

Bodies at Menarche: Stories of Shame, Concealment, and Sexual Maturation

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Abstract This study examines the embodied nature of menarche through a focus on themes of shame, concealment, and sexual maturation. Using a narrative analysis, it examines menarche stories of 155 undergraduates in the Pacific Northwest, USA, aged 21 years and younger, who started their periods between 1999 and 2003 and who grew up in a culture with changing attitudes and practices about women and the body. Unlike findings from past studies and those with older participants, women reported more positive experiences of menarche. While these data provide evidence for changing attitudes and practices associated with menarche, they may also reflect cultural changes that increasingly commodify the female body and encourage girls to identify the maturing female body as an asset.

Keywords Menarche · Menstruation · Adolescence · Sexuality · Families · Shame · Concealment · Sexual maturation · Bodies · Feminism

Introduction

When I started I didn't know whether to be happy or not. It was almost like my body was out of control and I wasn't sure how it might finish up. I do remember that while I was embarrassed that my body was maturing like this because I noticed people noticing it, and I was terribly worried about staining or something, I did want to be able to wear a bra and be like my friends. (Penny, aged 18 years)

At menarche, or first menstrual period, girls start to produce themselves as women in compliance with, and in resistance to, contemporary messages about gender (Bailey 2001; Weitz 2001). As Penny's narrative above illustrates, it is the embodied nature of this experience that is especially salient as menarche is intensely experienced in the body. Although experiences of menarche vary widely across cultures and depend upon cultural and family norms, a girls' age and preparation, and her personal and community resources (Marván et al. 2006; Uskul 2004), early research on menarche in Western societies revealed the problematic dimensions of first menstrual period as an embodied experience and emphasized girls' shame, embarrassment, and lack of preparedness (Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1983; Golub 1992; Martin 1987). Later studies, and especially those with older respondents, continued to document negative aspects of embodied femininity at menarche (Beausang and Razor 2000; Costos et al. 2002; Houppert 1999; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996; Rembeck et al. 2006); more recent work still reports negativity, but with a stronger focus on ambivalence and more positive aspects (Fingerson 2006; Lee 2008; Teitelman 2004). This study contributes to this scholarship through analysis of 155 menarche narratives of young women undergraduates at a university in the Pacific Northwest, USA, who started their period within the last decade and who have grown up in a culture with changing scripts about women and the body (Fingerson 2006). In particular, the study explores meanings associated with bodily experiences of menarche that produce embodied, sexualized femininity. It addresses frequencies, meanings, and conditions associated with three specific themes: first, shame and humiliation; second, secrecy, embarrassment, and concealment; and third, sexual maturation: the production of the body in the context of sexual/reproductive issues. These themes are selected as

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having emerged from scholarship to date on menarche and the changing body.

Changes at menarche are interpreted through a range of bodily repertoires (Ferree 2003), constructed through language and practices loaded with signifiers of cultural meaning (Bartky 2002). It is through the body that women become integrated into the social and sexual order, adopting meanings about their bodies that help construct their senses of self and identity (Haug 1987; Ussher 1989). For indeed, menarche is an embodied event that “dramatically signals the transition from girl to woman; [it] is a highly salient and intensely experienced event, and a turning point in female development” (Marván et al. 2006, p. 323). Such a phenomenon illustrates body-reflexive practices whereby bodies are both objects of practice, worked upon and scripted in accordance with social norms, as well as agents of practice, asserting themselves in social discourse and interaction (Connell 1995). Bodies are never “natural,” but always implicated in regimes of truth and knowledge (Bartky 2002) associated with female blood, feminine bodies, and sexuality: knowledge that is invested with properties such as danger, contamination, and sexual power (Delaney et al. 1988). A focus on menarche therefore provides the opportunity to analyze socially constructed scripts and their accompanying bodily practices as examples of embodied gendered negotiations. And, while scholars have emphasized the ways bodily scripts in contemporary US society discipline women and often encourage consumerism (Bartky 2002; Brumberg 1997), they also implicate these cultural scripts in women’s empowerment (Fingerson 2006). Specifically emerging from this body of research on women and menarche are the three themes of central concern in this study: shame, concealment and sexual maturation.

Studies have articulated menarche’s emotionally-laden, and *shame*-filled dimensions grounded in negative messages about bleeding bodies as contaminating, polluting, and something to be embarrassed about (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Delaney et al. 1988; Kipling 2006). Historically and cross-culturally, menstrual blood has been considered magical and poisonous, and social interpretations of women’s bleeding have created taboos that structured and restricted women’s lives (Laws 1990), encouraging separation and seclusion of women from the daily activities of others. Sometimes these seclusions originated in the magical and respected power of menstrual blood and women’s reproductive capabilities. However, discourses of the bleeding female body as polluting illustrate the dangers associated with maintenance of bodily margins as fluids that transcend the body take on particular significance (Douglas 1966). Psychoanalytic theory informs the ways girls unconsciously identify menstrual blood with feces and urine and therefore with contamination (Klein

1918 in Delaney et al. 1988, p. 75), contributing to the “deep-down-inside feeling that one is unworthy, unvalued, defective and unlovable” (Cavanaugh 1989, p. 2). Ultimately, notions of pollution and uncleanness are statements about bodily power relations (as is also shown in denigrating beliefs that fat people, the poor, and people of color are less clean). Repugnance associated with being close to polluting bodily fluids emerges as a powerful indicator of social relations of dominance and subordination: the “girl stain... the fact that girls, not boys become cast as an ultimate polluting group” (Thorne 1994, p. 75). Internalization of pollution themes thus encourage girls to feel shame and humiliation about bleeding bodies.

A major source of information for girls at menarche concerns hygienic management of “sanitary” processes and products (Costos et al. 2002; Marván et al. 2006), underscoring the ways cultural beliefs about menarche as a “hygienic crisis” reinforce stigmas of uncleanness. In one study Rembeck et al. (2006, p. 707) reported participants describing menstruation as “a sign of uncleanness” and a “hygienic silence” (confounding the stigma of menstrual contamination with discourses of concealment). Indeed, language about menstruation, as well as female sexual anatomy generally, have been shown to silence and embarrass girls, encouraging internalized feelings of humiliation in supporting ideas that female genitalia and their excretions are smelly and unpleasant (Thorne 1994). Contemporary media, although more open about menstrual products, continue to perpetuate menstruation as a hygienic crisis (Kissling 2002). Even Fingerson (2006, pp. 44–5), who suggests that contemporary positive discussions about menarche in media and advice books explain the lack of evidence of menstrual “taboos” among her sample of US high school girls, reports these same girls experience “feelings of shame” and work to present their bodies as “not marred by blood and menstruation” (p. 17).

Second, alongside shame and humiliation invoked by menarche, studies have emphasized practices of *concealment* taught to girls that require hiding evidence of menstruation from others (especially male others). Lee and Sasser-Coen (1996, pp. 81–2) demonstrated the practices of concealment and recorded “disciplinary practices” organized around avoiding the horrors of blood-stained clothes in public (wrapping sweaters around the body, avoiding certain colors, etc.). Beausang and Razor (2000, p. 526) write that “young women are still directly or indirectly influenced by cultural beliefs that menstruation is a secretive female process that is primarily hygienic in nature” and Fingerson (2006, p. 15) describes the ways “girls put a great deal of effort into this, such as keeping pads and tampons in concealed places, wearing certain clothes so their pads so not show, changing their ‘protection’ during class breaks so they do not have to ask the

teacher for a pass, and changing their protection often to ensure that they do not leak through their clothing.” Uskul (2004) emphasized secrecy and the discourse of concealment as a defining feature of menarche across cultures. In this way, discourses associated with the female body are internalized and naturalized in ways that make them appear to be voluntary (Foucault 1977). As Bartky (1992, p. 112) suggests, the “disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere.”

Third, at menarche girls’ subjective sense of themselves as women develops simultaneously with the processes of *sexual maturation*: the production of the body as sexual and the inclusion of women into the ordering of the sexual (Lee 1994). Studies of attitudes and behaviors at menarche describe girls’ ambivalence about the sexual messages associated with their maturing bodies and address a range of feelings from mortification and embarrassment (Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1983; Lees 1993; Uskul 2004), fear and uncertainty (Lee 1994; Rembeck et al. 2006), to more positive feelings about growing up and developing a female body (Fingerson 2006; Lee 2008; Teitelman 2004). While the processes of sexual maturation as culturally scripted developments are not monolithic and girls are active agents negotiating these processes and managing their everyday lives, they are taught to live and discipline their bodies in accordance with the prescriptions of compulsory heterosexuality.

Given that girls are developing at earlier ages than previous generations (Chumlea et al. 2003), menstruation is increasingly “a symbol not of motherhood but of sexuality” (Rembeck et al. 2006, p. 712). Contemporary media provide an important cultural context for sexual maturation and affect girls’ sense of themselves and the body (Buszek 2006; Gimlin 2002; Kirberger 2003; Levy 2005). These media encourage sexualization, the ways identity is centered on sexual appeal and encouraged through objectification or the rendering as object for another’s sexual use or pleasure (Brown et al. 2002; Paul 2005). Developing breasts and hips that provide visual cues of menarche are highly constituted as objects of male desire and contribute to the experience of puberty for many girls as synonymous with objectification (Shalit 2007). Such processes, framed by family scripts and cultural norms about girls and the body as well as media representations (Bartky 2002), may encourage anxiety about the maturing female body that coincide with emotional and cognitive changes often described as “the fall” when girls lose self-esteem along with the optimism, self-assurance, and competence of their preadolescent selves (Brown and Gilligan 1992; Pipher 1994; Williams 2002). A recent study by the American Psychological Association (2007) has shown the negative consequences of girls’ sexualization in the form of diminished emotional, cognitive, and mental health indica-

tors. Illustrative of this sexualization of the body at menarche is the term for early menstruation: “precocious puberty.” As several authors have noted, girls who started their period early are often viewed with suspicion as promiscuous (Houppert 1999; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996), reflecting menarche as a crucial sexual transition whereby the politics of desire are scripted on the female body. Indeed, Teitelman (2004) found that when girls’ intellectual or creative capacities were recognized, they felt better about menarche. When sex and reproduction were referenced, girls were “more likely to associate fear, shame, dysfunction, and victimization with their bodies” (p. 1292).

Against these findings is research by Rembeck et al. (2006) showing that while most of their sample of 12 year-old girls were ambivalent about their maturing bodies at menarche, a substantial number of girls reported that they liked their bodies and were looking forward to adulthood. They had more positive feelings about menarche and stronger self-esteem. Fingerson (2006) more explicitly implicates menarche in bodily empowerment. She suggests girls experience bodily agency through menstrual management and notes how they use their bodies, “gendered through menstruation, as sources of power in gendered interactions” (p. 24). Fingerson makes the point that cultural changes encouraging openness about the body have facilitated the transformation. She encourages us to consider the ways women’s experiences of menarche and the meanings they make of these experiences must be understood in relation to larger socio-cultural arrangements and practices and framed by the discourses of specific time and place (Howie and Shail 2005).

This study analyzes meanings associated with bodily experiences of menarche that produce women as embodied, sexualized beings through an engagement with these themes of shame, concealment and sexualization. It analyzes menarche narratives of a US cohort of young women aged 21 years and younger who began their first period around the time of the new millennium and who grew up in a culture with increased media discussion of menstruation. Age of respondents is important since scholarship on menarche with young participants (Fingerson 2006; Rembeck et al. 2006; Teitelman 2004) reveal more positive changes in girls’ experiences of first period; those with older participants (Beausang and Razor 2000; Costos et al. 2002) continue to emphasize more negative aspects. In particular, this study examines (1) the *frequency* of these themes of shame, concealment, and sexual maturation in written menarche narratives; (2) the *meanings* women make of such themes as they recall experiences of first period; and (3) the relation of these themes to key *characteristics* or conditions. Characteristics implicated in understandings of menarche evident in scholarship to date include age at onset of first period, race, economic status, and political

identification of family of origin, and presence of siblings in the home. Age and perceived timing of menarche have been shown to affect girls' experiences of the event (Golub 1992; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996; Stice et al. 2002) as have family resources and scripts and political affiliations (Lee 2008; Teitelman 2004). Sex of siblings and birth orders of respondents have also been shown to have consequences for girls' experiences of first period (Fingerson 2006; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996) and thus are important characteristics for understanding menarche.

Method

This research stems from a larger project examining women's relationships with their mothers at menarche and addressing the relationship between women's memories of maternal scripts and their experiences of menarche (Lee 2008).

Participants

Participants in this study are 155 young women aged between 18 and 21 years who were invited to participate through enrollment in three introductory courses on gender during the winter term 2006 at a university in the Pacific Northwest that attracts a broad range of students. A call for participants was made in the classroom, emphasizing that participation was anonymous, completely voluntary, and not related to their participation in the class. No compensation was involved. Women who volunteered but had started their periods before 1996 were not included in the study. Male students were offered an alternative assignment about adolescence; the project for both was explained as "research about adolescence" to provide privacy for women who agreed to participate in this mixed setting. Since participants were a "captive audience" (instructors used 20 min at the end of the class, instructing students to leave if they did not want to participate), the response rate was high (85%). Research on menarche by Costos et al. (2002) and Beausang and Razor (2000) also used college student participants: the former conducting interviews and the latter using written narratives.

The sample is relatively diverse in terms of socio-economic status with slightly over one fifth of participants living in families with annual incomes below \$40,000 a year, almost three fifths with family incomes between \$40,000 and \$100,000 a year, and approximately one fifth with family incomes over \$100,000 a year at the time they started their first period. Seventy seven per cent of participants ($n=120$) are white and 23% ($n=35$) women of color (with Asian-American women making up over half of the sample of women of color). While all participants are

between 18 and 21 years old, almost two thirds are 18 to 19 years old. Fifty-five percent ($n=85$) lived in politically "conservative" or "very conservative" families and 45% ($n=70$) "liberal" or "very liberal" at menarche. Fifty-two percent ($n=81$) had brothers in the home when they started their period, 51% ($n=79$) had sisters, and 13.5% ($n=21$) were only children. The mean age for onset of menarche among sample participants was similar to the US national average of 12.43 years (Chumlea et al. 2003) at 12.5 years (with a range of 8 to 17 years). Finally, 22% of participants identified their menarche as "early," 59% as "average," and 19% as "late" compared to friends and/or sisters. Most women in the sample started their period between 1999 and 2002.

Procedures

Participants were invited to choose a pseudonym (a name was invented to designate the narratives of those who did not choose a pseudonym) and asked to respond to an anonymous short questionnaire reporting demographic information about themselves and their family. These included open-ended questions about age and race/ethnicity and a request to indicate on a range of family income from under \$40,000 to over \$100,000 a year. Political identification of respondents' families was assessed by respondents checking the following options: "very conservative," "conservative," "liberal," and "very liberal." Information on siblings and birth order was reported by request to check for "only child" or the presence of one or more "older brothers," "younger brothers," "older sisters," and "younger sisters" in the home at the time of menarche. Respondents were asked their age at first period and requested to identify whether this felt "about average," "early," or "late" compared to friends and/or sisters.

After reporting demographic information, study participants were then asked to write an anonymous menarche narrative outlining their experiences of this event with the following open-ended direction: "Please share your memory of your first menstrual period." Finally, all participants were asked to respond to the following question: "If you had to describe your feelings about your first period in a few words, how would you describe it?" These narratives reflect study participants' interpretations of menarche and provide the rich data that provide insight into the meanings women make of their first period. The codes employed in the interpretation of these data (shame, concealment and sexual maturation) were generated from the body of literature on women and menarche. They were tested in the data through indicators explained below.

Indicators of shame include the following words and their derivatives: shame, ashamed, humiliated, disgust, and mortified. Indicators of secrecy and concealment include

embarrassed, hide, secret, plus phrases that imply concealment such as “I didn’t want anyone to know.” Indicators of sexual maturation include the words sex and maturing or growing and their derivatives, plus phrases such as “becoming a woman” or ones that imply the possibility of having a sexual relationship or becoming pregnant, phrases referencing maturing bodies or specific body parts, and phrases that imply others had knowledge of, or were looking, or talking about, their changing bodies. Indicators of counter-evidence in terms of shame include not only its absence in written narratives, but also words and phrases associated with positive feelings, including the words excited, happy, like, love, okay, and cool. Counter-indicators of concealment include phrases about telling others or enjoying public celebrations of menarche. Comments about not wanting to mature can only be interpreted as indicators of feelings about sexual maturation and therefore any comment about sexual maturation indicates this theme. It is important to note limitations of indicators in narrative work: the motivation or choice to not write about something does not mean that it was not experienced, only that it was not shared.

Analysis

The project utilizes a narrative approach that recognizes “memories” as reconstructions or stories created to frame the past in the context of the present (Chase 2005; Lawler 2002). Narrativity is central to the social structuring of experience and expressive in giving meaning to human experience (Schutz 1972). As such, narrative represents the interplay between individuals and culture, emphasizing that in the gap between a subject’s “experience” and her story about it emerges the meanings made of everyday lives (Byrne 2003). As storytellers, narrators work to fashion an account of themselves for socially significant others as well as for themselves, crafting a relationship between experience and memory that allows certain experiences to be remembered in specific ways. Narrative shapes connections between individuals and culture in ways that represent their lived experience and can be interpreted as their meanings about their world.

Analyses began with close readings of all narratives, without taking notes, in order to get a general feel for the range of women’s experiences (Luborsky 1994). During subsequent, multiple readings, a three phase process was established that included data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles and Huberman 1994). During data reduction, narratives were read closely and coded for presence of indicators of shame, concealment and sexual maturation; data was displayed through identification of illustrative statements identified. Simultaneously, descriptive patterns were noted and narratives coded for

demographic variables. A chi-square statistic (χ^2) was computed to test the observed frequency values of the data against predicted values. As conclusions were drawn about themes and patterns in the data, evidence and counterevidence was sought, confirming and challenging the formulation of themes (Chase 2005). Narratives were analyzed through processes of deconstruction (challenging what appears obvious or “natural” by identifying assumptions and analyzing contradictions [Reinharz 1992]). The assumption is made that if certain memories and experiences are shared, they are more salient to the respondent. While only one coder analyzed all narratives, a second coder analyzed a random subset ($n=35$) with total agreement between the two coders for 85% of the narratives. Intercoder rating scores as a measure of agreement among multiple coders for how codes are applied to texts is used as a proxy for the validity of constructs that emerge from the data. The validity of these data must also be judged by the rich descriptions provided (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Results and Discussion

Shame and Humiliation

In terms of the *frequency* of narratives of shame and humiliation in menarche narratives, 19 participants or 12% of the sample specifically wrote about the deep sense of shame associated with menstrual bleeding. These respondents wrote such responses as “I felt humiliated”; “it was awful—just a gross, disgusting thing to happen”; “I experienced such paralyzing shame”; and “oh my God, I was totally ashamed; it felt disgusting.” Rae, for example, wrote about waking up, finding blood in her panties and remembered it as “the most horrifying and disgusting thing in my life.” Similarly, Ginny described feeling “mortified” at having to do the “walk of shame” through a restaurant on the way to the bathroom to take care of the blood in her underwear, and Pam felt “ashamed... [and] defective”: “it was all I could do to not cry,” she explained. Among these narratives of shame and humiliation, fear and assertions of extreme anxiety were also expressed with almost half using such phrases as “I was so scared” and “it frightened me.” Although these participants wrote lucidly about the shame they felt, more respondents ($n=27$ or 18% of the sample) remembered their first period as overwhelmingly positive and shared stories about menarche illustrating eagerness for the event and pleasure at its onset. They wrote such phrases as “[I was] excited, happy to start,” “I loved it,” “yeah! cool,” and “a good experience.” Another 30% of the sample ($n=47$) gave neutral descriptions of menarche that included such responses as “it was just a fact of life,” “no big deal,” and “okay, unavoidable.” Together these positive and

neutral responses to menarche make up 48% or nearly half the sample. Compared to the more negative memories of menarche shared by participants in earlier research, or with older participants in recent studies, respondents have more positive memories of menarche and less indication of feelings of shame.

Several subthemes about the *meanings* associated with feelings of shame and humiliation emerged that include first, images of dirt and feces; second, feelings of guilt and blame; and third, expressions of loss of innocence and sexual objectification. For example, over half of respondents voicing expressions of shame associated with menarche also used the word “dirty”: “it was gross—I felt very dirty” was a common sentiment, reflecting the association of menstruation with dirt and contamination (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). For study participants, these feelings of shame and feeling of uncleanness were connected to other bodily excrement, and the typical dark color of first menstrual blood was associated with feces and the fears of soiling the self. Kat shared the following: “It was Christmas time and we were going around to several Christmas parties. I went to go to the bathroom and there was brown gunk in my panties. Since I only had to pee I didn’t know what was going on and I thought I had some situation with my bowels. It was SO embarrassing!” Similarly, Bianca remembered “this stuff creeping out of me” and got “really scared.” “I thought,” she wrote, “that I had peed and pooped at the same time.” Janice was also “grossed out” and declared “I felt dumb,” adding “I thought I had pooped or something, I was so humiliated.”

Five respondents wrote about feeling “guilty” as if this shameful event was something that they had caused, especially when it involved soiling clothes. “When I went to the bathroom I saw blood on my underwear and I remember thinking that I had done something wrong. I didn’t want to tell anyone about it because I was afraid that I would get into trouble,” explained Dolores. Similarly, Elaine wrote that she felt “very gross and somewhat guilty. I threw my underwear away and felt very dirty.... It made me feel vulnerable.” This guilt illustrates the ways derogatory cultural understandings of menstruation are internalized and women feel culpability in not being able to control leakages from bodily boundaries (Douglas 1966). Finally, another five respondents connected their shame to a “loss of innocence” associated with menarche reflecting how this transition from girl to woman is fraught with sexual overtones and the potential sinfulness associated with female sexual desire (Pipher 1994). Gwen, for example, wrote about the “taboo” nature of this event for her and the way her shame was rooted in the sexual nature of her first blood. Elle, too, wrote that she “felt very dirty and almost forced out of childhood.” This is discussed again in the section on sexual maturation, below.

Key characteristics or differences between this subgroup writing about shame and humiliation and those who did not are presented below. Only differences associated with age at onset of menarche are statistically significant at the .05 level, although chi-square is unreliable with low frequencies and only 12 subjects recalled memories about shame. Fifty-eight per cent of respondents in the subgroup reporting shame and humiliation remembering their menarche as “early” compared to 19% of those without memories of shame ($\chi^2=10.05$). This finding is not surprising given that early menarche can facilitate negative feelings when girls are not emotionally ready to deal with the consequences of this maturational event (Stice et al. 2002).

While there is no evidence for differences by race and income, 74% of those writing about shame and 53% not sharing such narratives grew up in politically conservative or very conservative homes where families often tend to be less open about communication concerning bodily functions (Bornstein 2002). Although this is not a statistically significant difference, several respondents included narratives such as the following: “I don’t want to blame my family, especially my mom, but she was so conservative in her politics and ideas about stuff that I think it really affected how I thought about myself and my body at this time.” Similarly, 67% of this subgroup writing of shame and 52% not reporting these feelings had brothers in the home, with 42% and 24%, respectively, having older brothers. Again, although these data on brothers are not statistically significant, women in this subgroup do share poignant memories of brothers teasing or insulting them. Rae, for example, wrote that “[my brother] kept teasing me and telling me how gross I was” and Rhonda recalled all her brother’s humiliating PMS jokes. Shanna also remembered how awful she felt when her brother described her first menstruation as “dirty and gross.” Mary wrote that she was “terrified that my brothers would find out,” illustrating the ways feelings of shame were connected to fears about concealment generally and concealment from male siblings in particular. Only one respondent who wrote about feeling ashamed also described a sister’s teasing at this time.

Concealment

Etiquettes of concealment (exacerbated by the developmental phenomenon of the “imaginary audience” (Elkind 1978) where adolescents perceive themselves as the center of everyone’s gaze) continue as features of girls’ experience of menarche, supporting prior research to date (Beausang and Razor 2000; Fingerson 2006; Uskul 2004). Almost a third of study participants ($n=48$, 31%) wrote narratives about the necessity of concealing their first period from others and/or the fears and horrors when their secret was revealed. Although this provides support for the continued preva-

lence of the discourses of concealment for girls at first period, the relative absence of exact numerical data in previous studies about concealment (and this is of course true for all themes examined here) makes it difficult to provide precise comparisons. However, the *presence* of so many specific stories of concealment indicates that secrecy surrounding menarche is still a feature of many young women's experience of first period. This reflects messages about the taboos and secrets surrounding menarche and the necessity for women to shield others (especially boys and men) from this contamination. Such messages continue to reproduce a menstrual etiquette internalized by girls at menarche.

Although these data suggest the prevalence of concealment practices, they also reveal counter-evidence. Among women with fond memories of menarche ($n=27$, 18% of the sample), the relative absence of concealment etiquette is marked and the presence of acceptance and celebration a key feature. Many of these described celebrations to mark their experience, usually initiated by emotionally supportive mothers (Lee 2008). This suggests not only the role of mothers in helping girls negotiate cultural norms about concealment, but the point that for some girls, menarche is not a secret event.

In terms of the *meanings* associated with menstrual concealment etiquette, several themes emerge. First, the basic embarrassment associated with having a bleeding body and the necessity of hiding this to prevent loss of personal privacy: "I was SO embarrassed!" is a typical response (often with multiple exclamation points and upper-case letters), as also is "I thought everybody would know." All the women who wrote about feeling shame and humiliation also wrote about intense embarrassment and fears of being "found out" (although, of course, those writing of concealment did not necessarily indicate shame and humiliation). Rima, for example, was "horrified" and was so worried about anyone finding out that she used toilet paper in her underwear and did not tell her mother until about 4 months later. Emma Lynn wrote that she was "especially embarrassed because it happened in a public place." She explained that she "was afraid a boy would know and then make fun of me." Second is an awareness of maintaining cultural norms about concealment and the necessity of not violating these norms by embarrassing others as well as themselves: "I knew I had to keep this to myself and I was horrified that someone might know what was happening," wrote Antoinette, who described her period as "scary" and "embarrassing." "After finding brown, red gunk in my underwear," recalled Cecily, "I thought it was no big deal, but I'd been told indirectly to keep it hidden."

Finally, concealment is associated with fears of staining and leaking: the most intense embarrassment in terms of

violation of concealment etiquette. Taylor, for example, sat anxiously in science class, "nervous that I would leak." "I was so worried I'd stain, especially since I was wearing white pants," wrote Anna, "you feel like everyone is staring at your butt." Lucy corroborated with the following comment: "[if] you're wearing a pad you feel like everyone is staring at your butt because you have this huge diaper thing on." When girls who had internalized the requirements of concealment violated these norms by staining, and, as one respondent explained, "declaring your shame to the world," feelings of intense embarrassment followed. Respondents often looked back on this with humor, at least in the telling of the story, describing incidents about light colored pants or being at the beach in shorts, wrapping sweaters around waists and wearing coats in hot weather to hide stains. "I refused to tell even my female teacher who I liked," explained Gwen. "I wrapped my jacket around my waist for the remainder of the day and I clearly recall walking home with my huge French horn case swinging strategically in front of my body!"

There are few differences concerning key *characteristics*, and no statistically significant differences except for age at onset, between respondents writing about concealment and those who did not. Thirty-three per cent of those remembering such attitudes and behaviors compared to 17% not sharing these memories described themselves as "early" ($\chi^2=4.743$). As already noted, the younger and less prepared a girl is for her menarche, the more likely she is to suffer the embarrassments and fears associated with concealment (Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1983; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996). Sixty-three per cent of those who wrote about concealment and 51% of those who did not report these memories grew up in politically conservative or very conservative families. Politically conservative families do tend to have stricter norms about gendered behaviors (Stacey 1996). Although these differences are not statistically significant, narratives do illustrate the relationship between political conservatism and concealment. As Miriam, for example, recalled: "my family is really conservative and we just didn't talk about such things. All of us girls knew we had to keep this sort of thing hidden and be careful about leaving things around."

Fifty-six per cent of respondents writing about concealment and 50% who did not write about this issue had brothers and 29% and 23%, respectively, had older brothers. Again, although these are not statistically significant differences, narratives do report more anxiety associated with the presence of brothers among this group. Celie, for example, was worried about her pad showing and having her brothers know her secret: "My pad was huge and I was worried it would bulge... I worried about everything. I especially worried about whether my brothers would know and I did not want to be teased. I'd always

make sure I hid my supplies in my room and didn't leave them out in the bathroom." Similarly, Janette wrote that she "tried to hide it so you would never find anything in the bathroom. I kept supplies in my room and wrapped the trash up in toilet paper before throwing it away." Sometimes brothers (like Rose's brother who teased her about her "smelly diapers") did find out about a sister's menarche and caused embarrassment for sisters. Teresa, for example, was "mortified" at her younger brother's "joke": "He got my pads and stuck them to the carpet from my room to the bathroom." Several respondents remembered older brothers teasing them about PMS and then using this knowledge to make fun of them at other times. Almost half of those writing about concealment also mentioned that they did not want their fathers to know about their first period and several discussed asking their mothers not to say anything. Given the norms and practices of menstrual concealment that encourage secrecy and tell girls to hide evidence from males, the presence of male family members may cause stress and anxiety. Although not statistically significant, 42% of this subgroup had sisters in the home and 14.5% older sisters; 55% of those who did not write about concealment attitudes and practices had sisters in the home and 26% older sisters. Only two narratives about concealment anxieties related specifically to the behaviors of sisters and these were not about teasing, but reflected a conflictive relationships shared by the sisters.

Sexual Maturation

As found in prior research, many study participants felt keenly the transition from childhood to womanhood symbolized at menarche, emphasizing the feelings and behaviors associated with "becoming a woman." In terms of the *presence* of this theme among sample participants, over a third (35% or $n=55$) wrote specifically about maturing sexually and the implications of this for their everyday lives. Unlike earlier studies that found girls experienced sexual maturation as a mostly negative transition (Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1983; Lee 1994; Uskul 2004), these data confirm findings by Teitelman (2004) and Fingerson (2006) that first menstrual period is something many girls may look forward to and have positive memories about. Indeed, over two thirds of those writing about sexual maturation (69% or $n=38$) experienced this development as positive with such narratives as "yeh! I became a woman at last!" compared to just under a third (31% or $n=17$) who had negative memories and recalled the experience with such comments as "I did not want to grow up—this was not a good thing!"

The *meanings* for those who saw sexual maturation as a negative event include several themes. First, several who did not enjoy growing up were concerned that they would

lose the freedoms of childhood. As Ginger explained, "I was always a little tomboy into playing sports and swimming. Periods and tampons scared the hell out of me so I hated that I started... I wasn't one of those girls who was waiting for the day that they 'became a woman.' Fuck that, I wanted to play sports and swim and never wear dresses." Similarly, Libby, although with fewer expletives, wrote: "I was a big tomboy, it was awful, I didn't go to school for 3 days and hated that I thought I couldn't do things now like I used to." Stacey was equally horrified: "what a drag: I cried because I thought I would never be able to swim or do anything again." These women saw adult femininity as a restriction on their lives and saw "ladylike" behavior and "girly" clothes as confining.

Second, over three-quarters of participants recalling negative memories of sexual maturation ($n=14$) wrote specifically about how they felt disempowered by the ways people were starting to look and relate to them: behaviors they understood as directly related to the fact that they were no longer children but "budding" into women with all the sexual and reproductive baggage that entailed. "It was traumatic and the sexual part made me feel vulnerable," wrote Elaine. Among these narratives are those discussed above whose memories explicitly focused on feelings of shame: Elle, for example, felt "forced out of childhood" by this shameful sexual knowledge. Such feelings are also illustrated in the "loss of innocence" experienced by Sunny who connected menarche with sexual promiscuity:

I went to the bathroom and there it was, a brownish brick red stain on my "Monday" underwear. I was stunned, almost a paralyzing shame feeling went through me. I was a kid and knew from watching TV that girls who got their period were generally loose and attracted guys' attention.

Of all respondents, Gwen, who grew up in a politically conservative and "very religious" home, was most articulate about the relationship between sexual repression and the negativity surrounding her first blood: "It's a glowing representation of all the sexual repression that I experienced in adolescence," she wrote. Indeed, several women writing about sexualization connected it to sexual information that they found embarrassing, scary, or restrictive. "Being sexually active was definitely not okay," wrote Sophia. And, as Lani explained, "my menarche was particularly awful because I was always so shy about sexual things."

Finally, a handful of participants specifically wrote about how their sexual maturation had affected their relationship with their fathers. They were no longer "daddy's little girl" and experienced the loss of physical affection from fathers. Louise, for example, who wrote "I was saddened to lose the close relationship with my dad," explained that she was no longer able to creep into his bed to fall asleep at night.

However, even though these women were articulate about the perceived horrors of being viewed as a sexual object, only one person specifically mentioned that she did not like her growing breasts and “felt terrible” about them. Remarkably absent are narratives that specifically connect the developing body to negative sexual feelings.

Those with positive narratives of sexual maturation remembered looking forward to this transition to womanhood and everyone wrote some variation of Lorraine’s exclamation: “I became a woman! I was so excited!” or Jane’s comment: “It was great: a realization of becoming a woman.” The *meanings* women made of these positive memories included several themes. First, over half of those excited about “becoming a woman” were happy to be accessing the privileges they perceived came with adult womanhood. “I felt more grown up,” explained Ruth, “and I liked that I could look forward to all the benefits of being a woman and no longer being a child.” These thoughts were shared by Irene who wrote that starting her period was positive because it made her feel “grown up”: “[It’s] good to move beyond childhood and be treated like an adult.” Similarly Janet was also pleased at the anticipation of being treated as more mature. “It meant I’d soon be able to drive and smoke cigarettes (just kidding!),” she wrote.

A second theme mentioned by almost a third ($n=12$) of those with positive memories was that they were glad to be maturing so they could “catch up” with girl friends or sisters and become “one of the club.” “I was scared at first but was so excited to be like my sisters” wrote Jane. Similarly, Cassy wrote about her relief and pleasure: “I started my period after my younger sister... I was glad because I thought I was never going to get it.” Jenny was extremely glad when her period arrived so that she could fit in with her girlfriends. “I was the last one of my group of friends to start,” she explained. “I felt defective. So it was a real relief!” Like Fingerson (2006, p. 110) who describes the ways girls “forge connections” at this time, menarche can be a time for camaraderie and the solidification of relationships with girlfriends and sisters. As Bethany explained:

All of my friends had gotten their period; my best friend Sara and I were the only ones who had not in our friend group. When it finally came I told all my friends and was super-excited. Sadly Sara had still not gotten hers and our no-period club was split up on my account! But she wasn’t mad, she was supportive.

Finally, some of those with positive memories of sexual maturation ($n=8$) wrote specifically about their pleasure at developing a womanly body. For example, Aria wrote: “I was still in elementary school. About the end of fifth grade I grew breasts and started my period soon after. I remember my best friend being very jealous. She would wear water

balloons in her bra hoping that she would get them like I did.” Emily Jo also wrote a narrative illustrating this theme of breasts as assets for girls entering adolescence. Note how these narratives underscore the ways physical development is related to the development of camaraderie and the “fitting in” with sisters and friends.

When I first started my menstrual period I was about 12. I was so excited because I had always wanted to look and act older than what I was, and now I finally felt that I was becoming a young adult; I no longer had to pretend to be mature. I think my enthusiasm to start was triggered by my friends—at age 12 my bust line looked as if I were 5 years old, I was so embarrassed about my breasts because all of my friends were already in wire bras ranging from an A to a B cup. So when I started my menstrual cycle I thought I was catching up to them, I fit in again! Yeh!

Janet also wrote about how happy she was to think about her breasts growing. “It seems like everyone makes such a big deal about breasts now with push-up bras, and in movies and television, etc., that they seem really important. I know in my group of friends it was definitely not a good thing to be flat-chested. I think that’s why I wanted breasts so badly.” Janet’s comment is insightful in describing the emphasis on breasts in contemporary US culture and the increasing sexualization of girls by the media (Paul 2005). Whereas past studies have alluded to developing breasts as sources of shame (Houppert 1999; Delaney et al. 1988; Lee 1997; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996), no woman in this study specifically described breasts as a source of shame or humiliation (although, as already discussed, three participants resisted sexualization associated with loss of childhood implied by menarche, even though they did not mention breasts *per se*). That breast development seems very likely to be experienced as an asset among young women today reflects the increasing cultural emphasis on looks and beauty as well as the normalization of breast augmentation and pornography in mainstream society (Bartky 2002; Levy 2005). Certainly there is some evidence here for the anticipation of breasts and hips and an acknowledgement of this currency within girls’ peer groups.

There are no statistically significant differences between key *characteristics* of women who wrote positively and those who wrote negatively about sexual maturation, although 65% of those who had negative memories and 55% of those with positive memories grew up in politically conservative families and several of those from the latter subgroup explained how their politically conservative families influenced their feelings about their maturing bodies. Fifty nine per cent of respondents writing negatively about sexualization had brothers in the home (and 29% with older brothers) whereas 45% of those with positive memories had brothers (and 21% had older brothers).

Finally, 29% of those with negative and 18% of those with positive memories of sexual maturation started “early,” although 23% of the negative subgroup and 21% of the positive remembered starting “late.” Although narratives clearly indicate that early sexual maturation is connected to feelings of distress (with Kat, for example, starting her period at age 8 years and describing her “intense confusion” about being treated in sexual ways at such a tender age), other narratives about “feeling deformed to be just starting my period at age 14” underscore findings that the ideal time to start is in sync with friends and sisters (Fingerson 2006).

An important aspect informing understandings of sexual maturation is the relatively high frequency of respondents who nonchalantly reported menarche as “no big deal.” They did not experience this incident symbolizing entry into adult femininity as either good or bad: as one respondent explained, “it just was.” As already mentioned, almost a third of the sample ($n=47$) had such neutral reactions to menarche, although they do not demonstrate any statistically significant differences from the rest of the sample. These “no big deal” and “I hardly noticed it” stories both minimize menarche and report it as uneventful with minimal meaning, and emphasize the ways the event was taken in stride. Not surprisingly, neutral memories tended to be short and sweet: “I barely remember it”; “It was bound to happen sooner or later”; “Normal, nothing much to say”; and “ho hum, no biggie.” Ariel, for example, remembered her menarche as a “so-so” experience: “[It] wasn’t a big deal. That year all the girls in the fifth grade had a day of understanding a woman’s body... the best part was the cake with icing [shaped like] a pad!” These responses are similar to those “capable” and “matter-of-fact” respondents found by Teitelman (2004, p.1298) who shared what she called “I knew what to do” scripts. Both Teitelman (2004) and (Lee 2008) found such respondents tended to have mothers who prepared them for their first period.

Limitations

Subjects were selected from sections of introductory courses that attract diverse students because of the courses’ fulfillment of university baccalaureate core requirements and were invited to participate at the very start of the term before key issues pertaining to the class had begun. Instructions also included a request to write straightforward accounts describing their menarche rather than an analysis of that experience. Despite this, it is still important to emphasize a potential bias of a sample drawn from a course that focuses on gender issues and to keep this in mind when interpreting results. And, while the sample exceeds the racial diversity of undergraduates at this particular univer-

sity where approximately 17% of the student body is made up of students of color, it is biased in its predominance of white women as well problematic in collapsing diverse ethnic categories under the terms “white” and “women of color.” Further, although there is socio-economic diversity in the sample, income levels are often unreliable since many young people guess at family income, especially if this was an estimation for a time in their past. Such bias that involves access to education and other resources has implications for scholarship on menarche (Lareau 2003).

Another limitation includes the self-selected aspect of respondents who felt able to share personal information. Those not wishing to participate in this project could differ from those who did in their orientation to menarche: perhaps they were not comfortable sharing about potentially “taboo” issues or had especially bad memories, or alternatively, unremarkable memories.... Still, compared to the confidentiality of face-to-face interviews, these written narratives provided anonymity and may have allowed some respondents to feel more comfortable about sharing personal or potentially embarrassing stories.

Finally, a key limitation of the study is one intrinsic to open-ended narrative research: the tendency to underestimate the prevalence of factors as a result of lack of explicit probes. Because a respondent does not write about something when asked to respond to an open-ended request like “Please share your memory of your first menstrual period” does not mean that she did not experience it. In other words, searching for written indicators of themes (such as words like “ashamed” for themes about shame) underestimates in its assumption that narratives of silence or the absence of key words implies a negation of themes. While this limitation is true also for oral narratives and interview protocol, writing requires more conscious effort than speaking and therefore suffers more from this problem (Chase 2005). In addition, being text-based, written narratives tend to be more formal than the more intimate sharing that might occur in face-to-face, in-depth, oral histories. Nonetheless, even though participants were not able to verbally recount their stories, the written narratives of these young women are remarkably candid and often quite lucid. A handful of respondents also added a note about how much they had enjoyed remembering their first period and how easily these memories came back to them.

Conclusion

Lucid narratives about the body with intricate details of first period underscore the importance of menarche in women’s lives. Participants remember this event with surprising acuity and willingly shared feelings and insights. While the generalizability of these data are limited by the

parameters of the sample and the narrative method, the results do provide some evidence for the continued presence of themes of shame and concealment and for the ways girls continue to experience sexual maturation as negative. However, expressions of more positive attitudes towards menarche and sexual maturation, as well as a more a more nonchalant response to first period generally, is startlingly apparent in these narratives of young women compared to earlier research and studies with older participants. Specifically, while many women described attitudes and practices about concealment with narratives of embarrassment for self and others and heightened anxiety about leaking and staining, the presence of narratives of shame and humiliation was relatively low. Similarly, among those who chose to write about sexual maturation in their menarche narratives, twice as many shared positive memories as negative ones and a third of the sample explicitly remembered menarche as “no big deal.” What this implies is that although some women report experiencing menarche in ways that reflect cultural misogyny and the association of the bleeding female body with shame and secrecy and interpret changing bodies as negative developments, still the balance shows most women did not remember their period in this way, and a good number were very excited to develop an adult female body. These more positive findings support Fingerson’s (2006, p. 149) claim that “there is no single negative or positive model... [It can be] empowering for girls as [they] generate agency through their bodies and menstruation.”

The more positive response to menarche may reflect the fact that families and schools appear to be dealing better with menarche than in the past (Lee 2008; Teitelman 2004). An increased cultural openness or acknowledgment of menarche in social discourse might also provide a preparation of sorts that makes menarche more predictable. This current generation of adolescent girls were born after Steinem (1978, p. 110) wrote “If Men Could Menstruate,” a narrative that is now “a part of their culture” (Fingerson 2006, p. 105). More positive memories may reflect the “girl power”: a discourse that is “assertive, dynamic, and unbound from the constraints of a passive femininity” (Gonick 2006, p. 2) and whose feminist underpinnings offer girls liberatory potential (Adams and Bettis 2003; Harris 2004; Jacques 2001). Such an approach underscores a more expansive femininity and celebrates the potential of girls as producers and creators of knowledge through self-expression: a form of “youth feminism” (Garrison 2000, p. 142; Valenti 2007). It encourages an understanding of the ways girls use the body to appropriate and integrate consumer cultures that potentially objectify them, leading to efficacy and new forms of female agency (Aapola et al. 2004; Seely 2007).

Such cultural changes about girls and femininity in new family scripts, media, and schools that encourage an

interpretation of female physical maturation as an asset provide new discourses about how bodies should look, feel, and behave. These data may also suggest that menarche as a developmental transition to a mature female body is interpreted more positively in a society that increasingly sexualizes the female body and encourages girls to identify with this sexualization. Indeed, perhaps the decrease in negativity about menarche among young women today reflects the ways young women think they *should* experience the body, in light of these cultural messages. While bodies are biophysical entities, the meanings attached to bodies are directly related to the historical and sociocultural spaces they occupy. When Paul (2005), for example, writes about the “stripper culture” of contemporary teens and even pre-teen girls, she is referring to these cultural changes. Levy (2005) also demonstrates the ways consumer culture encourages adolescent girls to participate in their own objectification through identification with displays of the female body for male viewing pleasure in music videos, movies, video games and advertising, as well as directly through self-proclamations of “sexy” or “hot” on social networking sites like MySpace and FaceBook. The increased cultural openness about menstruation (even while the content of these messages are often still problematic (Kissling 2002)) may cause pressure for girls to feel they have to be “cool” about menarche and might mask more nuanced feelings. Cultural pressures may guide perceptions, frame experiences, and encourage a re-narration of stories that flatten negative experiences into a socially expected “no problem.”

Despite these more positive memories of menarche in this study, the presence of specific narratives about shame, embarrassment, and fear points to the continued internalization of negative cultural messages about menstruation that helps shape young women’s lives. These data provide evidence that girls starting their period early are especially vulnerable to these messages and may require supportive interventions by mothers and other caretakers (Lee 2008). Girls with brothers, and especially older brothers in the home, may also be particularly vulnerable. Although differences associated with brothers are not statistically significant, narratives do underscore the influence of the presence of brothers on girls’ experiences of menarche. This speaks to the need for the socialization of boys in ways that support girls and avoids having brothers act as conduits for sexism in the family and society. Sisters for the most part seem to provide support and solidarity; narratives of teasing sisters were few and far between and girls often looked forward to “joining the club” with sisters who were already menstruating. These data point to the necessity of more research exploring contemporary discourses that govern the politics of the female body. Oral narratives with girls who are just now starting their periods are necessary if

we are to continue to understand the interplay between changing complex cultural scripts and girls' experiences of this important developmental experience.

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