



Menstruation, Stigma, and Reproductive Health Education in the State of North Carolina:

Exploring the Effects of Period Stigma on Female Adolescents

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Introduction

The act of menstruation is a natural, bodily function that a majority of those with uteri experience. Historically, it has been regarded as the onset of womanhood, puberty, and female sexuality. Medically, it is the shedding of the uterus lining indicating that a person is not pregnant (Davis, 2019). Yet, despite the biological basis for menstruation, many women, young girls, and other people across the world experience stigma during this process. In certain countries, those undergoing their menses are subjected to extreme stigma and are placed in a “menstruation hut” until their cycle has finished (RCHCO Field Bulletin: Chaupadi In The Far-West). In these same countries and others, religions and cultures find the act dirty and/or unclean. This can cause feelings of shame when women have their periods. The negative stigmas and the feelings of shame attached to menstruation cycles can have very serious consequences -- and may affect the type of help that women seek in regards to their reproductive health.

Although stigma toward menstruation in the United States is not as severe as to force women into menstruation huts, the act of menstruation is still heavily shamed. From speaking with my friends and peers anecdotally, these notions of embarrassment, shame, stigma, etc., are already understood by menarche, otherwise known as the initial menstrual cycle that a person experiences. We do not need to be told directly that having a menstruation cycle is embarrassing and/or shameful -- it is simply known. A friend of mine stated that in her own reproductive health education class during fifth grade, the discourse on menstruation left her with the impression that menstruation cycles are something that should be kept secret even though the educator did not specify that. During informal discussions with others, we recalled how we used code names such as “Aunt Flow” or “Code Red” throughout our K-12 education to describe our periods. We also mentioned how we would slip tampons and pads up our sleeves to hide those

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items from our male peers while navigating to the bathroom. The common element of this secrecy is the academic setting.

This research will explore the reproductive health education curricula implemented in the State of North Carolina (NC) and analyze menstruation hygiene product commercials. Using the information gathered from menstruation hygiene product commercials and the reproductive health education curricula in NC, it will aim to ascertain their effects on the stigmatization of menstruation. It will also examine the impacts of stigma on young adolescent girls and how it may affect school performance. Some of the stigmatization will be analyzed through a feminist lens with feminist theory. With these findings, this research intends to provide an understanding of how to shift, and perhaps, ameliorate the negative stigmas attached to menstruation in the academic setting in NC.

Stigma

According to Major and O'Brien (2005, pg. 395), "stigma is a social construct that exists externally from a person." Therefore, stigma is not innate, but rather, it is a concept that society teaches individuals. Stigma, then, has multiple functions that alienate those that are stigmatized and forces them to perform in a certain manner in society in order to minimize the effects of being stigmatized. Being stigmatized is a great source of stress, which can lead to health issues, such as hypertension (Link & Phelan, 2006, pg. 528). It can also affect self-esteem and academic achievement (Major & O'Brien, 2005). In the United States, menarche typically occurs around the age of 12, but can begin anywhere between the ages of 8 to 15, with some people having their menarche at an even later age (Davis, 2019). During this period of adolescence, menstruators have yet to fully develop their self-esteem, which is reliant upon academic achievement and both mental and physical health. As they are undergoing a lot of new and

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different changes, embarrassment and shame from menstruating can have very serious effects on self-confidence and self-esteem.

In a Swedish study done by Randell, Joffer, Flacking, Starrin, and Jerdén (2017), researchers noticed that everyday interactions that initiate feelings of “pride and shame are important determinants for identity development”, particularly for growing adolescents (pg. 1). Meaning that for adolescents, their interactions with other individuals may affect the type of people that they become, how they feel about themselves, and how they rate their health.

In the study, research participants, ages 17 and 18, were asked: “A person may feel good sometimes and bad sometimes. How do you feel most of the time?”. They would then answer “‘very good’, ‘rather good’, ‘neither good nor bad’, ‘rather bad’ and ‘very bad’.” Any answer other than “very good” is considered as a lower rating of personal health. Therefore, when interactions yield feelings of shame, and in turn reduced feelings of pride in themselves, adolescents admitted to viewing their own personal health as lower (pg. 1 & pg. 7). Conversely, when interacting with people yields feelings of pride, adolescents have a higher self-health rating (pg. 7). However, the study indicated that young girls are less likely to feel pride and that shame has a more harmful effect on how they viewed themselves than young boys (pg. 7). Young girls, women, and other menstruators often feel embarrassed about having a menstrual cycle, which is detrimental to their overall health as inferred in the Randell et al. study. A report by *The Independent*, a British news source, found that “91 per cent of girls worried about going to school on their period” because it meant that they could be teased, bullied, and/or shamed for menstruating. Being stigmatized and made to feel embarrassed and ashamed over something uncontrollable can be damaging to an individual’s dignity, personhood, and confidence no matter what age they are at, but can be especially so for adolescents who are still trying to learn their

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place in the world. Those feelings can also lead to poor mental and physical health (Randell et al., pg. 2). So, how did period stigmatization come about?

The Stigmatization of Menstruation

Throughout Western history, the stigmatization of menstruation has fluctuated. Beginning with Aristotle, menstruation indicated “female inferiority” as women could not “produce semen” and therefore, produced “menstrual blood” in compensation (Weida, 2009, pg. 551). In different religious texts, such as the Bible and Qu’ran, menstruation blood is described as a dirty act that should be avoided (Druet, 2017). One possible explanation for the stigma surrounding menstruation is related to societal patriarchy and misogyny.

According to bell hooks (2014), a major feminist theorist, social activist, and American author, the patriarchy is:

. . . a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (pg. 1)

By this, hooks means that it is expected for men to be in positions of power and wield the power that they have, whether it be political, economic, or sexual, to maintain that power, no matter what the cost. Although some may argue that the United States is not a patriarchal society, taking a look at the U.S. government can prove that perhaps the U.S. is patriarchal. As of 2020, the 116th Congress has a record amount of women holding seats. Of the 535 seats available in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, only 131 seats are held by women (Manning, 2020). That means that about 24% of the people writing and passing federal laws are women in a

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country where women make up roughly one-half of the population. Under patriarchy, men have a considerable amount of power in society and over women, and it is difficult to contest.

In a patriarchal system, women are viewed as lesser than men and are often objectified as sexual beings. This can be seen in fashion adverts, in laws prohibiting mothers from breastfeeding their children, everyday commercials, and more. Women are regarded as sexual objects. In 1997, scholars B.L. Fredrickson and Tomi Ann Roberts postulated that women are typically subjected to sexual objectification when their body, body parts, or sexual functions are the only parts of them considered significant (pg. 175). Therefore, a woman's value is derived from her ability to serve others, particularly men, and how aesthetically pleasing she appears. Menstruation cycles shatter that aesthetic image.

Menstruators are aware of this illusion violation and attempt to conceal their periods from their male peers, colleagues, and family members; the menstruators' primary concern is the male view and judgment. Not because she wants to please the man, but because she understands that men are more likely to react adversely to their menstruation and embarrass them for it. It is not other women that menstruators are trying to hide their periods from. This relationship can be shown in research steered by THINX, a menstruation hygiene company that promotes period positivity, where they found that "forty-two percent of women have experienced period-shaming, with one in five being made to have these feelings because of comments made by a male friend" (Siebert, 2018). Period-shaming can come in the form of being ridiculed for bleeding through clothing, being asked to "calm down" for "PMSing", receiving looks of disgust for having menstruation hygiene products, and more. Furthermore, the study found that over 50% of men find it "inappropriate" for their female colleagues to speak about menstruation at work (Siebert, 2018). This implies that men are, at the very minimum, uncomfortable with the topic and would

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rather menstruators be silent about their menstruation. This understanding, that men are discomforted by menstruation, can cause girls and women to self-objectify and adjust their actions and behavior accordingly, understanding that how they behave has an effect on “their quality of life” by keeping their period cycles hidden (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, pg. 180).

Periods can also be stigmatized because they are misunderstood by much of the world population. A study published in 2011 found that many young boys learned about periods either on their own or because their female family members were menstruating (Allen, Kaestle, & Goldberg). Many of the young boys did not learn about menstruation in a formal setting because “females are the primary targets of sex education” and therefore, they were left out. This lack of formal education on menstruation, amongst other pertinent information regarding reproductive health, causes young boys to search for information elsewhere, leading to “accuracy problems” in the information that they do find (pg. 151). The lack of understanding leads to issues, from hiding in shame to anxiety in the way young boys and girls interact with the act of menstruation, according to a Taiwanese study (Chang, Hayter, & Lin, 2012, pg. 514). Notably, in the Taiwanese study where young boys were separated from young girls during reproductive health education, the boys tended to have “negative, stereotypical, and uninformed views and attitudes towards menstruation” which sustained the stigma surrounding menstruation (pg. 518). This secrecy from boys, in both the academic and home setting, and therefore, their misunderstanding of what menstruation is an issue that continues menstruation stigma. Keeping one’s menstruation cycle secret has been a reticent tradition passed down for generations by young girls observing older women and for the last several decades, emphasized by menstruation hygiene advertisements.

Menstruation Hygiene

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Media is very heavily consumed by people of all ages and a 2016 CNN article indicates that American adults spend more than 10 hours on the screen (Howard, 2016). According to Forbes, Americans are subjected to roughly 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements every day (Simpson, 2017). Americans spend a lot of time on media platforms and absorb a lot of advertisements. From an early age, American children are subjected to varying television programs and advertisements with unnatural depictions of menstruation and hygiene products, such as blue liquid used to demonstrate period blood rather than red liquid and people twirling on the screens with flowers blooming and people smiling. It was clear that the intention of the product being advertised was to help the menstruator hide the fact that they were, indeed, menstruating. As children age, they begin to notice the importance of being discreet and using discreet packaging.

The perpetuation of menstruation stigma has not and is not overtly expressed in our everyday lives; rather, it is something that becomes known through “sociocultural routes” which are subconsciously propagated into us via “products and media we see everyday” (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, pg. 11). Meaning that during those 10+ hours of daily media consumption and the bombardment of at least 4,000 advertisements a day, people are subliminally understanding that the act of menstruation should be hidden. Menstrual product advertisements play a key role in the ongoing stigmatization due to its insistence that the products will prevent other people from knowing that an individual is undergoing their menses and thus, saving them from embarrassment and shame. On both the Tampax and U by Kotex websites, the words “quiet” and “discreet” are used on several occasions for some of their tampon descriptions, and Tampax totes their tampons’ “Quiet Easy Reseal Wrapper” as a selling point. Menstruation hygiene product companies have perpetuated the idea that menstruation cycles are shameful and embarrassing with their rhetoric and marketing, and that menstruators

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should hide their period. Menstruation pamphlets that are either provided via hygiene products or reproductive health education courses are a paradox that reassures menstruators that the act is “natural and normal”, yet is something that must be kept “secret” (Charlesworth, 2001, pg. 14). This type of contradictory language contributes to the stigmatization of menstruation.

However, in recent years, emerging companies such as THINX are altering the way that menstruation products are advertised. Their adverts place a higher emphasis on comfort and security rather than discreteness and secrecy. In addition to selling period-absorbing underwear, THINX also participates in period advocacy by fighting against menstruation stigmatization with education and working to end period poverty, which is when menstruators do not have access to clean, running water and/or are unable to afford menstruation hygiene products.

Reproductive Health and Safety Education Curricular in the State of North Carolina

In the State of North Carolina, school systems are given the autonomy to teach health or reproduction-related materials the way they wish as long as it complies with NC state law ("Sex Education and Schools — NC Youth Connected", n.d.). There is not a state-wide health education curriculum, meaning individual school systems have the jurisdiction to choose what they teach as long as the material “provides factually accurate biological or pathological information that is related to the human reproductive system (N.C.S.L. 2009-213, 2009). Additionally, NC Youth Connected states that parents and/or legal guardians are able to opt their students out at the beginning of the school year from these courses. This makes it difficult to provide students with the necessary and proper information. Reproductive health education is not mandatory for students to learn in North Carolina and can only be taught with the consent of parents and/or legal guardians.

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In an interview with a health educator from Orange County Schools, NC, she noted that reproductive health and safety education can begin in the fourth or fifth grade with puberty classes. Students are given an overview of the physical, social, and reproductive changes that occur during puberty. Whether or not students are segregated by gender is dependent on individual counties or schools. The topic of menstruation is typically introduced during these classes, but the depth in which it is discussed and how long it is discussed is dependent on whomever the educator is. The stigmatization of menstruation, however, is not discussed and any questions that arise are deferred to the school nurse or a parent. According to ShiftNC, a North Carolinian organization that focuses on the sexual health of adolescents and young adults, the topics that NC's reproductive health education for grades 7 - 8, referred to as the 2009 Healthy Youth Act and outlined in NC House Bill 88, touch on are:

- Abstinence, presented as the safest choice and the expected standard for all schoolchildren;
- All FDA-approved methods of contraception;
- HIV/STD risks and prevention;
- And sexual assault and sexual abuse risks and prevention.

It is clear that the objective of the reproductive health education classes during these grade levels is to simply ensure that students understand what safe, consensual intercourse is if they choose not to practice abstinence. In the fifth grade, the objective of these classes is to make sure that students are prepared for the changes that their bodies and themselves are about to undergo. This format poses issues because menstruation is an important topic to not only learn but to also discuss, especially in the academic setting where menstruating students would prefer

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to “skip school altogether” than be subjected to shame and pressure because they are menstruating (Okamoto & Molland, 2019).

Orange County Schools does not provide any online information regarding their reproductive health and safety education curriculum. This is a stark contrast from neighboring school district, Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools (CHCCS), which provides their entire policy code for their reproductive health and safety education. The code outlines every topic that will be covered and states that parents will be able to “withhold consent” by “writing to the principal” of their child’s school. The permission slip that CHCCS supplies parents, also available on their website, has an outline of covered topics as well. Other North Carolina school districts, such as Winston-Salem/Forsyth, Onslow, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Union County, provide similar information regarding their reproductive health and safety education on their websites and more. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, for example, even offers a Google Drive for each grade-level with the curriculum content available for anyone to view.

The focus of most of these programs seems to be about dissuading sexual intercourse in both middle and high school and explaining bodily changes in puberty for 4th and 5th-grade students. Menstruation falls under the category of puberty classes. Schools are also allowed to decide whether or not these classes were segregated by sex, meaning boys may not have learned about menstruation during the classes, posing another issue with the stigmatization of menstruation. Understanding what menstruation is is necessary and so is addressing the stigmas associated with it.

Limitations

This research encountered numerous obstacles. The Institutional Review Board application was significantly delayed and resulted in no survey data to supplement the theoretical

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findings of this research. Many interviews with local school districts could not be conducted regarding the reproductive health education curricula due to this delay as well. Additionally, the scope of the research needed to be narrowed. This research acknowledges that other factors such as period poverty and abnormal period cycles affect period stigma in the academic setting as well. The stigma also stretches far beyond the academic setting. Those who menstruate should be able to live their lives with dignity and regardless of circumstances such as poverty, incarceration, race, ethnicity, transgenderism.

Conclusion

Stigma and being stigmatized causes stress and affects self-esteem, altering the way an individual navigates the world, whether by speech, action, and/or behavior. It also detrimentally impacts health. Menstruation stigmatization goes beyond being “hygienic” -- it is the manner in which the patriarchy effectively polices and controls the body of menstruators, particularly young girls and women. To ensure that they are not stigmatized, and therefore treated in a poor manner that betrays their dignity, young girls and women adjust their behavior by continuing the silent tradition of secrecy. With menstruation hygiene products participating in this tradition by marketing their products as discreet and quiet, it continues on.

The academic setting, in which young girls are first exposed to the shame, stigma, and embarrassment, does not endeavor to provide young girls with information that could empower them and combat the negative reactions that they receive. In fact, school systems fail young girls in not making menstruation stigma a paramount issue to tackle, leading to stigma’s perpetuation. In addition to the material being factually and medically accurate, NC can gradually eliminate stigma by requiring both young boys and girls to learn about menstruation together. If over 50% of men find it “inappropriate” for female colleagues to discuss their periods, it implies that there

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is a significant portion of the population that does not have a proper understanding of menstruation. Knowing what menstruation is could possibly reduce how often periods are stigmatized. In fact, the aforementioned Taiwanese study found that educating and including adolescent boys in menstrual lessons *can* minimize stigma because it makes it more difficult to have misconceptions of menstruation (Chang et al., 2012, pg. 519). Menstrual lessons would provide knowledge that could deter the objectification of young girls and women by humanizing them. Parents and/or legal guardians who do not give permission for their student to participate in the reproductive health education courses can be provided with materials to teach their children themselves. It would also be beneficial for all school districts to have their materials available online through their county website. All of these options could help end menstruation stigma, by normalizing it and ridding the secrecy that surrounds it.

Once menstruation is not as stigmatized and normalized, people can live with dignity. In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action called for the “equal rights of and inherent human dignity of women . . .” in respect to their personhoods, their right to “their health”, and to “ensure equal access to . . . enhance women’s sexual and reproductive health” (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 8 - 11). The people at the Beijing Platform believed that the world had yet to become a place where women could have any of those aforementioned action items. To work towards ending the period stigma by providing proper education for it is to ensure that those action items are met, and that menstruators are not stigmatized, shamed, and/or embarrassed for menstruating.

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