

Menstruation and Sexuality: An Attitudinal Survey

Rina Grafstein

Étude sur les attitudes concernant la menstruation et la sexualité.

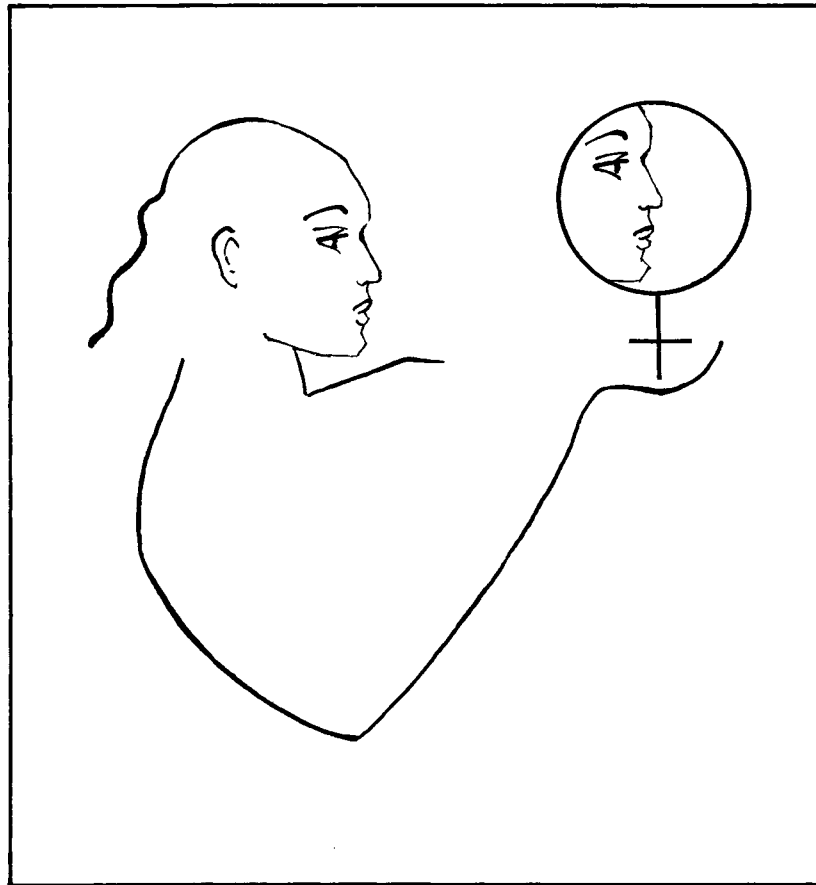


Illustration by Monika A. Uesson

The human menstrual cycle, and the moods and behaviours associated with its intricate hormonal shifts has, for years, been the subject of inconclusive studies and contradictory research findings. This most fundamental of human systems, with regard to its life-giving potentiality, has historically inspired a vast number of unsubstantiated myths and taboos regarding the so-called 'harmful' effects which are regularly 'suffered' by the menstruating woman. The biological functions of both menstruation and ovulation have traditionally been viewed as awesome mysteries by predominantly male researchers and this menstrual mythology has frequently been passed uncontested from one generation to the next.

Historically, women have acquired only fragments of conflicting information regarding the true effects of the

menstrual process and have learned to regard hormonal fluctuations with a mixed array of feelings, ranging from intense fear of impending pain and incapacitation to extreme elation at the regularity and beauty of these phenomena. As a result of the persistence of these vague and equivocal research findings in the area of menstruation, women have at times been excluded from socio-political milieus and occupations on the basis of unwarranted claims that menstrual periods will yield them less productive.

Review

Existing data regarding the menstrual cycle have been so uncategorical and so confusing that according to Deutsch, among the primitive as well as the most

civilized peoples, menstruation was, and still is, connected with ideas of horror, danger, shame and sin.¹ Many societies currently consider menstrual blood dangerous, especially to men and religious, domestic and sexual taboos have been established to ward off its mystical powers. For example, in primitive societies such as the Arapesh of New Guinea, the newly menstruating girl is isolated from the community in a cave, cage, hole in the earth, dark hut or other enclosure symbolizing a womb. According to Stephens, in 40 such societies throughout South America, it is commonly believed that menstruating women must be kept at a distance because they are in some way harmful to men, and as this fear increases, taboo restrictions become more elaborate.²

Superstitions connected with menstruation have also found their way into the North American psyche, causing a substantial number of couples to abstain from sexual relations during the menstrual flow. According to Paige, a recent survey of 960 California families showed that half of the men and women questioned had never engaged in sexual intercourse during menstruation.³ The belief that menstruating women are unclean has been a chief reason for these individuals to refrain from sexual activities and has also forced women to avoid any visible sign of menstrual blood, at all costs, lest they be publicly humiliated. Advertisements displaying genteel ladies at 'that time of the month' reinforce the message that menstruation is dirty by declaring that their products will prevent embarrassment and loss of composure caused by 'unseemly stains'.

Anachronistic menstrual attitudes have thus been perpetuated in a variety of cultures and have been coupled with a paucity of research regarding the effects of menstruation upon overall performance, perception and cognition. As women enter the labour force in greater numbers, valid studies on the subject become essential, especially in light of the tremendous dysfunctional implications which have been regularly ascribed to this monthly event. The pervasive effects of such knowledge may be of paramount importance, both in the work force and in the sphere of interpersonal relationships. The subjective impact of menstruation upon sexual activities is a particularly salient area of investigation, insofar as women are influenced by their social milieus and react to the demands and expectations placed upon them.

There is currently no empirical study which comprehensively describes the psychological and social aspects of menstruation in North America. The necessity for such an investigation is underscored by Levitt and Lubin's finding that most gynecologists believe menstrual difficulties result from an improper attitude on the part of the sufferer.⁴ The most recent report of menstrual attitudes in modern European cultures was undertaken by Abel and Joffe in 1950.⁵ The only other current study which has even attempted to discover 'experiences and feelings' about menstruation (but not necessarily to uncover attitudes) was completed by Paula Weideger in 1975.⁶ Furthermore, there has been only one investigation of both male as well as female evaluations of menstrual symptomatology and this was originally designed in order to test a menstrual distress questionnaire for methodological soundness.⁷

The present study was carried out in order to meet the need for increased research on the psychosocial aspects of menstruation by investigating the attitudes of Canadian women and men toward this monthly event. This research was additionally intended to reflect those changes in menstrual attitudes which have been affected as a result of the feminist movement of the past decade. Beliefs about menstruation and its influence upon sexuality will be discussed presently, in an attempt to

unravel prevalent menstrual attitudes as they relate to existing sexual stereotypes. The expression of sexuality is highly relevant both to the quality of human relationships and to the quality of life in the work place, so that an in-depth discussion will follow.

Method

Since there was no existing instrument available to measure menstrual attitudes, a 40-item Menstrual Attitude Inventory was constructed for the purposes of this research. Four subscales were factor analytically derived from the total set of items, which depicted menstrual attitudes related to pride, efficiency, health and sexuality. The statements included were specifically fashioned to reveal some of the most common assumptions surrounding the menstrual process. Examples of items in the sexuality category are as follows:

Sexual activities are enjoyable when a woman is menstruating.

During menstruation, women are unclean.

Women should not engage in sexual intercourse during menstruation.

The Menstrual Attitude Inventory was the first of its kind to measure such beliefs and exhibited a high degree of internal consistency and validity for use in future studies.

The 40 items chosen for inclusion in this instrument were worded in positive and negative directions, such that half describe the benefits and half the disadvantages of the menstrual process. This technique has not generally been incorporated in traditional menstrual scales, which have tended to describe only the maladaptive aspects of menstruation and have often yielded negatively biased responses.

One hundred and seventy undergraduate students in psychology, 103 of whom were females and 67 males, voluntarily elected to complete the Menstrual Attitude Inventory. The students were between the ages of 18 and 46, with 73 per cent of the sample lying between the ages of 19 and 23. In order to provide a more free-flowing elaboration of the questionnaire responses, nine men and women were additionally interviewed for approximately one hour's duration. Six of the interviewees were women (three under and three over the age of 30), while the remaining three were men under the age of 30.

Results

On the whole, the men in the questionnaire sample held more negative or maladaptive menstrual attitudes related to sexuality than did the women, while scoring significantly lower on a variety of t-tests ($p < .001$). Specifically, the men agreed more often with the statement that, 'Women should not engage in sexual intercourse during menstruation.' They also endorsed more items which indirectly referred to the undesirability of sexual contact, these being, 'During menstruation, women are unclean,' and 'The sight of menstrual blood reminds me of a physical illness.' The males were clearly more prohibitive of sexual encounters during menstruation, possibly because they have never actually experienced the event themselves and have never acquired accurate information on the topic. They have likely been socialized to identify menstrual blood as an impure substance and a sign of ill health, a view which permanently casts menstruating women as frail, sexless creatures.

Responses obtained during the individual interviews reinforced the results obtained on the more structured questionnaire items. For example, one male interviewee stated that:

I really believed that whole thing at that age (16 or 17) that you just really didn't have

contact with girls at that time of month . . . so I just assumed for a long, long time that women did not want to be touched or have contact at that point.

This individual had no first-hand experience with the sexual sensations connected to menstruation and maintained a false belief system for years. He further commented that it was only the advent of the women's liberation movement, when females projected a different set of messages about menstruation and sexuality, which provided him with more adaptive, factual information. Many of the women interviewed found sexual activities to be more enjoyable during menstruation, at which time they reported their bodies to be especially sensitive. One woman commented that females have been conditioned to feel sexually insensitive during menstruation and she attributed this to a 'whole male mythology about women being unclean, which comes out even in men who don't really believe that menstrual blood is poisonous or even believe it at all . . .'

Men also scored significantly lower on a series of simple true-false questions reflecting one's degree of factual information on the topic of menstruation. For example, women were more often correct when answering the following two items: 'It is physically harmful for women to engage in sexual intercourse during menstruation, as this might lead to hemorrhage, injury or infection,' (this is false) and 'Some women experience an increase in sexual drive and sensitivity during their periods' (this is true). Males again were generally unaware of the actual effects of menstruation and exaggerated the physical discomfort accompanying the menstrual flow. They consequently thought that sexual intercourse during menstruation might be injurious and that women's sexual sensitivity could not possibly be enhanced at this time.

The finding that men were misinformed significantly more often than women regarding menstruation and its effect upon sexual functioning was borne out by the personal interviews as well. Every woman interviewed considered her knowledge in the area to be extensive and factual, while every man felt that he required more access to data. Such a lack of knowledge was directly correlated with the development of more maladaptive attitudes in men, so that the less factual information available, the more negative an influence menstruation was considered to exert. One male interviewee commented, for example, that:

I know only the basic mechanics of how women's bodies work . . . I've known more, I've been told more, I've read more, and I don't remember. It doesn't relate to me.

When examining the responses of the women separately, it was found that those who equated their first or current menstruations with physical injury felt that sexual intercourse during menstrual periods could be harmful. Once again, a lack of accurate information on the topic contributed to negative attitude formation. Those women who were not secretive about the fact that they menstruated also felt that sexual activities are enjoyable during menstruation. This result indicates that women who are verbal and free enough from societal prohibitions to talk openly about the subject are generally more free and more positive about menstruation and sexuality overall.

Discussion

In summary, the Menstrual Attitude Inventory was

highly sensitive to the effects of sex, with males exhibiting more negative attitudes and possessing less factual information regarding menstruation and sexuality. Interpretations explaining these types of sex differences have been suggested by Mary Brown Parlee.⁸ These have included the notions that: (1) negative or maladaptive attitudes have been retained by males in order to justify the social distance (status) arrangements prevailing in society and; (2) prevalent male beliefs about the menstrual process are acquired because men have little direct opportunity to acquire accurate information.

Men have traditionally been socialized to assume dominant roles in the realm of sexual relations, wherein for centuries they have regarded women as the passive receptors of sexual overtures. Furthermore, males have not been provided with enough new, socially relevant data to combat these sexual stereotypes. On the other hand, more women have read feminist literature and have had pleasurable sexual experiences while menstruating. Men have tended to describe potential menstrual restrictions in terms of the longstanding social and economic arrangements to which they have been continually exposed and have developed menstrual attitudes which serve to reinforce such traditions. The powerful wave of the feminist movement has influenced many women who feel that they should be able to enjoy sexual relations at all points of the menstrual cycle and who are attempting to eradicate these ancient societal stereotypes.

Maladaptive attitudes regarding menstruation persist, and it is essential for all women to spread accurate information, which would in turn promote more positive attitudes, to the general public. Such information could be distributed within the school system to bring about healthier and more realistic views of menstruation as a normal part of women's development. Additional research should also be carried out in the area, using the Menstrual Attitude Inventory and other tools for investigation as a means of further discarding unnecessary myths. Most importantly, women must alter their own existing stereotypes which inhibit sexual expression, for as one female interviewee stated:

I think my change in menstrual attitudes had to do with feminist literature and exposure to the women's movement. I began to see that these inhibitions had more to do with fear derived from society than from logic or reason or human development, and that was very freeing for me. ☉

Notes

- 1 Deutsch, H. *Psychology of Women: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Volume I. New York: Grune and Stratton, 1944.
- 2 Stephens, W.N. 'A cross-cultural study of menstrual taboos'. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 1961, 64, 385-416.
- 3 Paige, K.E. 'Women learn to sing the menstrual blues'. *Psychology Today*, 1973, 9, 41-46.
- 4 Levitt, E. and Lubin, B. 'Some personality factors associated with menstrual complaints and menstrual attitudes'. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 1967, 11, 267-270.
- 5 Abel, T.M. and Jofee, N. 'Cultural background of female puberty'. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 1950, 4, 90-113.
- 6 Weidiger, P. *Menstruation and Menopause*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976.
- 7 Parlee, M. 'Stereotypic beliefs about menstruation: a methodological note on Moos Menstrual Distress Questionnaire and some new data.' *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 1974, 36 (3), 229-240.
- 8 *Ibid.*

The author excerpted this from a detailed study. For more information please contact Rina Grafstein, 303 Carleton Street, Toronto M5A 2L6.