

Restriction and Renewal, Pollution and Power, Constraint and Community: The Paradoxes of Religious Women's Experiences of Menstruation

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Abstract Across cultures and historical time, menstruation has tended to be perceived as mysterious, dangerous and potentially contaminating. Most world religions place prohibitions on and prescribe codified purity rituals for menstruating women. We surveyed 340 religious and non-religious women from the Rocky Mountain West region of the United States regarding their attitudes and experiences of menstruation. We found that prescriptive religious women rated their periods as more bothersome, embarrassing, shameful, and endorsed more prohibitions, prescriptions and seclusion during menses compared to non-religious women. However, perhaps because their religions openly acknowledge menstruation, and their practice of rituals spotlights menstruation as a special time, religious women also identified a positive aspect of their menstrual cycles not shared by their non-religious counterparts. This was a heightened sense of community with other women. Further, women in committed relationships had more positive experiences of menstruation than single women, and this was especially true for women in prescriptive religions, despite a greater onus placed on them to observe menstrual rituals. This study complicates our understanding of how the practice of codified religious prohibitions and prescriptions around menstruation impacts women's experience.

Keywords Menstruation · Religion · Attitudes · Feminism

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Introduction

Women across cultures and traditions throughout history have been paradoxically both demonized and praised for their bodies' reproductive processes (Goldenberg and Roberts 2011). The archetype of "mother" is undoubtedly revered in societies across the globe (Glick and Fiske 2001). A bleeding woman, however, is considered polluted, contaminating, and dangerous (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). We see evidence of this widely-held belief in three of the major religions around the world—Judaism, Hinduism and Islam—each of which codifies prescriptions and prohibitions on menstruating women (Guterman et al. 2008).

Modern Western cultures also place restrictions on menstruating women and studies show that secular women in countries like the United States, Great Britain, Canada and Mexico endorse many taboos, myths and negative feelings around menstruation (e.g., Lawlor and Choi 1998; Marván et al. 2006; Rempel and Baumgartner 2003; Roberts et al. 2002). These are reflected in mass marketing which characterizes menstruation as unclean and polluting, necessitating its quiet, secretive management with sanitary products (Kissling 2006). Compared to the regulations codified by many religions (as we will detail below) however, the menstrual "rules" of modern western culture are largely unwritten, and women's consent implicit.

There is an irony reflected in the codification of prohibitions and prescriptive rules on menstruating women in Judaism, Islam and Hinduism (Guterman et al. 2008). Religious menstrual rituals that prohibit certain behaviors during menses, and prescribe participation in other behaviors, essentially shine a light on women's periods and often require obvious separation from men. In doing so, rituals are capable of reinforcing and propagating negative attitudes towards women and menstruation certainly, but also,

ironically, of perhaps enabling women themselves to acknowledge and experience their and other women's menstruating bodies in a more open and even communal way.

In an effort to explore nuances in how religious women living in the United States negotiate menstruation, we conducted a quantitative survey that measured the menstrual attitudes and experiences of prescriptive religious, non-prescriptive religious, and secular women. Women were asked to indicate their endorsement of attitudes related to menstruation as bothersome, embarrassing, shameful and secret, as well as their seclusion from others and their adherence to prescriptions and prohibitions on behavior during menses. To these largely negative attitudes, we added questions regarding menstruation providing opportunity for a heightened sense of community with other women. Finally, we sought to explore the role relationship status may also play in these menstrual attitudes, and in potential interactions between relationship status and religious affiliation, given the common religious prohibitions regarding women's sexuality particularly.

Attitudes Toward Menstruation in Modern America

American culture teaches women through educational materials, advertising, and marketing that menstruation is dirty and contaminating (why else would "sanitation" be necessary?), that secrecy is imperative (a product line called "Whisper"), and through obfuscation and euphemisms ("on the rag"; "Aunt Flo") that open dialogue about menstruation would be embarrassing and shameful (Erchull et al. 2002; Kissling 1996). Feminists have argued that this cultural milieu, which is widespread in modern cultures around the globe, discourages positive menstrual discourse (Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996; Marván et al. 2006).

Studies show that secular American menstruating women are stigmatized by others. For example, when it is made known that a woman is menstruating (e.g., she accidentally drops a tampon), observers opt to sit further away from her, implying a belief in menstruation's polluting power (Roberts et al. 2002). Furthermore, the cultural practice of sexual objectification appears to discipline women to feel shame about their periods, and thus seclude themselves from others, and keep all evidence of menstruation hidden, especially from men (e.g., Johnston-Robledo et al. 2007; Roberts 2004). It is no surprise, then, that even secular individuals in the United States feel predominantly negative attitudes toward menstruation, and women themselves accept some associated restrictions on behavior during their periods (Houppert 1999; Kissling 2006). However, the code of conduct must be inferred, and the menstruating woman is on her own to decode it.

In spite of predominantly negative attitudes toward menstruation, some women do endorse positive attitudes,

particularly if asked about them. For example, Chrisler et al. (1994) showed that women could be primed by the title of a questionnaire to report positive changes associated with their menstrual cycle. In a counterbalanced design, women who completed a "Menstrual Joy Questionnaire" (MJQ) prior to completing an attitude measure expressed surprise at the title, and they did not report fewer feelings of negativity about their cycles compared to those who received the Menstrual Distress Questionnaire (Moos 1968) first. However, they *did* report greater positive feelings toward their cycles, and many reported that the MJQ caused them to look at menstruation in a different way. A follow-up study removed the title of the MJQ, but again found that women given the same items that reflect positive associations with menstruation (e.g., "high spirits," "self-confidence") were primed to endorse positive features of their menses (Aubeeluck and Maguire 2004).

Thus research to date on scale development to assess menstrual attitudes suggests that women's views of their cycles are multifaceted. Brooks-Gunn and Ruble's (1980) Menstrual Attitude Questionnaire, as well as Roberts's (2004) Menstrual Self-Evaluation Scale, and finally Marván et al. (2006) Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Menstrual scale all demonstrate that women in countries like the United States and Mexico reflect a tremendous range of attitudes and emotions regarding their periods. Some find it more and some find it less bothersome, embarrassing, requiring of secrecy, or shameful. This investigation sought to discover whether religious affiliation might predict variations in these attitudes and emotions.

Attitudes Toward Menstruation Across Three Religious Traditions

Though contemporary Western culture does not confine menstruating women to menstrual huts as some indigenous cultures do (Hoskins 2002), periods are nonetheless marketed as a hygienic emergency that must be managed quietly and effectively (Erchull et al. 2002; Roberts et al. 2002). However, some major religions, even when practiced in the United States, enforce prohibitions and prescriptions for menstruating women that do involve isolation (Guterman et al. 2008). This study focuses on the attitudes and experiences of women from Orthodox Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim traditions because of the similarity in the form and magnitude of their menstrual rituals. To date, few if any researchers have examined the ways such codified rituals impact modern women's experiences of menstruation, particularly in the U.S. Each tradition restricts menstruating women from engaging in sexual intimacy, from active participation in their religion, and requires some form of a ritual bath when bleeding has stopped.

Orthodox Judaism and Menstruation

Jewish scripture dictates that “she shall be in her impurity for 7 days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening” (Leviticus 15:19). Orthodox Jewish law dictates many prohibitions during menstruation (*niddah*, a woman’s period of ritual uncleanness), particularly for married women. A wife is forbidden from touching her husband, passing objects to him, sharing a bed or seat with him without an object between them, wearing clothes that do not cover her entirely, wearing perfume, singing, or from sexually enticing her husband in any way (Steinberg 1997).

The ritual bath in Judaism, called a *mikveh*, is required for women 7 days after bleeding has stopped in order to return to ritual purity. The process of cleansing is a meticulous one, which consists of visiting the bath after nightfall, where the woman must first remove all foreign objects from her body, wash herself thoroughly, and immerse herself twice in the pool, once before reciting a prayer and once after, under the supervision of an experienced female observer (Steinberg 1997).

Ironically, while practices of restriction can contribute to a “false consciousness” in which the menstruating woman embraces her identity as polluted, such rituals may also result in some positive advantages for women (Hartman and Marmon 2004). For example, if a married woman does not otherwise have a voice to deny sexual relations, *niddah* can become her period of refuge (Hartman and Marmon 2004). As well, studies have shown that while some women may experience the *mikveh* as tedious and invasive, it can also be a space for women to commune with one another, and can provide a means of reclaiming a kind of control (Hartman and Marmon 2004). Women, for instance, may delay going to the *mikveh* and in so doing refuse, with officially sanctioned authority, to have sexual intercourse with their husbands for up to 2 weeks a month.

Islam and Menstruation

Islamic law also imposes physical contact restrictions on menstruating women. The Qur’an (2:222) reads “Say it is an illness, so let women alone at such times and go not into them till they are cleansed.” Islamic law specifies that menstrual blood alone is ritually impure. The woman herself is not viewed as intrinsically impure (Maghen 1999). Intercourse with a menstruating woman, then, is forbidden because it would involve coming into contact with menstrual blood itself.

Islamic law also specifically limits a menstruating woman’s practice of her faith. Menstruating women are prohibited from reciting the five daily ritual prayers, from visiting a mosque, must abstain from fasting during Ramadan, and must not touch or recite directly from the Qur’an

(Guterman et al. 2008). Muslim women cannot engage in any ritual washings to become pure while menstruating. Water is a substance regarded in Islam as having the power to rid one of impurity, a belief that is enacted by worshippers with washings before ritual prayers. After her cycle ends, a Muslim woman must perform ritual acts of ablution to return to the state of purity and once again can engage in sexual intimacy and worship (Maghen 1999).

Hinduism and Menstruation

According to traditional Hindu belief, it is the menstruating woman herself that is polluted. As such, menstruating women are isolated as untouchables (Leslie 1991). They can do no work, must not comb their hair, bathe, or touch water or fire sources (Guterman et al. 2008). In addition to being prohibited from engaging in sexual contact, menstruating Hindu women are also restricted from sharing spaces in all forms with others. Menstrual isolation also extends to idols and the spaces where the gods and goddesses are housed, thereby prohibiting menstruating women from engaging in the active practice of their religion (Nagarajan 2007). After this isolation, menstruating Hindu women end their monthly impurity by ritually washing their hair on the fourth day, and then their bodies on the morning of the fifth (Leslie 1991).

Although some Hindu women may experience these restrictions as burdensome, research suggests that the isolation can also serve as a break from the monotony and struggle of work, a welcomed period of rest (Nagarajan 2007). As one Hindu woman expressed, reflecting the paradoxical quality of menstrual seclusion, “When the fourth day arrived, we would take our head baths and become ritually pure again, losing our special space of quiet and rest” (Nagarajan 2007, p. 95).

Sexuality, Relationship Status and Menstruation

All three religious traditions specifically restrict women’s sexuality during menses, and therefore it follows that prescriptive religious women who are married may have a different attitude toward their menstrual cycle than do unmarried prescriptive religious women. Given that sexual intimacy outside of the context of marriage is frowned upon in these religions, unmarried women are likely not bothered by the strict rituals regarding sexual intercourse, and thus may experience their menstrual cycle as less bothersome than do married women. However, for married women within prescriptive religions, menstruation and menstrual rituals may provide a way to exercise power over their own sexuality by allowing a break from sexual relations with their husbands (Hartman and Marmon 2004).

For those women who do not identify with a prescriptive religion, however, menstruation may be a way to exercise

power *through* their sexual activity. A qualitative study conducted by Allen and Goldberg (2009) demonstrated that women in committed relationships were more likely to be comfortable with and to have menstrual sex. Menstrual sex was, in fact, a developmental milestone to be achieved in a relationship, and women testified to it as a means to satisfying their own urges. In fact, many women in this study believed their sexual drive to be heightened when menstruating, and being in a committed relationship allowed them to act upon this drive without shame. Furthermore, a woman's level of comfort with her own sexuality and sexual activity is connected with her belief in menstruation as a normal, publicly acceptable event (Rempel and Baumgartner 2003). It seems, then, if women and their sexual partners are comfortable with menstruation, they are more likely to be comfortable with sexual activity during menstruation.

So, both religious and non-religious women in committed partnerships may find some power with respect to their sexuality connected to menstruation, but in different ways. For prescriptive religious women this power is likely a “negative” one. That is, menstruation may allow married prescriptive religious women to *deny* sexual activity if they do not wish it, and to do this without any feelings of guilt or obligation. In contrast, for non-religious women in committed or married relationships, the prohibitions against menstrual sex may be lifted, and thus these women may find a feeling of power in pursuing sexual activity during menses without shame. For these reasons, we predicted that women who were married or in committed relationships would view menstruation as less bothersome, embarrassing, shameful, and endorse fewer prohibitions, prescriptions and seclusion than single women would, regardless of religious affiliation. We believed that religion would interact with marital status, however, to predict that married religious women, despite the greater burden to engage in rituals, would feel a greater sense of community among other women during menses than would single or married non-religious women.

Present Study

Women of different faiths, cultures, and traditions engage in different menstrual practices. Many of the aforementioned religious menstrual rituals seem to reinforce negative stereotypes of women as weak, dirty, and as beings that should be secluded. But is it possible for religious women to find room for a more positive view of menstruation because their religions do acknowledge them as unique and even special during their periods? French philosopher Foucault (1995) argued that the body is unavoidably constructed by the culture and society that surrounds it. There are seen and unseen power structures within society that affect the body, that “mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (p. 25). To what extent

are menstruating women able to realize the disciplinary structures that surround them, and to what extent are they blind to these? Might religious rituals surrounding menstruation shine a light on those disciplinary practices such that women who perform them find some room for positive experiences not shared by their non-religious counterparts? While prescriptive religious rituals reinforce negative experiences of menstruation, studies have also shown that women may recognize positive effects of menstruation if primed and presented with the language to do so (e.g., Chrisler et al. 1994). Other studies suggest that being in a relationship provides some room for a more positive view of menstruation (e.g., Allen and Goldberg 2009). Ironically, in prohibiting some behaviors and prescribing rituals their religions openly acknowledge menstruation and even imply its power to pollute or disrupt the social order. Moreover, rituals make obvious that all menstruating women within a certain community engage in similar practices, endure similar burdens, and experience similar social constructions of their bodies.

In the present study, we sought to provide religious and non-religious women in the U.S. with the opportunity to reflect on both positive and negative aspects of their menstrual cycles. To do so, we developed a questionnaire with items from previous scale development work (Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1980; Marván et al. 2006; Roberts 2004) to assess how bothersome, embarrassing, secretive and shameful women felt about their periods. To these, we specifically added and created new items to reflect the religious prescriptions, prohibitions and seclusion required in Jewish, Muslim and Hindu traditions, as well as items reflecting community.

We predicted that prescriptive religious women would have the most negative feelings of all the groups, given the many codified rituals in which they must engage, rating their periods as more bothersome, embarrassing, secretive/shameful, and endorsing more prescriptions, prohibitions and seclusion than non-religious women. We hypothesized second, however, that women in the prescriptive religious group would also have some positive feelings toward aspects of their menstrual cycles that their non-prescriptive and non-religious counterparts would not share. Primary among these would be endorsement of feelings of community with other women. Perhaps, given the requirements of separation and ritual cleansing in Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, these women encounter other women on their cycles in ways that secular American women, whose cycles are more private, do not. Accordingly, we added new questions to existing menstrual attitude scales assessing women's feelings of community with one another in relation to their periods and predicted that religious women would endorse these items more highly than would non-religious women.

Third, we also predicted that married women and women involved in committed relationships would have less

negative views overall of their menstrual cycles, reflected in lower scores on all the attitude clusters (except community) than their single counterparts. Fourth, and finally, we predicted that particularly those married women in prescriptive religious traditions would experience the most paradoxical feelings toward their menstrual cycles, rating the more negatively-valenced attitude items lower, and the community items higher than other women. Perhaps the onerous practices they must perform once married provide an ironic space to recognize their power and even to share it with a community of other women.

An additional consideration might be the impact of age on attitudes. Menstrual attitudes have been found to vary with age; some studies have indicated younger women's more positive attitudes (e.g., Lawlor and Choi 1998) while others have indicated older women's more positive attitudes (e.g., Marván et al. 2009; Roberts 2004; Stubbs 1985). Accordingly, our analysis considered age as a covariate.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 340 female participants from the Rocky Mountain West, ranging in age from 17 to 62 years of age completed an online survey. The mean age of participants was 28 years old. 78.5% identified as White or European-American, 8.8% as Asian or Asian-American, 5.6% Hispanic, 2.1% as African-American, 2.4% as Arab, and 2.7% identified as "other" or "mixed race." 32.7% of respondents identified as Christian, 8.4% as Jewish, 2.4% as Hindu, 8.1% as Muslim, 1.4% as Buddhist, 9.7% identified with an "other" religious group, and 37% identified with no religion at all. Participants were invited to complete the online survey through links provided on a social-networking site, a college listserv, and emails to religious groups and organizations in the Rocky Mountain West.

Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim participants were categorized in a single group as Prescriptive Religious women due to the commonalities in the rituals prescribed for menstruating women: abstention from sexual intercourse, abstention from religious expression, and a ritual bath. Buddhism and Christianity offer far more leniency toward menstruating women than do the aforementioned religious traditions (Guterman et al. 2008). Accordingly, participants were categorized in one of three groups: Prescriptive Religious (Jewish, Hindu and Muslim, $N=70$); Non-Prescriptive Religious (Christian, Buddhist, or Other, $N=162$), and Not Religious (those who reported that they did not identify with any religious group, $N=136$). A second independent variable was created to characterize respondents' relationship status that

distinguished those who were single and/or dating ($N=214$) from those in committed relationships and/or married ($N=154$).

Materials

A 48 item questionnaire was used to assess menstrual attitudes. The measure included the Bothersome subscale of the Menstrual Attitudes Questionnaire (MAQ; Brooks-Gunn and Ruble 1980), and the Disgust/Shame subscale of the Menstrual Self-Evaluation Scale (MSE; Roberts 2004), 21 items from the Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Menstruation Scale (BATM; Marván et al. 2006), and 13 new items written by the researchers. Items from the Bothersome subscale assess how bothersome menstruation is (e.g., The only thing menstruation is good for is to let women know they are not pregnant); items from the Disgust/Shame subscale of the MSE scale assess the degree of disgust and shame that may be associated with menstruation (e.g., I find menstrual blood disgusting). The BATM assesses several aspects of menstrual experience but the items chosen for use in this study were those from the Secrecy/Shame and Prohibitions/Prescriptions subscales as most pertinent to a sample of religious women. The 13 original items addressed attitudes the previous published scales did not consider, including religious prescriptions, prohibitions and seclusion around menstruation, as well as feelings of community with other women connected to menstruation, suggested by more qualitative examinations of religious women's experiences (e.g., Guterman et al. 2008). These items were rated by our participants using a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating *strongly disagree* and 7 indicating *strongly agree*.

Factor Analysis

A factor analysis with Varimax rotation was conducted on all 48 items from the questionnaire to determine internal consistency as well whether the items would arrange themselves into confirmatory and/or new subscales. Examination of the scree-plot revealed that the slope changed significantly after the seventh factor, and this corresponded to an Eigenvalue cut-off of 1.5, which placed 38 of the 48 items into seven meaningful factors (see Appendix). The seven factors were labeled as follows: *Secrecy/Shame* contained eight items that addressed respondents' feelings of having to hide their menstruation (e.g. When women have their period, they should do things to hide the fact that they are menstruating); *Prohibitions* contained seven items that addressed activities that should be avoided by menstruating women (e.g. Women must avoid swimming while we are having our periods); *Community* consisted of five items regarding a strengthened sense of community while menstruating (e.g. Menstruation provides a way for me to keep

in touch with my community); *Bothersome* included five items that discussed feelings of menstrual burden (e.g. Menstruation is something women just have to put up with); *Prescriptions* contained five items that addressed things that should be done by a menstruating woman (e.g. Women must drink tea while we are having our periods); *Seclusion* contained four items which identified respondents’ isolation from others while menstruating (e.g. I avoid being touched while I am menstruating); and *Embarrassment* consisted of four items regarding respondents’ self-consciousness around menstruation (e.g. It is embarrassing when a man finds out that a woman is having her period).

These seven factors served as subscales, and the dependent measures in the following analyses. Reliability analyses on the new subscales revealed Cronbach’s alphas of .87 for Secrecy/Shame, .82 for Prohibitions, .86 for Community, .79 for *Bothersome*, .79 for *Prescriptions*, .75 for *Seclusion*, and .72 for *Embarrassment*. Value ranges for each of the seven dependent measures were: 1.60–7.00 for *Bothersome*, 1.00–6.13 for *Secrecy/Shame*, 1.00–5.71 for *Prohibitions*, 1.00–6.00 for *Community*, 1.00–5.60 for *Prescriptions*, 1.00–6.75 for *Seclusion*, and 1.00–6.75 for *Embarrassment*.

Results

A multivariate analyses of co-variance (MANCOVA) was run with Religion (Prescriptive, Non-Prescriptive and Not Religious) and Relationship Status (Single/Dating versus Married/Committed Relationship) as the independent variables, and Age as the covariate, on the seven dependent measures. The omnibus test revealed significant main effects for Religion, $F(14, 564)=5.63, p=.000$, Relationship

Status, $F(14, 564)=171, p<.05$ and the interaction effect of Religion x Relationship Status, $F(21, 849)=1.89, p=.009$, justifying further analyses examining the 3x2 design for each dependent variable. Please see Table 1 for the descriptive data for all seven dependent measures in the 3x2 design.

Although examination of the Age variable revealed that it was skewed, transformation of Age did not change the pattern of results, and so we relied on the untransformed Age variable. There were no significant differences in age among the three Religion groups (M Prescriptive=25, M Non-Prescriptive=24, M Not Religious=26, $p>.05$). Not surprisingly, the Married/Committed group were significantly older ($M=32$) than the Single/Dating group ($M=22$). However, age did not have a significant multivariate effect, $F(7, 281)=.722, p=.654$, on any of the dependent measures, nor was there a significant univariate effect of age on any of the dependent measures. Thus, by partialling out age in the MANCOVA, the following analyses controlled for age.

Religious Group Main Effects

As predicted, significant main effects for Religion emerged on six of the seven dependent variables, *Secrecy/Shame*: $F(2, 288)=16.88, p<.0001$; *Embarrassment*: $F(2, 288)=5.22, p<.005$ *Prohibitions*: $F(2, 288)=37.65, p<.0001$; *Community*: $F(2, 288)=9.53, p<.0001$; *Prescriptions*: $F(2, 288)=6.11, p<.005$; *Seclusion*: $F(2, 288)=32.09, p<.0001$. The *Bothersome* factor was rated equally by all three religious groups, $F(2, 288)=.219, ns$.

Tukey’s Post Hoc Tests were run to determine which groups were different on each dependent variable, and these

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for all continuous variables

Variables	Not Religious		a	Prescriptive Religious		b	Non-Prescriptive Religious		a
	Single (N=78) M (SD)	Married (N=38) M (SD)		Single (N=23) M (SD)	Married (N=30) M (SD)		Single (N=61) M (SD)	Married (N=59) M (SD)	
<i>Bothersome</i>	4.27 (1.30) ^y	4.47 (1.21) ^y		4.97 (1.03) ^x	4.07 (1.47) ^y		4.35 (1.18) ^y	4.52 (1.22) ^y	
<i>Secrecy/Shame</i> *	2.34 (.98)	2.16 (.88)	a	3.59 (1.27)	3.02 (1.27)	b	2.67 (1.01)	2.27 (.99)	c
<i>Prohibitions</i> *	1.52 (.61)	1.37 (.46)	a	2.85 (1.42)	2.22 (1.05)	b	1.78 (.67)	1.50 (.59)	a
<i>Community</i>	2.53 (1.07) ^y	2.50 (1.04) ^y	a	2.85 (.99) ^y	3.41 (1.59) ^x	b	2.51 (1.02) ^y	2.18 (1.08) ^y	a
<i>Prescriptions</i> *	2.45 (1.09)	1.96 (1.10)	a	3.28 (1.13)	2.65 (1.25)	b	2.88 (1.09)	1.98 (.91)	a
<i>Seclusion</i> *	1.94 (.87)	1.64 (.75)	a	2.86 (1.11)	2.97 (1.72)	b	2.06 (.84)	1.58 (.70)	a
<i>Embarrassment</i> *	3.02 (1.18)	2.75 (1.20)	a	4.01 (1.50)	3.20 (1.12)	b	3.21 (1.14)	2.79 (1.23)	a,b

Letters that are different across rows indicate significant differences between religious groups. Variables with a * showed significant differences between single/dating versus married/committed women. Superscripts that are different across rows indicate significant mean differences between groups on the variables where there was a significant interaction between Religion and Relationship Status, using Tukey’s post hoc tests, at $p<.05$. Value ranges were: 1.60–7.00 for *Bothersome*, 1.00–6.13 for *Secrecy/Shame*, 1.00–5.71 for *Prohibitions*, 1.00–6.00 for *Community*, 1.00–5.60 for *Prescriptions*, 1.00–6.75 for *Seclusion*, and 1.00–6.75 for *Embarrassment*, with higher scores indicating greater agreement

comparisons are depicted in Table 1. All groups differed significantly ($p < .05$) from each other on the Secrecy/Shame factor, and as predicted, Prescriptive Religious women scored highest, followed by the Non-prescriptive Religious women, and finally the Not Religious women. As predicted, the Prescriptive Religious women endorsed significantly more Embarrassment than the Not Religious women. There were no significant differences, however, on Embarrassment between the Prescriptive Religious group and the Non-Prescriptive Religious group, nor between the Non-Prescriptive Religious group and the Not Religious group.

In the case of the Prohibitions, Prescriptions, Seclusion and the Community factors, as predicted, the Prescriptive Religious group rated the highest, significantly different from both the Non-prescriptive Religious group and from the Not Religious group, who did not differ from one another. In other words, Prescriptive Religious women felt they should avoid things more than did the other participants, adhere to more directives while menstruating, and isolated themselves more and discussed menstruation less openly than did their Non-Prescriptive religious or Not Religious peers. However, as the Community factor indicates, Prescriptive Religious participants also felt a significantly stronger sense of community and connection with other women regarding their periods than did the other groups, who did not differ from one another, consistent with our second prediction.

Relationship Status Main Effects

Main effects were also found for the relationship status variable on five of the seven dependent variables: Secrecy/Shame: $F(1, 288) = 8.41, p < .005$; Prohibitions: $F(1, 288) = 13.59, p < .0001$; Prescriptions: $F(1, 288) = 23.67, p < .0001$; Seclusion: $F(1, 288) = 2.25, p = .06$; Embarrassment: $F(1, 288) = 10.53, p < .001$. As predicted, the Single/Dating group, regardless of religious affiliation, experienced greater levels than the Committed Relationship/Married group of Shame/Secrecy, Prohibitions, Prescriptions, Seclusion, and Embarrassment. For all women, as predicted, being in a relationship appears to be associated with an easing of these negative feelings and behavioral requirements.

Religion and Relationship Status Interaction Effects

A significant interaction was found between religion and relationship status on the Community, $F(2, 288) = 3.76, p < .05$, and Bothersome, $F(2, 288) = 3.55, p < .05$, dependent measures. Tukey's Post Hoc comparisons revealed that only in the Prescriptive Religious group did relationship status matter with respect to the Community factor. In other words, as commitment obliges prescriptive religious women to engage in similar rituals, married religious women are tied to their community through menstruation rituals more so than are single women.

Again, Tukey's comparisons revealed that whereas for Non-Prescriptive religious and Not Religious women, relationship status did not impact their ratings of menstruation as bothersome, it did for Prescriptive Religious women. Those in the Prescriptive religious group who were married or in a committed relationship rated their menstrual cycles as significantly less bothersome than those who were single or dating.

Discussion

This study, unlike others, examined both positive and negative experiences regarding menstruation in the particular cultural and religious contexts of Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu women, compared to their non-religious counterparts in the United States. We utilized subscales from previously existing questionnaires as well as original items written by the authors in order to more broadly examine women's feelings toward their own menstrual cycles, to understand their experiences within the context of religious traditions as well as relationship status, and to explore the extent to which menstruation can be a communal versus isolating experience.

All women, regardless of religious affiliation, appear to find their periods equally "bothersome." Perhaps not surprisingly, those women whose religions dictate specific prohibitions, prescriptions, and rituals around menstruation had more negative attitudes toward menstruation than did non-religious women. Surprisingly, however, they also had the positive experience of connecting with a community of women through menstruation, one not shared by and perhaps even unheard of among non-religious women. In groups where menstruation involves rituals and certain rules, for instance, menarche becomes a time to welcome girls into a community of menstruating women who will go on to teach them the prescriptions and prohibitions specific to their culture. Dunnivant (2009) quotes one Hindu woman, who described her menarche with a mixture of embarrassment and also pride in her acceptance into the community:

My mother was *very* excited when I had my first period, and proud that I was finally a "woman" in this way. She even called my aunts and grandmothers to inform them of the news... [and] called another, older family friend to our home to do an *aarathi* [a religious blessing ceremony involving singing songs of worship to God in the form of mother] to me... I was terribly embarrassed... but in hindsight, I'm very glad that my mother did that for me, and kept that tradition alive... it's something special.

Each of the Prescriptive Religious traditions, it seems, offers a space for menstruating women to identify with each other, to share experiences, and to form a community. Non-

religious women do not appear to experience this feeling of community through menstruation as fully.

As we predicted, quantitative analysis revealed that women who were single or dating experienced greater feelings of secrecy and shame, more prohibitions and prescriptions around menstruating, engage in more activities that isolate themselves from others physically, and feel more embarrassment than do women who are married or in a committed relationship. Women who are in committed relationships feel more positive likely because of some relief from the effort of keeping their periods hidden; their partners undoubtedly encounter their periods and an increased level of comfort is created.

Among the prescriptive religious women, those who were married rated menstruation as significantly less bothersome than those who were single, despite the fact that they were actually required to engage in more rituals than singles. These married women also felt that menstruation enabled them to experience greater community among women. Monthly rituals are taught to religious women by other women in their religious community, and this appears to enable a special bond between them. One participant in Dunnivant's (2009) study, Seanna, had an older woman friend accompany her to her first *mikveh* the night before her wedding, thus welcoming her into the community of married Jewish women that attend the *mikveh* each month. Religious women may also form community around their shared, burdensome experiences.

In addition, for these women having one's period when married may mean a break from sexual relations that is openly accepted by their husbands and that many women seem to experience with positivity. Participants in Dunnivant's 2009 study discussed the blessings of the openly acknowledged sexual "break" menstruation gave them from their husbands. Samantha, Jewish, said,

I feel the same way about the family laws of purity because I feel like my relationship with my husband would be this monotonous thing, that's like, pretty much the same thing all the time. Whereas when you kind of take a break from each other, I think it really helps your relationship because you learn to communicate with words, and express yourself to each other a lot more, and then you just appreciate each other when you come back together.

And Farah, a Muslim participant said, "I like the idea that I can say no to my partner and he's going to understand and he's not going to like get upset over it because it's not in my hands" (Dunnivant 2009). Perhaps these quotes help to clarify that, despite the burdens of the greater number of rituals, married prescriptive religious women may feel their periods are less bothersome than do single prescriptive religious women because they get a break from one kind of intimate relations, and because they do not have to live their experience all alone.

Dunnivant's (2009) interviews with prescriptive religious women revealed that Hindu women experienced greater secrecy and shame, more prohibitions and prescriptions, and found their periods more bothersome and embarrassing than did Jewish or Muslim women. Hindus do not have a scriptural or doctrinal foundation for their menstrual rituals and rules and these women seem to struggle more, perhaps because they live in American culture but lack a concrete set of religious texts to guide them in their faith tradition.

Our survey showed that prescriptive religious women feel greater levels of embarrassment. Perhaps this also reflects an embarrassment at having to abstain from the outward practice of their religion. The internalized shame experienced from being unable to entirely hide menstruation was detailed by Smarni, a Hindu interview participant in Dunnivant's (2009) study: "I went to the Herod Waters with my whole family, once. But I couldn't go to the celebration and my grandfather... said I should do the rituals like everyone else. I wouldn't tell him directly why I couldn't go." Further, a Muslim participant, Kelsey, spoke of instances at Muslim Student Association meetings when some menstruating women go to the restroom during prayer so as to avoid remaining in the room. In the prayer room, they must openly abstain from prayer while everyone else takes part and are thus unable to effectively hide the fact that they are menstruating (Dunnivant 2009).

Women whose menstruation is ritualized in these ways may feel greater embarrassment because they cannot easily hide, in other words. However, within this isolation it seems many religious women have the ability to find community with other women. A Muslim participant, Farah, explained that camaraderie is easy to cultivate in Islam since during prayer time, menstruating women of all ages often sit together apart from the prayer room to discuss their reproductive health (Dunnivant 2009).

In Orthodox Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, disciplinary practices very directly outline boundaries and rules for contaminating menstruating women. The language condemns women as impure, untouchable, and even forbidden. But this language, by naming menstruation, implies a kind of power. In contrast, disciplinary practices for secular women are largely unseen. In spite of feminist movements to create a positive discourse surrounding menstruation, the wider consumer-driven, sexualized popular culture urges secular women to become and remain clean, to hide any evidence of menstruation, in some cases to opt to suppress menstruation altogether (Johnston-Robledo et al. 2003) and, mostly, to deal with the *problem* alone.

However, even as the physical body can be a medium of subordination to women, so too can it be a vehicle of power (Bordo 1993). If women are given the chance to recognize the disciplinary practices in which they engage, they are also

given an opportunity to reclaim their bodies within their subordinated positions and challenge the structures around them. In the words of an Orthodox Jewish interview participant, Meera, these rituals are “key to... creating an essential women’s space” (Dunnivant 2009). Moreover, prescriptive religious interview participants attested to feelings of camaraderie with other committed women of their faith, who were obliged to engage in the same rituals. Farah, a Muslim interviewee, declared: “I love that it kind of joins people that may have nothing else in common. You know there’s that sympathy that goes back and forth” (Dunnivant 2009).

Asking what women do and how they feel about their periods serves to aggravate and make complex common conceptions of “the curse.” Prescriptive religious women’s greater sense of community surrounding menstruation and menstrual rituals seemed to be a place of resistance for them to reside, within a cultural construction of oppression, with other women. Menstrual rituals proved to have the potential to tie women to each other, providing a space for menstrual discussion, identification, and understanding. In contrast, when asked about the support of a community in the open-ended form on the survey, secular women often simply wrote in question marks or skipped the question entirely, not understanding the concept of *community* in this context. Secular women might do well, in other words, by being more open about their periods, joining one another in supportive community as their religious counterparts do.

Limitations and Future Research

The relatively few demographic questions asked of our survey participants limited conclusions from this study. For example, we were unable to accurately judge the extent of participants’ religiosity simply from the survey. Future research could further explore the extent to which religious women actively or more passively practice their religion, whether they are “reformed” or more “conservative.” A broader and more extensive sample as well as in depth qualitative data could be gathered in the future to further nuance our understanding of how the practice of religion impacts women’s experience of menstruation. Future samples should also extend beyond the Rocky Mountain West and the United States, should include information about participants’ health status, and should more fully examine developmental trends across women’s menstruating life.

Despite these limitations, implications of this research are significant. Our participants evidenced that accessible menstrual discourse allows women the opportunity to recognize their bodily processes. In this context, the available discourse was from religious traditions, condemning women’s polluting bodies to relative isolation during the week of their period. As our prescriptive religious survey participants indicated, and interviews highlighted, though, this week is

named and known by menstruating women, their partners, and their communities. Thus, it can be a potential time of rejuvenation during which women can share their experiences and resist their oppression in contexts away from men, and with one another. Further, this research reinforces that committed relationships provide non-religious and, ironically (given the greater burden on married women to engage in rituals) even more so religious women, a more positive spin on their menstrual cycle.

Providing women with an opportunity and the language to reflect positively on their periods results in more positive responses than if they are only provided with negative language. Prescriptive religious women are proof that an available discourse that regards menstruation as normal, though contaminating, lessens women’s isolated status, at least with regard to other women. Women do not have to remain secluded, silenced, and powerless simply because they menstruate. Future research should focus on the ways a menstrual discourse is created in other contexts, and thus how to further develop the available menstrual discourse in popular, modern culture.

Concluding Comments

This comparative study provides a complicated picture of religious and non-religious women’s attitudes toward menstruation, refuting a simple conclusion that Western secular women, having no set codified rules regarding their periods, are more liberated and positive than women who practice religiously prescribed rituals around menstruation. Although women who practice prescriptive religions acknowledged many negatives regarding their periods compared to non-religious women, they also identified some positives that secular women did not. Our study revealed that Jewish, Muslim and Hindu women’s experiences of menstruation are paradoxical, in that they find empowerment and community in spite of the oppressive rituals in which they engage. Menstrual rituals are both restricting yet renewing, women’s bodies within religious traditions are both polluting but powerful, and menstruating religious women themselves experience the constraints of isolation from men, yet find community with one another.

Appendix

Secrecy/Shame:

1. When women have their period, they should do things to hide the fact that they are menstruating (MSE Disgust/Shame subscale)
2. I find menstrual blood disgusting. (MSE Disgust/Shame subscale)

3. It is important to keep the period a secret. (BATM Secrecy subscale)
4. A woman should feel ashamed if she “leaks” menstrual blood on her clothes. (MSE Disgust/Shame subscale)
5. It is important that nobody knows when a woman is having her period. (BATM Secrecy subscale)
6. I would prefer not to talk openly about menstruation. (MSE Disgust/Shame subscale)
7. Women must hide anything that shows that we are having our periods. (BATM Secrecy subscale)
8. It is important to buy sanitary pads without being seen. (BATM Secrecy subscale)

Prohibitions:

1. Women must avoid swimming while we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
2. Women must avoid eating certain foods while we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
3. Women must avoid eating or drinking cold things when we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
4. Women must avoid smoking while we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
5. Women must avoid carrying heavy things when we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
6. Women must avoid exercising while we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
7. Women should avoid touching their genital region when menstruating. (MSE Disgust/Shame subscale)

Community:

1. I feel comforted when another woman in my community is menstruating at the same time as me. (Original item)
2. Menstruation provides a way from me to keep in touch with my community. (Original item)
3. Menstruation allows women to be more aware of our identities within a particular community. (Original item)
4. Menstruation ties me to other women in my community. (Original item)
5. My menstrual cycle is a monthly opportunity to connect more strongly with my community. (Original item)

Bothersome:

1. Menstruation is something women just have to put up with. (MAQ Bothersome subscale)
2. Men have a real advantage in not having the monthly interruption of a menstrual period. (MAQ Bothersome subscale)

3. It would be great if someday menstrual periods could be over with in a few minutes. (MAQ Bothersome subscale)
4. The only thing menstruation is good for is to let women know they are not pregnant. (MAQ Bothersome subscale)
5. In some ways women enjoy their menstrual periods. (MAQ Bothersome subscale *reversed*)

Prescriptions:

1. Women must take showers with hot water while we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
2. Women must drink tea while we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
3. Women must eat or drink hot things when we are having our periods. (BATM Proscriptions and Prescriptions subscale)
4. Women must stay away from men while we are having our periods. (BATM Secrecy subscale)
5. Women must blush when we see an advertisement about sanitary pads when we are with a man. (BATM Secrecy subscale)

Seclusion:

1. We women should avoid talking about our periods when there are men present. (BATM Secrecy subscale)
2. I avoid touching others while I am menstruating. (Original item)
3. I avoid being touched while I am menstruating. (Original item)
4. I avoid sexual encounters while menstruating. (Original item)

Embarrassment:

1. Women should be embarrassed when they have to purchase menstrual products. (MSE Disgust/Shame subscale)
2. It is embarrassing when a man finds out that a woman is having her period. (BATM Secrecy subscale)
3. I am embarrassed when I have to engage in rituals surrounding my menstruation. (Original item)
4. It is uncomfortable for us to talk about our periods. (BATM Secrecy subscale)

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