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Journal of Family Issues 2011 32: 129 originally published online 20 May 2010

DOI: 10.1177/0192513X10371609

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Journal of Family Issues

32(2) 129–156

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DOI: 10.1177/0192513X10371609

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Abstract

Parents, peers, schools, and the media are the primary contexts for educating young people about sexuality. Yet girls receive more sex education than boys, particularly in terms of menstruation. Lack of attention to how and what boys learn about menstruation has consequences for their private understanding about the biology of reproduction and also for social and cultural ideologies of gendered relationships. In this qualitative study, 23 written narratives from male undergraduates (aged 18–24 years) were analyzed using grounded theory methodology to explore how young men perceive their past and present learning about this uniquely female experience. Findings suggest that most boys first learned about menstruation in their families, primarily through their sisters' menarche; menstruation is experienced—in boyhood at least—as a gender wedge; and most men described a developmental process of moving from a childish attitude of menstruation as “gross” to seeing themselves as maturing through the experience of an intimate relationship.

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Keywords

boys, family life education, gender, menstruation, puberty, qualitative, sex education, young men

The literature on girls' and young women's experiences with and knowledge of menstruation is more comprehensive (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1982; Golub, 1992; Kissling, 1996a, 1996b; Sibnath, 2005) than what is known about the knowledge boys receive about menstruation, as well as their reactions to this knowledge (Clarke & Ruble, 1978; Fingerson, 2006). How boys and young men perceive and experience the intersection between menstruation and their own lives is an area that few researchers have explored qualitatively or quantitatively and is therefore relatively uncharted territory. The exemption or omission of boys from sexuality education in general and menstruation education in particular is problematic and may have implications for their attitudes and treatment of women, intimate relationships, and reproductive decision making. In this study, we analyzed young men's qualitative narratives of what they learned about menstruation as boys and how they perceive and use that knowledge in their lives today.

Theoretical Perspective

We use an integrative theoretical framework in this study, drawing from both critical feminist and life course perspectives (Allen, 2001; Collins, 2000; Elder, 1998; Risman, 2004; Walker, 1999). A critical feminist perspective attends to structural inequalities and the implications of these inequalities for individuals (e.g., boys and girls). Families, peers, educational systems, the media, and society at large communicate and reinforce the notion that boys and girls are fundamentally different, and girls are lower in status than boys (Eisenberg, Martin, & Fabes, 1996; Lorber, 1994). A life course perspective recognizes the importance of attending to gender socialization processes over time and being sensitive to developmental transitions that mark the passage from one phase of life to another (e.g., childhood to adolescence to young adulthood). Boys' and girls' knowledge of and feelings about menstruation, for example, change over time as they are exposed to different cultural messages and expectations regarding menstruation (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Fingerson, 2005; Mansfield & Stubbs, 2007). Likewise, the sources of knowledge regarding menstruation also change over time, as youth develop and become more integrally involved in and influenced by extrafamilial contexts such as the peer network (Epstein & Ward, 2008). A critical feminist life

course framework, then, emphasizes the need to examine the varied and changing forces affecting such processes over time and in multiple contexts.

Literature Review

Sexuality Education: Family and School Contexts

Gender is a key factor when considering sexuality education in contexts such as families and schools, which includes instruction on sexual development and reproductive health, as well as a focus on communication processes that promote responsible sexual decision making (Meschke, Bartholomae, & Zentall, 2000). The fact that females uniquely experience menstruation and that menarche is universally treated as a rite of passage for girls is related to the greater attention focused on educating women about puberty, reproduction, and sexuality (Fingerson, 2005). In the United States, we educate girls more than boys about sexuality issues (Epstein & Ward, 2008). For example, a study of parents and adolescents found that boys were generally less likely than girls to have someone talk to them about pubertal development and sexuality issues; furthermore, when pubertal development was discussed, it was done so at a later age for boys (Omar, McElderry, & Zakharia, 2003). In schools, as well, gender figures prominently in sex education because such knowledge is typically initiated with factual presentations by female teachers about the female reproductive process (Diorio & Munro, 2000).

Mothers, far more than fathers, function as the main sexuality educator in the home (Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998). Girls and young women report having more frequent and higher quality communications about sexuality with their parents than do boys (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007). Mothers are central in providing menstrual instruction to girls (Beausang & Razor, 2000; Lee, 2008), but given the complex and sensitive nature of sexual topics, there are limits to the content of parent-child communications. Although girls report that their mothers are crucial to their developing knowledge about menstruation, many feel their mothers are unable to meet their needs (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). Indeed, girls often have contradictory needs, wanting mothers to be protective, but not overprotective, and involved, but with some distance. Although adolescents may communicate with parents about menstruation (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002) and general sexuality topics (Pistella & Bonati, 1998), there is little evidence that discussions between parents and daughters extend to complex topics such as having sexual intercourse during menstruation. For example, one study of undergraduate college students indicated that parental communication on how couples might

negotiate issues of sexual activity during menstruation was very rare (Allen & Goldberg, 2009). Even in the context of close family communications, discussion of the body and sexuality can be difficult (Meschke et al., 2000). Adolescents tend to hear more cautionary advice from their parents and tend to rely on their peers and the media for more sex-positive information, that is, information that portrays sexuality as normal and healthy (Ballard & Morris, 1998; Epstein & Ward, 2008).

During menarche, girls confront the ambivalence with which women must negotiate being female in a society that devalues women, yet simultaneously glorifies the onset of their reproductive capacity. Societal messages about menstruation are mixed: on one hand, it is healthy and natural, on the other hand, it is annoying and debilitating, thus setting the stage for girls and women to feel they have received limited and inaccurate information (Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2007). Menarche introduces girls to the cultural baggage of secrecy and shame (Lee, 2008), where they must hide and control the messiness that surrounds the evidence of their womanhood (Costos et al., 2002). Girls' bodies are thus disciplined by menstrual discourse, which permeates hygiene education materials promoted by the industry and distributed broadly to girls in schools (Charlesworth 2001; Merskin, 1999). No parallel cultural meaning to menarche exists for a boy's first ejaculation (spermarche) in the United States. A boy's entrance to adulthood (e.g., first ejaculation) is socially invisible, "but its invisibility reflects freedom rather than constraint" (Diorio & Munro, p. 360). Boys, representing the invisible yet valued standard of comparison, are allowed greater freedom from this control. The differential treatment of girls and boys in sex education, beginning with menstrual education, has sexist roots that ultimately devalue both genders. When directly asked, girls say they want long-term, continuous education about the pragmatics and subjective experiences associated with sexuality (Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Wood et al., 2007). Boys, on the other hand, are rarely asked directly about their needs for sexuality education (Epstein & Ward, 2008).

Ideologies of Culture and Gender in Menstruation Education

Menstruation education in general can raise uncomfortable issues of sexuality, cultural norms, and gender relations (Cheng, Yang, & Liou, 2007). In part because of societal discomfort surrounding the issue, there is no clearly defined source of information about menstruation for boys; rather, a nebulous group of "educators" exist on this topic, including parents, peers, family life, health and biology teachers, and the media. All of these educators influence and interact with boys and men in ways that have consequences far beyond their knowledge of menstruation. Indeed, what boys learn both implicitly and explicitly about

menstruation can influence the very definition of what it means to be male or female. A continuing theme, historically, in the ideology of menstruation has been that of women as deviant, as more naturalistic and animalistic than the accepted norm: men (Tong, 1989). In many societies, the “polluting nature” of menstruation is treated as justification for the separation—and elevation—of men in relation to women (Sanday, 1981). Modern boys learn about menstruation at a time when the focus has shifted from menstruation as a marker for maturation and fertility to menstruation as a hygienic crisis (Brumberg, 1997; Whisnant, Brett, & Zegans, 1975). The dominant ideology of menstruation is that it is unclean and must be kept secret. Girls would be subject to the ultimate humiliation if menstruation is not hidden, at all costs (Merskin, 1999). Merskin (1999) argues that this “ideology of freshness” is crucial to the battle for the control of female sexuality and that it is fought through the construction of meaning. Menstruation can be a symbol of deviance or otherness that can be internalized as a shame of one’s own body (Tong, 1989) and can thus undermine efforts to change institutions in the public sphere to make them less incompatible with women’s reproductive lives.

Menstruation education has become a prominent battleground in efforts to confront and overcome gender inequalities (Merskin, 1999). Martin (1986) argues that the vocabulary and metaphors used to describe menstruation, such as degenerate, weak, deteriorate, disintegration, expelling, and dying, tend to tie menstruation to failure (failed reproduction), uselessness, and with poor health, whereas other biological processes such as the shedding of the stomach lining are not described with these types of negative terms in the medical literature. Strong social interests have historically used menstruation education as a tool to support and reinforce social structures and gender roles that curtail the potential of women in terms of their public involvement as well as their personal identities (Brumberg, 1997; Merskin, 1999). By teaching that menstruation is a negative experience that can lead women down the path toward unwanted pregnancies and requires special hygienic controls, schools reinforce an officially sanctioned discourse that “offers boys opportunities to practise male power by ridiculing women” (Diorio & Munro, 2000, p. 351). For example, menstruation ideologies have been used to justify limiting the participation of girls in activities, such as riding bicycles or swimming, and to justify subjecting their bodies to greater standards of control and manipulation, especially manipulation involving the extensive use of sanitary products aimed at hiding the biological process girls are experiencing (Merskin, 1999). Martin (1986) argues that the cultural view of menstruation as dirty creates a variety of problems for menstruating women in public arenas such as work or school. Our subsequent discomfort with discussing this taboo topic may then reinforce men’s limited understanding of

menstruation issues and influence the public environment that menstruating women face. It may also undermine efforts to change institutions and policies that make the U.S. workplace incompatible with women's reproductive roles.

New discourses about menstruation that reflect more empowering beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors among young women, however (Lee, 2008; Teitelman, 2004; Wood et al., 2007), are emerging. Fingerson (2005) conducted interviews and focus groups with 26 girls and 11 boys in the United States, currently in high school or recent dropouts (aged 13-19 years), about menstruation to examine how they negotiate power and agency in social interactions. Both groups said that girls were empowered by their superior knowledge about menstruation; boys were dependent on "not-so-reliable" sources such as friends or media and would have preferred to have more formal education on the subject. Girls who were comfortable with their own bodies tried to gain more control in social situations by teasing their brothers or other males about menstruation and refusing to be silenced by boys who teased them. Many of the girls in Fingerson's study responded creatively to the negative views of menstruating women and constructed their own positive ideas about their menstrual experiences (e.g., menstruation is a cleansing process, it keeps you healthy). Thus, the participants' experiences suggested that menstruation is not simply a source of shame for women, but it may also represent a source of power and knowledge. In this way, menstruation continues to emerge as an issue that divides boys and girls (and men and women) but does not necessarily disempower girls and mark them as "other." Now, boys can be "othered" by girls, who use their unique knowledge to embarrass, manipulate, and silence their male peers. And yet, as Merskin (1999) argues, regardless of whether menstruation ideologies and education have positive, liberating implications or restrictive implications for girls, menstruation is undoubtedly an "affirmation of femaleness" (p. 941). That is, the experience of menstruation and the activities and rituals surrounding it serve to mark females as separate from males and also function to reinforce notions of femininity and womanhood. Thus, menstruation ideologies have implications not just for the temporary experience of menstruation itself but for the socially constructed "nature" of being female and male.

Method

Research Questions

To explore how young men learn about and perceive menstruation, this study was guided by three research questions:

Research Question 1: From whom, and in what ways, did young men learn about menstruation?

Research Question 2: What do young men report knowing about menstruation? What ideas do they espouse in relation to this experience?

Research Question 3: How does their emerging knowledge about the gendered nature of menstruation affect their perceptions of what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed to address the research questions guiding this study. Qualitative methods are particularly useful for exploratory research on topics about which little is known (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The rarity of research on this topic necessitates the need to hear directly from young men regarding their perceptions of experiences about menstruation within family and educational contexts (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Russell, 2005).

Participants

The data for this study consisted of 23 narratives obtained from male undergraduate students at a public land grant university with more than 30,000 students in a rural part of the state. Permission to conduct this study was granted by the university institutional review board. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years. Students enrolled in a human sexuality class with a focus on global issues participated in the study. The narratives were gathered from five classes taught by the first two authors, enrolling an average of 160 students per semester (range of 75-250), over a 5-year duration. For the purpose of anonymity, students were only asked to identify themselves by gender and age. On average, 65% of the students in the classes were female, and 35% were male. With the exception of gender, course enrollment patterns match general university enrollment, where students' self-identification of race/ethnicity is as follows: 72% White, 7% Asian, 4% African American, 2% Hispanic, 2% international, less than 1% Native American, and 12% unknown. More than 70% of the student body comes from the mid-Atlantic region; two thirds are from suburban areas, and one third is from rural areas.

Procedure

Narratives were completed as a voluntary extra credit assignment. The purpose of the assignment was to offer an opportunity to expand on a class topic

if a student so desired, given that the large enrollment in the class required multiple-choice exams, and the sensitive nature of the course required opportunities for students to process their personal reflections on course content. Students were given a choice as to whether or not to submit a narrative; if they did, their opinions would not be graded. Extra credit was given for submitting a one-page single-spaced narrative (650 words in length) reflecting on their choice of topic. Students 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.

Students could choose from one of five topics: (a) the relationship of spirituality and sexuality, (b) the development of gender identity in childhood, (c) ways to distinguish a romantic from a sexual relationship, (d) limitations to emotional intimacy in relationships, and (e) experiences with menstruation. The following menstruation question was used in this analysis:

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 or cramps, and what do you do to relieve cramps? (Male and female students can answer this question)

Approximately 60% of the students across the 5 years submitted an extra credit paper. Most students chose to respond to the gender question or the romantic/sexual relationship question.

Not surprisingly, although both female and male students were invited to answer the menstruation question, few males ($n = 23$), compared with 231 females, chose to write on this topic: a ratio of 1 to 10. Indeed, the menstruation question was the least often chosen by males for their reflection, among all five choices. The menstruation question was designed to be provocative in the sense that it explicitly asked female and male students about their own sexual education history and current experiences related to menstruation, a topic that their textbook revealed still has vestiges of taboo, secrecy, and differential treatment of women (Carroll, 2007). Furthermore, lectures related to male and female anatomy and physiology; gender identity, development, and roles; and sexual communication preceded the extra credit opportunities, so students were provided with course content relevant to menstruation as a biological and cultural phenomenon. Although the men's motivations for answering this question were unknown, men who chose to reflect about menstruation were clearly in the minority, compared with their peers who refrained from

taking advantage of the extra credit option or who chose to answer another, perhaps safer, question that may have provoked less sensitive reflection or self-disclosure. In addition, the fact that the data are derived from an educational environment explicitly designed to inform young people about scientific and social facts associated with issues such as menstruation reveals ways in which the sample is highly select.

After the narratives were collected, the papers were separated by gender, and identifying information was removed by a research assistant. Participant quotations reported in the results section are identified by pseudonyms.

Data Analysis Process

We conducted a grounded theory analysis using the constant comparative method of the 23 written narratives. The analysis was guided by our integrative theoretical framework, the literature review on sexual education in family contexts about menstruation, the three research questions, and our multiple readings of the narratives. We sought to identify general patterns and specific themes evident in the students' perceptions of their own lives and to make analytic distinctions in the data in three levels of analytic process (Charmaz, 2006). In the first level of analysis, open coding, each author read the narratives multiple times, noting the ways in which participants expressed their experiences in both language and meaning. We attended to specific words, sentences, and paragraphs and the nature of the narrative as a whole text (Charmaz, 2006). We shared analytic accounts about our own perceptions of what and from whom the young men learned about menstruation; how they learned it; how they described their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in relation to what they learned; and how they reported their knowledge changing as they became young men. We observed both common (e.g., learning from sisters' first experiences with menstruation) and unique (e.g., having a gynecologist father) histories. After all the independent codings and analytic memos were reviewed, we compared and discussed each case, until we arrived at 100% agreement of our initial coding scheme.

The second level of analysis, axial coding, required an intensive examination of each of the primary emergent categories and the subcodes that comprise a primary category. For example, one primary category that emerged was *Developmental knowledge: What boys actually learn about menstruation*. We found four subcodes within that category: (a) *Scientific knowledge*, for example, eggs, pregnancy, 28 days; (b) *Practical knowledge*, for example, tampons, pads, orgasms to soothe cramps; (c) *Second-hand knowledge*, for example, what girls say cramps feel like and what menstrual blood looks

like; and (d) *Experiential knowledge*, for example, what I now know from being in an intimate relationship. Returning to the axial coding process over and over again, as we applied the coding scheme to the original data, we continued to work with the categories and revise the coding. We settled on three major categories, each with subcodes that provide the framework on which the results section is organized. Again, we wrote detailed theoretical memos throughout this process, applying the codes, and reorganizing the major themes as we worked through disagreements and inconsistencies, through the constant comparative and reflective analysis, until we reached 100% consensus (Charmaz, 2006).

In the final phase of the grounded theory procedure, selective coding, we determined the main story line underlying the new synthesis of the data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Boys' early learning about menstruation is haphazard. The mysterious nature of what happens to girls contributes to a gap in boys' knowledge about female bodies and to some negative views about girls. Although most boys report that they eventually give up their negative views, for the men who do not make that transition, the myths and mystery from boyhood remain, continuing to deepen the wedge in their ideologies and experiences with the "opposite" sex. Only a few young men perceive they have closed the gap completely through empathic, committed relationships with girlfriends once they have come of age.

Results

How Boys First Learn About Menstruation

Participants reported a wide age range in when they first found out about menstruation: from 7 to 16 years of age, with the average age of 11 years ($SD = 1.93$). They also reported a variety of ways in which they learned about menstruation: in the context of their families, their friends, through formal sex education, and by just figuring it out, as we discuss below.

Family conversations. The most common way that boys first found out about menstruation was in the context of their families ($n = 13$), with seven of them saying they learned from sisters, five mentioning mothers, three mentioning fathers, and two mentioning brothers. Tyrone and Jared were among the seven participants who revealed that having a sister get her first period was a key way in which boys found out about this uniquely female experience. As Jared said,

I pretty much learned about menstruation from my sisters and the awkward experiences with their first "period." Being a young boy and

seeing one of my sisters crying with her nightgown spotted in blood, kept me in a state of shock for a short time.

Tyrone also recounted a feeling of shock at witnessing his sister's first period:

My first encounter with a female's menstruation came from the onset of my oldest sister's period. This even was very scary to me and at my young age, I honestly didn't know what to think when I saw my sister crying to my mother with a huge blood stain in the back of her night clothes.

The reality of having a sister experience menstruation had a stronger impact on boys than learning about menstruation in more academic ways, even from mothers, as Zeke expressed.

When I was young, my mother taught me about sex and the human body through books from the library. I was around 12 at the time. It was kind of a strange way and I didn't pay much attention, but being a guy, I never was taught that much about menstruation.

When Tyrone's mother would not explain what menstruation was, he relied on his brother to fill in the gaps:

When I asked my mother about the incident [sister's first menstruation] she only stated that "you will find out when the time is right." Even though my mother didn't explain to me why my sisters were all experiencing this event, I eventually found out from my older brother. He revealed to me that this event was called "menstruation" and it signaled that a female was now able to conceive a child.

Without a woman in the home, boys may receive much less information about menstruation. Tony received his rather technical explanation, at age 7, from his father:

My older brother who was 9 asked my father what tampon commercials were for after we saw one on TV. Since we were both being raised by a single father, he had to answer the question himself and not tell us to "ask your mother." Even though it was my brother who asked the question, he had both of us sit down around the dinner table as he began to tell us what a woman's period was. While he

didn't tell us what sex was or how sex needed to occur for a baby to be made, he did tell us how if a woman isn't pregnant she bleeds every month. I remember thinking how I thought the baby needed the blood to keep it warm in the womb, and since there was no baby, the blood just kind of fell out. My father then drew us a picture of how the tampon stops the blood from coming out. I remember how I didn't really understand this because I didn't even really know what a vagina looked like.

Sex education, friends, and figuring it out for myself. In contrast to the 13 boys who first learned about menstruation in their families, 10 boys found out about it through sex education classes, friends, or just figuring it out for themselves. Three of the participants mentioned that their families were silent on the subject of menstruation, even when there were women present in the household. As Walter said, "My mother never had this talk with me. I think it is probably because I am a boy and it never really came up." Eric also commented,

I never really heard anything from my mom or dad or younger sister throughout the years about menstruation. Occasionally you would hear menopause comments as my mom and friends' moms got older. I don't really remember any of the details of those; I was more worried about beating my friends in the next video game and all.

Thus, both Walter and Eric seemed to believe that, because they were not female, the issue of menstruation was something that they were not expected to understand and, in turn, did not need to understand. Ben, too, felt confused in the absence of explicit family conversations:

My mother or sister never talked about it. I would see tampons under the sink and in the trashcan but I never thought twice about it . . . Until this class, I never had a full understanding of what a menstrual cycle was. Everything I learned about the female menstrual cycle I learned from 13-year-old girls and my male classmates.

Among the seven boys who did not mention their families at all in their narratives, either as explicitly discussing menstruation or never having "the talk," sex education in schools provided their first exposure. Brian described the extent of his knowledge in his fifth-grade sex education class as scientific:

We actually got into a relatively broad overview of how the male and female bodies worked, so I learned that women produced a microscopic egg once a month, and if a sperm did not fertilize it, the egg would discharge along with some blood and stuff.

Yet knowledge gleaned through school settings was often through second-hand accounts, and much of the content was lost in translation. Kyle first heard about menstruation when he was 10 years old, from a girl, following her experience with sex education:

The elementary school I was attending decided to separate the guys and girls into two separate classes for the afternoon. The boys' class was supervised while we played board games and we were told that the girls were doing the same thing. This was, of course, the school's weak attempt at covering up sex education for the girls, where they were being taught about menstruation. After the class, school was out and while on the bus many of my girl friends that were in the class were talking about it. Looking back it was pretty funny because they were trying to tell me that girls had periods. But they were too shy to actually describe it; they just kept saying, "you know; a period, girls have periods." All I could think about was the punctuation mark because up till then that's all I thought about when I heard the word "period."

Kyle recalled a sense of bewilderment as he tried to reconcile this new, unelaborated-on definition of "period" with his existing knowledge.

Most of these participants said they just "pieced together" bits and pieces of information about menstruation from various sources, as Rashad explained.

When it comes to menstruation, I really was not told about it. It was more putting a puzzle together for me. I took the information that I learned in middle school and applied it to real life. From that I figured out what was a period, what girls do during their period, and fall backs of being around someone who is on their period. The school system basically said that menstruation was a once a month process that women go through to cleanse the human body.

Jon said,

I wasn't really told about menstruation at an early age, it was just sort of figured out, like sex. Nobody ever explained to me where babies

come from or anything like that, no birds and bees talk. I just sort of figured it out by around age 6. Menstruation was similar except I didn't figure it out until a little later. You just observe people and hear them talking about this thing that girls get and after a while I just figured it out for myself.

Putting together bits and pieces of information from various sources led to misunderstandings that actually delayed comprehension of the process of menstruation. Jerry said,

In my youth (starting around age 12-13), I heard mostly about menstruation from friends. Often, the information that my friends had heard were from older siblings or other friends; it turned out that most of the people I heard about menstruation from had not received correct information themselves. This led me to believe in things about it that were not necessarily true. Mostly, friends believed that it was just something that happened once a month for no reason at all. Girls just do it and it is gross and there is no purpose to it.

For Doug, figuring out menstruation for himself was a developmental process that continued through college:

Growing up and going through school, the only thing I was ever taught about menstruation was the basics. I suppose the extent of my education on the matter came in tenth grade of high school when we had to take a sex education class that was part of PE. There was a cycle, some cramping, foul moods, and it was called the period. Other than that, I had to figure it out for myself. My remaining knowledge on the matter I learned through friends that were girls and a few courses in college.

Menstruation as a Gender Wedge

Having a period separates girls and women from boys and men. The participants in this study acknowledged that menstruation was a biological event they would never truly know. Indeed, because women alone experience the mysterious process of menstruation, the men perceived that they could never completely understand it. Caleb commented on the limits of his possible understanding of menstruation, stating, "as a Biology Major in college I . . . feel that I have complete comprehension, or at least as complete as can be understood for a male."

Participants expressed a range of perceptions of menstruation, from thinking that it is gross to wondering how painful it might be. Lester used being “kicked in the balls” as a comparison point:

I’m a guy and I’m glad I don’t have to deal with it. It sounds pretty awful. I am kind of curious as to how painful it is though. I wonder if it’s comparable to being kicked in the balls. That’s something girls can’t experience and believe me it’s not pleasant.

Whether participants thought the experience sounded exciting or unpleasant, many expressed a deep curiosity about what menstruation must be like. Phil summed up his feelings by simply stating, “I find it fascinating to learn about.”

Menstruation envy. Some men appeared to be envious of the unique ability to menstruate, either because of its meaning as a symbol of entering adulthood or the accessories or benefits that comes with menstruation. For example, Ben remembered,

While in high school I noticed that the women’s bathroom had special boxes for tampons and tampon dispensers. I remember feeling a little jealous. I wanted a little something in the men’s bathroom that was just for men.

Menstruation gave girls an opportunity to experience something special that boys could never fully access: There was no such indicator of a big transition in the men’s bathroom at high school. In this way, menstruation was seen as something to be envied or at least a topic of great curiosity that could never be satisfied. When Finn was first told about menstruation and fertility, he thought it was “one of the most interesting things that I had heard in my life.” Ben described the menstruation experience “as a magical process from which life springs!” Thus, some men saw menstruation as a mysterious but positive aspect of being female and as a source of knowledge and power for women. For some of these men, understanding the unique role of menstruation in the life cycle increased their respect for women. Doug closed his narrative by saying, “I truly appreciate every female for being female and going through things such as the menstrual cycle and childbirth.”

A power tool in gender relations. Not only did some men acknowledge menstruation as potentially empowering, but it was also common for them to report that women in their lives explicitly used the topic of menstruation to gain the upper hand in a social situation. Some sisters and other girls used the

fact that they menstruated as a way to scare boys or hold power over them, as Daniel said about his sister:

The first time I heard about menstruation was from my older sister who was two years older than me. The reason she told me was in an argument to show she knew more than me, which was a way I learned a lot of things.

Steve also recalled how his sisters used menstrual talk to get him to “leave the room”:

I have two older sisters and whenever they would want me to leave the room because I was annoying them or they just did not want me in there they would say the word tampon and I knew that I did not want to hear about that.

Eric revealed that the graphic ways in which girls used their knowledge about menstruation highlighted their differences from boys:

Girls would sometimes talk about when they were on it, or use it as an excuse for yelling at you or getting mad. They might complain about how much it hurts and that if we were girls there is no way we could go through it. Then there was always the one girl who wanted to make it into this scientific detailed thing. She said that a period was like having chunky tomato soup, not as runny as soup, flowing out and at the same time like someone was squeezing your midsection and just tightening a noose around you.

Caleb concurred that menstruation signaled the difference between the genders, suggesting that girls used the paraphernalia of menstruation to disrespect and shame them:

In middle and high school, it was the new form of “cooties” for guys and girls. For a while I was extremely disgusted by the idea, and my sisters would jokingly put tampons and pads all over my car.

Although older girls, more comfortable with their own menstruation, may have used the topic to fluster boys, the topic of menstruation in general did not always work in a girl’s favor. In contrast to the situations described above, two boys talked about how the onset of a young girl’s period was an

opportunity to make fun of girls. Ben described an experience in the seventh grade when he first found out about menstruation:

I remember hearing a guy tell a joke to my sister about this girl who went to our church. He said she could not get wet because it was that time of the month. Everyone else laughed and I stood there looking lost, wondering what was so funny. After I asked them what did “that time of the month” mean, they changed the subject.

Phil related several experiences that emphasized the shaming that goes on for girls as well as his disapproval of such behavior:

The first time I can remember hearing about menstruation was probably around sixth grade. I remember my peers joking about periods and blood often. It always seemed like something that guys could make jokes about to make girls embarrassed or to seem superior to them.

I recall a time when a girl in my class got up and rushed out of the room and everyone looked at her chair and saw blood and proceeded to make fun of her for weeks. I can't even imagine the humiliation she must have felt.

In these ways, although menstruation is universally recalled as an experience that seemed to separate boys from girls, men differed in their descriptions of menstruation as a source of knowledge that girls used to empower themselves and disempower boys or as a source of shame that boys used to empower themselves and disempower girls. It seemed that older girls could gain some power through bringing up the topic of menstruation or menstrual products to make boys uncomfortable. However, less experienced girls, or girls who had the misfortune of being marked with blood or other evidence indicating their status as currently menstruating, were put at an extreme disadvantage, and boys would use fear of the situation to empower themselves in social interactions.

Not my problem. One response to the mystery of and discomfort with the otherness of menstruating women was the assertion that menstruation was a problem for women to deal with, not men. Participants thus distanced themselves from women's experiences—a response that ultimately served to reify the prevailing ideology that boys and men should not concern themselves with understanding menstruation.

In response to the mystery of menstruation, some respondents simply expressed relief that they were not women. For example, Rashad noted that,

"I really do not discuss menstruation because I'm a guy and I do not have to worry about bleeding once a month." Eric expanded on this sentiment, saying, "I am very happy I am a man and don't have to personally deal with that on a physical level . . . I guess in the end when it comes to reproduction, guys have the easy job."

Other participants were explicit about their desire to not even learn about the process of menstruation and were mostly concerned with avoiding any negative effect of menstruation on their lives. Barry said, "I try to avoid talking about it at all costs. I don't think I know exactly what is going on down there but what I do know is good enough." He was happy as long as his girlfriend menstruating did not interfere in his life or his sexual satisfaction, saying "I like to think of the time as 'blowjob week.' As you can imagine, I have no complaints." In this way, Barry reframed his girlfriend's menstruation to point out how it can be beneficial to him. Andrew also wanted to minimize the impact of menstruation on men and suggested that "a girl menstruating should have that week off to hang out with her girlfriends and leave us guys alone, or at least not blame every little problem on us."

Developmental Knowledge: Men's Current Perceptions of Menstruation

Participants were asked to reflect on how they perceived and discussed menstruation at the present time. Three types of developmental responses emerged: (a) men who retained the perception of menstruation as shameful and gross, or who were still uncomfortable talking about it ($n = 7$, 30%); (b) men who saw themselves as growing out of their immature state and learning to take on a mature attitude about menstruation ($n = 11$, 48%); and (c) men who perceived themselves as having already arrived at a place of maturation with regard to menstruation because they were involved in an empathic intimate relationship with a woman ($n = 5$, 22%). Of note is that 21 of the 23 men in the sample said that they were or had been sexually active with a woman. The two men who did not write about their sexual experiences with women (no man indicated he was not heterosexual) were in Group 2. Thus, what appeared to differentiate the men currently in terms of their developmental knowledge was not simply whether they had or have had a sexual relationship with a girlfriend and, in two cases, a fiancée, but the empathy they felt for their partner and the context of their relationship. Group 3 men situated themselves in the center of their relationships with a menstruating woman and gave detailed examples of how well they knew her and what they did to please and satisfy her, as we describe below.

Men will still be boys. Seven participants expressed a disdainful attitude about menstruation as boys and indicated that they still felt that way, as Barry said,

I don't exactly remember who told me or how old I was when I found out about menstruation. However I do remember my feelings about this newfound knowledge. I thought it was disgusting and I still do think it is disgusting. I know it's natural but I don't know how girls deal with that once a month.

Barry also said that his girlfriend understands "that the idea of getting menstrual blood on me horrifies me," and she knows not to bring it up, "unless it's a warning." Along the same lines, Kyle called his fiancée's menstrual period "her crazy time due to the insane mood swings that she is capable of." He framed his current disgust as a "normative" male response:

I absolutely hate talking about menstruation; I assume it's a pretty typical guy thing, but the mentioning of the bodily functions that coincide with menstruation, the mentioning of tampons or anything else that goes along with that just gives me the shivers.

Barry also described this disgust as a function of being part of a male "race," saying, "I like to avoid the topic of menstruation and the area [of the female body] while it is taking place. I feel like this is the norm for most of the male race." In this way, Barry essentialized his disgust as being inherently male.

Sexist beliefs about women as emotional and undisciplined seeped into men's menstruation attitudes, as Rashad revealed when discussing his relationships with former girlfriends:

I have experienced the "you think I look fat," the emotional ups and downs of PMS, and the constant nag of 'can you do this and do that' for me. Most of the times I could deal with it but sometimes the pressure of the demands, spoken and unspoken, would have me crack and curse them out, then tell them to leave me alone. I try to be sensitive to their needs but there are many times when I have to draw the line and put my foot down.

Thus, Rashad suggested that he views women on their periods as unreasonable, demanding creatures that he tolerates but ultimately has little patience for.

I'm more mature than I used to be. In comparison with how they see themselves today, for 11 men, their version of themselves as preadolescents and young adolescents ranged from feeling clueless and innocent to feeling immature and ignorant. These men shared stories of their uncertainty and confusion about “periods” before they became *enlightened*. They emphasized how much they now knew compared with when they were younger. Now that they were older and more experienced, they saw their former selves as childish and expressed amusement or embarrassment of their previous naïveté or ignorance. Being able to handle “female menstruation” was depicted as a sign of male maturation, as Jared said: “In my early teens I thought of female menstruation as sickening, but as I got older and my sexual activity increased, I grew out of that immature state.” Jared credited witnessing his sisters and fiancée experience their periods and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) as helping him become more enlightened. Tony said he now talks about menstruation “like it’s no big deal”:

I know it happens to every woman (for the most part) and is a natural part of life. It doesn’t gross me out to see a woman buying tampons at the store, or for some girl around me saying she has cramps. I remember it being different when I was younger, but now I feel like it’s immature to be afraid to talk about menstruation. As a guy, I don’t talk about menstruation much, but if it comes up I don’t avoid the topic.

Unlike the men in Group 1, Tony did not use stereotypes of bitchy women in describing PMS; rather, his discourse about female menstrual pain focused on the problem and the solution:

I personally have never heard of any woman say she is experiencing PMS or blaming any of her behavior on PMS. I have frequently heard my female friends say they are experiencing cramps. In fact, my ex-girlfriend experienced cramps that really bothered her, and she takes birth control to try to relieve these cramps.

For these participants, distinguishing themselves from other, more “immature” men was perceived as a sign of their own maturation, as Daniel indicated:

When I talk about menstruation I treat it as any other matter. When most men talk about menstruation they are usually saying some kind of joke. Often times they joke about PMS or some other aspect otherwise

they normally don't have any kind of serious talk about the subject. For me any serious discussions I have had on the subject have normally been with women. I believe this tells a lot about how guys feel about menstruation. I think most guys feel it is a problem for women to deal with and not bother the men. I disagree with this and feel it is a part of everyone's life because it is an important part of reproduction.

Group 2 men demonstrated that they were on their way to leaving behind their boyish attitudes about menstruation by comparing themselves with other more immature men and their own immature versions of themselves. In this way, development of "mature" attitudes about menstruation can be viewed as an unacknowledged rite of passage from boyhood to manhood that becomes completed by men in Group 3, perhaps mirroring menarche's role as an acknowledged rite of passage between girlhood and womanhood.

Being a man: Closing the knowledge gap through shared understanding. Five of the young men perceived themselves as *men* because they described themselves as having already arrived at a place of empathy and understanding of menstruation due to their personal experience with a menstruating woman. Their stories were rich with details about themselves as partners—even leaders—in their intimate relationships with women. No longer was their knowledge simply textbook or second hand. Instead, this knowledge became embodied in their relationship with the woman they loved. The reason for their maturity was not just the fact that they had a girlfriend, because all of the young men (except for two) in Groups 1 and 2 were also in relationships or were sexually active. Instead, these five participants were unique in that they found ways to *share* the experience of menstruation, as if participating in it themselves, with their girlfriend, as Brian revealed:

My girlfriend and I have no problems talking about menstruation (or much of anything else really). I help her keep track of them so that she knows when her next one should be coming. Keeping track allows me to be more understanding of any irritability or mood swings she may experience as her menstrual cycle completes itself. I think that because we are more open to talking about menstruation, it is no longer taboo and so we have grown closer and our communication skills have improved. After all, I think that miscommunication and misinformation about menstruation and between partners are what make the menstrual cycle and having sex during menstruation in particular a taboo subject.

Brian went on to contrast how his current girlfriend was different from his ex-wife, thereby suggesting a contextual factor that separates Group 3 men from the others: compared with other males his own age, he has more sexual and emotional experiences with women. He elaborated on how he and his current girlfriend shared views about how “the female body is beautiful and menstruation is just a part of the cycle of life.” He explained how proactive he was in helping and understanding his girlfriend when she is menstruating, asking her if she wants to go for a walk or a run when she is cramping, speculating about why she craves chocolate, and understanding how an orgasm helps to relieve cramps, thereby indicating his self-perception as a mature man.

Doug found the “whole menstruation/period thing” to be natural. He said he was very knowledgeable about his girlfriend’s physical experiences with both birth control (mentioning the name brands of the pills she had taken as well as their side effects on her) and details about her menstruation and how he worked to alleviate the symptoms:

When my girlfriend experiences cramps around me, she tends to curl up in a ball because they hurt so bad. I always try to comfort her by hugging and telling her sweet things to try and get her mind off of the pain.

Tyrone felt that in his current relationship, his own maturation, and love for his partner, and their decision to have a child together allowed them to discuss the issue of menstruation “openly without hesitation or uneasiness.” He also claimed credit for understanding her bodily functions better than her:

I know her cycle better than she does. I think every man should be knowledgeable about his partner’s cycle because it affects him too. We recently had a child and by doing a couple of calculations I figured out the time during the month where she has the highest chance of getting pregnant.

Thus, in contrast with men who were annoyed by women’s PMS and disgusted by menstrual conversation, or who viewed themselves as still in the process of maturing, young men who claimed to embrace menstruation and close the gender gap used their partner’s experience of menstruation as an opportunity to demonstrate empathy, respect, and care for their partners. In the process of revealing their capacity for intimacy and protectiveness

toward their partners, they also demonstrated a previously unmarked way that they have come of age as a man.

Discussion

Our exploration of young men's perceptions of learning about menstruation, a topic that has received limited attention, offers new insights about the familial and educational contexts in which beliefs about gender and sexuality are learned and enacted. Even though these narratives were written in a college-level human sexuality class and so represent older, more educated adolescents and young adults, their collective message is that women are not alone in absorbing and adopting negative menstruation ideologies (Fingerson, 2005; Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005; Wood et al., 2007). Boys and young men also incorporate these ideologies into their world view and struggle with the implications in their relationships with women, sometimes by further enforcing sexist attitudes but often by confronting and rejecting them.

The negative menstruation ideologies revealed in these narratives are fueled by the knowledge or lack of it provided to boys by families, peers, schools, and the media (Ballard & Morris, 1998; Epstein & Ward, 2008). Previous research has shown that regardless of the context—family, friend, school, media—females are the primary targets of sex education. Parents play a stronger role among preadolescents and younger adolescents, with peers becoming more influential as teens get older, particularly in relaying a positive attitude about sexuality (Lefkowitz & Espinosa-Hernandez, 2007). In the current study, most boys first found out about menstruation in their families, primarily at the onset of their sister's menarche. A substantial number, however, reported feeling confused and ignorant, having to figure it out for themselves in the absence of continuous and carefully delivered information over the course of their elementary and secondary schooling.

As with other types of sex-related information, schools were cited as an important source of the factual and biological information related to menstruation for boys. However, many boys did not have access to adequate education in the schools, and many of their questions about the realities of menstruation—its purpose, how it feels, and what it looks like—went unanswered.

In the absence of parental and educational resources, both male and female peers were described as an alternative source of information, causing substantial accuracy problems (Thornburg, 1981). Boys had to wade through myths and mysteries over the duration of their childhoods until they came to

a place on their own where they felt that they finally understood what a period was.

Previous research has indicated that some girls may feel power because menstruation is an experience only they can ever truly know (Fingerson, 2006). Boys know that they can never fully understand menstruation and may feel this puts them at a disadvantage when the topic comes up. Perhaps in response to this discomfort, a prevalent theme in the narratives was that menstruation is gross and should be hidden—and that *believing* that menstruation is gross and should be kept hidden is a normal and acceptable male response. The acceptance of these menstruation taboos and social enforcement of menstruation etiquette serve to support the hegemonic use of menstruation to devalue and limit women. By indicating that it is not their problem and that they do not want to hear or see anything about menstruation, men frame the female body as a problem to be contained; they devalue an essential part of womanhood to something ugly that should be denied and concealed.

Menstruation-related sexual harassment in schools is common. Such shaming behavior results in an environment where girls are constantly watched for signs that they are menstruating and have failed to keep their female bodies secret and under control (Power, 1995). The young men in this study recalled some severe incidents of girls being teased, although no boy actually admitted to teasing a girl in this manner. However, some also described situations in which girls used menstruation as a way to tease or manipulate them. Of note is that in her study of youth attitudes toward menstruation, Fingerson (2006) observed that girls teasing boys in this way was usually restricted to situations in which the girls were older and more experienced with menstruation or in social situations where girls outnumbered boys. Our study supports the finding that turning menstruation around as a tool to gain interactional power for girls only seems to take place under limited circumstances. Although Fingerson posits that girls gain interactional power by teasing boys with the supposed grossness of menstruation, it appears from these narratives that they are also legitimating the idea that boys should feel uncomfortable when menstruation is brought up. These incidents further solidify for boys that being associated with menstruation or even being in the same room when it is being discussed is something shameful or dirty, and some boys hold onto these attitudes into adulthood.

Fingerson (2006) found that during boyhood, knowledge of women's experiences was not valued. Although the retrospective descriptions of childhood ideas from our respondents supports this view, our study did reveal an almost transformative development in attitudes among some respondents as they transitioned into young adulthood. We found that some young men do

develop a keen sense of the value of understanding women's experiences of menstruation. Importantly, the majority of men in the sample described a developmental process whereby they came to learn that a period is "more than just a punctuation mark," developing a more well-rounded and even positive view of menstruation. Communication with women appears to be critical in this transformation—not the public teasing or exposure to jokes that occur between boys and girls but the one-on-one communication with female friends and between boyfriends and girlfriends. In particular, the narratives of men who have experienced empathetic discussions with girlfriends lacked the misogyny evident in the narratives of those who did not understand that menstruation served any purpose and who associated it with grossness and unreasonable behavior. Furthermore, the most empathic men also described more intensive life course experiences than their peers—for example, one man had a child with his partner; another man had been previously married. However, the transformative conversations were very intimate and private. Sharing information and feelings on this topic was in fact considered so sensitive that men felt it added to, and was a testament of, how close they were to their girlfriends. The private nature of these disclosures again emphasizes the perceived inappropriateness of menstruation as a public topic for discussion. Neither girls defiantly teasing boys nor girlfriends confiding with boyfriends have yet succeeded in teaching boys that menstruation, and those who menstruate, belong in the public arena.

Families and schools have important roles in future efforts to influence boys earlier in development to better understand menstruation as a valuable biological process and to better explore and confront the social context surrounding it. In addition to the facts of "28 days," schools need to address the cultural ideology of menstruation and deconstruct negative messages about women's bodies. Some lessons, for example, have been developed that explore how sanitary wear manufacturers promote menstrual taboos to sell their products (Power, 1995). The role of families in menstruation education also needs attention. Previous research suggests that mothers are the primary sex educators of both sons and daughters, but on closer examination, it is clear that family conversations about sexual bodies are not gender neutral. Girls receive more attention than boys, leaving boys misinformed or befuddled. New questions are being asked: Whose responsibility should it be to educate boys about sexual matters such as menstruation? Mothers, fathers, or both? In our study, boys who had sisters found their way into a knowledge source that provided their first window of understanding. The role of personal experience is exceptionally important, but adults—mothers, fathers, teachers, and others—are necessary to provide the ongoing education about being a responsible man in

our society. Adults are remiss when they shirk their responsibility to provide appropriate knowledge to both boys and girls.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

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