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Our Lips are Sealed: a Social Constructionist Approach to Understanding Menstrual Concealment at Menarche

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Our Lips are Sealed: A Social Constructionist Approach to Understanding
Menstrual Concealment at Menarche

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Thesis Advisor

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ABSTRACT

At menarche, menstruators receive messages from various sources that urge them to conceal evidence of their menstruation. Concealment refers to the notion that menstruation is to be hidden, especially from men. This belief is often exploited and/or expressed in interactions between menstruators, mothers, and peers, in advertisements, educational materials, day-to-day conversation, and personal disciplinary actions. Themes of concealment are analyzed within a social constructionist framework to understand how narratives develop over time to guide human behavior and maintain social order. This paper argues that the menstrual concealment taboo is a social construction that has been institutionalized into the fabric of American society and mediates experiences of menstruation to promote body shame.

Keywords: menarche, menstruation, concealment, adolescence, shame

INTRODUCTION

Menarche, the first menstrual period, is more than a biological event; the experience is social and symbolic involving menstruators, parents, doctors, siblings, peers, and more. It is public and private; it is disciplined. Menstruation is a female experience that has been “constructed as a shameful form of pollution that must be contained” for thousands of years (Bobel 2010:31). American people who menstruate often learn about the bodily process through cultural scripts perpetuated by predominantly female family members, as well as books, peers, and school teachers (Chrisler and Zittel 1998). Modern day American portrayals of menstruation tend to emphasize personal hygiene and help menstruators derive meaning from the bodily process as well as offer tactics for the management of blood (Brumberg 1997). Dominant representations of menarche and menstruation are a result from societal understandings about the process and the meaning associated with it. This menstrual knowledge is influenced by medical perspectives and societal assumptions about the female body. This paper will address how day-to-day knowledge about menstruation is perpetuated and how it is understood and felt by adolescent American menstruators.

‘Knowledge’ in this context refers to how individuals understand what menstruation is, how to manage it, and what it means that dominate society through ads, films, educational pamphlets, and people. Knowledge is taught to menstruators both explicitly and implicitly, often through cultural scripts and rules.

Through this process, menstruators learn their position in the greater social world, particularly in situating their selves and their bodies in a cis/hetero-normative, white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Literature about menstruation consistently present themes that function together to promote feelings of shame and embarrassment. These cultural themes are that 1) menarche signals a transition from girlhood to womanhood, 2) menstruation and products associated with it are to be hidden and kept a secret, 3) menstruation is framed as a hygiene crisis, and, 4) menstruation is viewed as an illness (Burrows and Johnson 2005; Chrisler and Zittel 1998; Lee 2008a).

These themes perpetuate gender and sex differences and associate “womanhood” with menstrual status. The culmination of knowledge regarding the female body sends the overall message that menstruators should keep their body and processes associated with it a secret, that their now reproductively-able bodies are something to be embarrassed about, and their bodies are socialized in a cis/heteronormative manner with the tie between menarche, sexuality, and pregnancy (Costos, Ackerman, and Paradis 2002; Hawthorne 2002; Lee 2008a). While many themes contain outdated cultural assumptions about menstruation, the theme deconstructed in this paper is the teaching that blood, odor, and sanitary products should be concealed verbally and physically as to hide evidence of menstruation. By applying Berger and Luckmann’s social construction of reality theory, we can deconstruct how knowledge is cultivated, how it shapes experiences, and how to best intervene to increase positive

responses to experiences of menarche. We can understand young menstruators and their primary educators as products of their culture, while also recognizing the agency each individual retains in the meaning-making process and in the perpetuation of these themes due to the nature of noncentralized nature of power structures. We can further demonstrate how current ideas and values held by society are humanly-produced and based in outdated patriarchal ideals.

The term 'menstruator' is utilized in this paper to deconstruct notions that menstruation is an event exclusive to and experienced by "all women." Not all women menstruate, and not just women menstruate (Bobel 2010). 'Menstruator' is an inclusive term used for anyone who has, will, or currently menstruates. It is an attempt to critique the assumptions that have been dominant in literature documenting the menstrual experience: that menstruation is a woman's experience. Through the use of the term "menstruator," we begin to account for the multiple identities that encounter menstruation, an essential step in taking an intersectional approach. The vast majority of the academic literature focuses on the menstrual experiences of cis girls and women. When this paper is referencing those works, it will be clear the research was conducted on cis women. While this paper attempts to deconstruct these notions, the lack of literature studying genderqueer youth and menstruation inhibits a productive understanding of the influences of gender on these aspects of knowledge. Otherwise, an attempt will be made to neutralize the perpetuation of sex and gender differences.

Lens

A goal in writing this paper is to illuminate how knowledge about menstruation affects how a person experiences menstrual bleeding. Knowledge informs the meanings that society is built on and guides both individual and group conduct (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Breaking down how knowledge is constructed is an essential step to demonstrate its influence and perpetuation. Everyday life and knowledge appear to an individual as a factual and verifiable reality, but through a social constructionist framework, it becomes clear that reality is humanly produced. This is demonstrated here through the application of menstrual knowledge. Within this framework, both subjective and objective forms of reality exist. A subjective reality refers to an individual's own consciousness and personal understandings about reality. Objective realities, on the other hand, refer to the realities that have been institutionally defined and legitimated. This occurs through a process of habitualization and institutionalization

Berger and Luckmann want us to first understand that knowledge is socially distributed, aiding in the creation of a subjective reality for each individual within a larger objective reality. Knowledge is socially distributed because it is contingent on factors like social and spatial location, relevance, familiarity, and the fact that one individual cannot know everything.

A society's overarching, shared sense of reality is interpreted through a social stock of knowledge, which contains meanings and constructions built on location and culture (Berger and Luckmann 1967). In the context of American

menstruation, the social stock of knowledge refers to what and how our society thinks and feels about menstruation. This includes shared assumptions and beliefs about the meanings of the process. Recipe knowledge, however, refers to the knowledge that aids in performing a specific routine. This knowledge is specific to menstruators. Recipe knowledge informs menstruators about aspects like how to manage menstrual blood and who to ask for assistance. The social stock of knowledge contains recipe knowledge, and an individual's reality is shaped differently by this knowledge based on familiarity and applicability to their own life (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

This paper understands behaviors, attitudes, and meanings derived from menstruation to be socially controlled via menstruation's institutionalization. Institutionalization is a historical human product that develops under the relationships between a particular environment and given culture, mediated by actors and significant others (Berger and Luckmann 1967). In essence, the institutionalization of beliefs, norms, roles, and behaviors into society imply social control over individuals. The process in which institutions are built is through the habitualization of human action. Habitualization is a process in which repeated social and nonsocial action becomes a pattern, eventually established as a routine that others can adopt. Habitualization provides the individual with a psychological relief by allowing them to free themselves from the "burden" of decision making (Berger and Luckmann 1967:53). Further, the individual can anticipate situations through the development of predefinitions provided by

habitualization. Predefinitions inform an individual about what to expect, what is expected of them, and how to act in any given situation. In order for these actions to become institutionalized, however, habitualization must occur to the extent roles form in which individuals may step in and out of. This process allows interactions to be predictable. In all, these roles and practices are created and adopted by society subjectively to form a seemingly objective reality shaped by institutions that control human behavior. The relationship between habitualization and institutionalization are constantly re-established and legitimated to adapt to changing cultures.

Institutions are experienced as objective entities because of the historical context associated with them. They cannot be taken out of the conditions they were created in. Those who did not have a hand in creating the institution (i.e. the following and later generations) understand the institution to be transcendent of their own lives (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Traditions and practices controlled by institutionalization were something the individual was born into, and assumes will be there following their death. This continuous moment of culture being experienced as outside of the individual is called externalization. Externalization is an anthropologically necessary process in which social order is produced. Institutions present to individuals as fact, as something that is “there.” Individuals who were born into a society cannot understand an institution via introspection or memory; they did not create it (60). Instead, they must go out to learn about it. In this way, our culture and institutions are externalized (60).

Externalization is one moment in a three-part, continuous and simultaneous cycle. At the same time externalization happens, objectivation occurs. Objectivation refers to how externalized action becomes an object for other people to encounter. Culture that is inherently externalized simultaneously becomes an object, whether physical or metaphorical. Language and signs are powerful objectivations as they allow us to tell other people experiences or general information that can be incorporated into our social stock of knowledge. In this way, words and signs are signifiers of the externalized culture. In general, objectivation solidifies as it “attain[s] the character of objectivity” with the birth of subsequent generations, who are unable to recollect why things are done in a certain manner, aiding in the creation of seemingly objective realities to members of the group. A dialectic between externalization and objectivation create a humanly produced reality that feels factual to an individual (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

The final moment in the cycle is called internalization. Internalization refers to the individual meaning and understanding derived from the ‘objectified truths’ produced in the dialectic and occurs throughout the socialization process. A subjective understanding is formed here. Through this process, both subjective and objective realities are created that take on a guise of objectivity, though are actually humanly-produced and subjectively bought into by individuals.

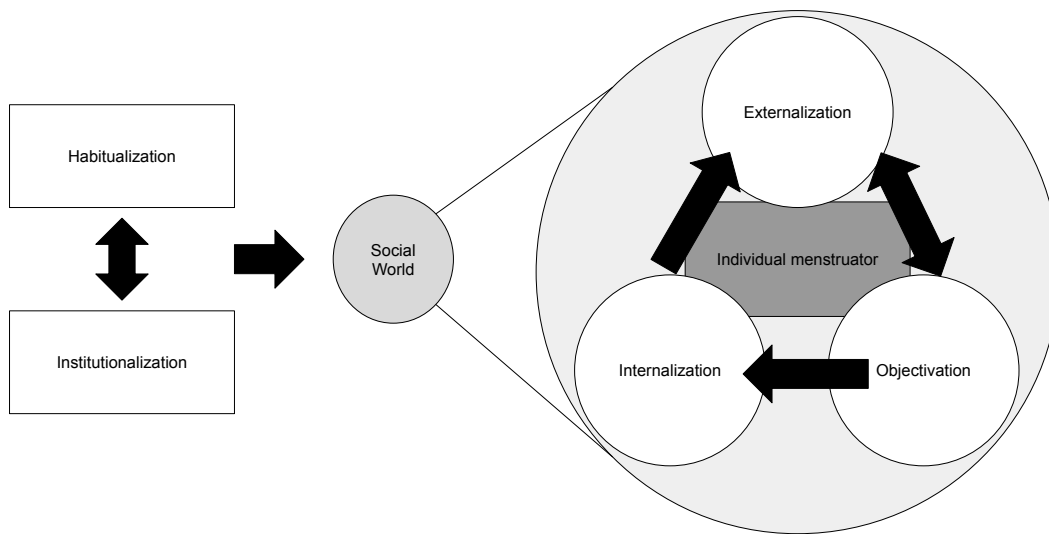


Figure 1

Figure 1 depicts a visual of the theoretical framework employed here. Objective reality and the social world are constructed through interplay between habitualization and institutionalization. Subjective reality is represented on the right side of the figure, where an individual menstruator experiences externalization, objectivation and internalization within the social world established before their birth.

DISCUSSION

In order to demonstrate how menstrual knowledge and thus reality are constructed, we must understand how objective and subjective realities function to maintain social order. In the following section, both objective and subjective

realities will be established through the mechanics of habitualization and institutionalization, as well as externalization, objectivation, and internalization.

Objective Reality

Understanding the history and development of menstrual management is essential to understand the social world adolescent menstruators today step into. Institutionalization is rooted in a shared history; menstruators are socialized to perform a role and are taught how to properly manage menstruation based on this history. The root of shared history in menstruation knowledge begins with the menstrual taboo.

The idea that menstrual blood and those who menstruate are dangerous and dirty is the basis of the menstrual taboo (Costos et al. 2002). Rules and regulations restricting menstruation and that describe the bodily process as “unclean” can be found in ancient texts such as Leviticus and the Quran (Selvidge 1984). Medical texts framing menstruations as a dirty, taboo process date back to the thirteenth century (Lemay 1992). It is even speculated upon that the word “taboo” is rooted in the Polynesian word for menstruation, “tupua” (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1988:3). The taboo functions to preserve social and sometimes religious standards that restrict menstruation in conversation and/or associated practices, and constrict female bodies to certain activities. Along with the taboo, misunderstandings about menstruation, health, and hygiene conduct human behavior in regards to activities that menstruators can or should engage in. For example, sex during menstruation was not only a perceived health risk,

but deemed immoral (Fahs 2011; Freidenfelds 2010). Into the 20th century, swimming or tub bathing during menstruation was thought to induce sickness, such as pneumonia (Freidenfelds 2010). These beliefs, or rather, myths, continue to affect menstruators today, as these beliefs have been institutionalized into the structure of our society. Further, by framing menarche as a health crisis, some scholars propose that menstruators must “become skilled” in using sanitary products, carrying out cleanliness rituals, and concealing evidence of these acts, implying there are correct and incorrect ways to manage menstruation (Scott, Arthur, Owen, and Panizo 1989:289).

Habitualization and institutionalization are constantly reestablishing their presence in our social world, often to adapt with the changing culture and values of society. Because of this, we can carry the conversation forward and discuss how habitualization and institutionalization were reestablishing in the 20th century when the dominant method of menstrual management in America shifted from homemade, reusable cloth rags to smaller and sleeker disposable products. This period in America also correlates with an increasing medicalization of menstruation, and aspects of the menstrual taboo began to be challenged by educators, health experts, physicians, and others, and the topic of menstruation slowly began to enter the public sphere of social life (Freidenfelds 2010). During this shift, we also saw many mothers revert educational responsibilities from themselves to medical professionals and/or instructional materials (Lee 2008b).

Menstrual technology looks vastly different today than it did one hundred years ago. Before Kotex dramatically altered the way in which middle and upper class Americans managed blood in 1921, homemade cloth pads were created by menstruators to absorb the discharge of blood (Freidenfelds 2010). The cloth “diapers” were typically made out of leftover, old fabric, like bed sheets, and were either pinned to the menstruator’s pants or to a belt worn inside the pants, made special for that purpose. Following use, the diaper could be rewashed for the next use or thrown away. To rewash the diaper was an indication of lower social class, but to dispose of or to wash a cloth diaper entailed regulations regarding secrecy and keeping the diaper out of sight. Overall, though, menstruators found disposable products to be associated with less embarrassment because they did not have to hide themselves while washing the cloth diaper, and instead only had to hide the product (Freidenfelds 2010).

Following Kotex’s introduction to the American market, a new way to manage menstruation emerged. Scholars refer to these practices as “modern” or “distinctly American” (Brumberg 1997:30; Freidenfelds 2010:120). These new products and advertisements aided in constructing a menstruating body “that was well managed, did not leak or smell, did not cause anxiety or self-consciousness, and did not display other evidence of menstruation” (Freidenfelds 2010). In other words, this body concealed menstruation from the public eye. This wasn’t necessarily new, as menstruation has historically been hidden from the public eye, but new practices were adopted to maintain secrecy with the introduction of

new products. Influenced by both the increasing medicalization of menstruation and the menstrual taboo, products used to maintain this concealment also emphasized sanitation and cleanliness. This ideal was not attainable for everyone, and primarily upper class white women set the standard for the rest of America to adopt, both in advertisements and accessibility. Properly managed bodies resembled the white bodies of the middle and upper classes that were represented in advertisements, creating conflict between white menstruators and brown and black menstruators. This conflict contributes to a larger trend of bodies of racial minorities to be perceived as out of control (Freidenfelds 2010). High expenses associated with menstrual products made them inaccessible to children of immigrants and working class parents (Lee and Sasser-Coen 1997). Over time, even smaller products, like tampons, were introduced that offered the menstruators a management method that offered no visible evidence when in use, because when used correctly, the blood stayed inside the body (Freidenfelds 2010). Disposable pads at this time still required the use of a sanitary belt or pins due to the lack of adhesive, but tampons could be worn with any type of clothing. Further, tampons could be flushed down the toilet, easing disposal anxieties. Products containing scents and deodorizers were introduced in 1929, further aiding in the concealment of evidence associated with menstruation.

Over the next 30 years, more and more menstruators made the shift from cloth to disposable pads. As more products became available and prices

reduced, these one-time-use products slowly became the norm for American menstruators (Freidenfelds 2010). Much in the same way washing used cloths was a source of shame and embarrassment for menstruators due to the public nature of the event, buying disposable products became an anxious event for menstruators. Special precautions were made to ease anxieties by reducing the visibility of the purchase. Ready-wrapped packages of products prepared in brown paper were made available and in many stores, and special precautions were often made for purchasing. Some stores utilized a money jar that menstruators could place funds into and discreetly be given a ready-wrapped package, so the buyer never had to ask an employee for the product or be seen getting it themselves (Freidenfelds 2010).

Communication was also influenced by this embarrassment, and menstruators frequently substituted a product's name for the brand's name, for example, asking the retailer for Kotex, rather than a sanitary napkin. Boxes of products were often kept hidden from men in homes, under or behind beds or in closets. When in school, menstruators had to keep spare products hidden in their pocketbooks and reported anxiety and fear at boys discovering the products. Disposing of products further contained regulations to ensure their concealment, and special practices were made for wrapping the products in tissue paper and sometimes plastic bags to dispose of in a bathroom trash can. It was very important to menstruators that blood and odor remain hidden in the wrapping and disposing process. When regulations were not followed correctly, menstruators

took it upon themselves in many contexts to shame other classmates into managing their bodies properly (Freidenfelds 2010). This cultural and social background sets the stage for young menstruators today, and also demonstrated how habitualization and institutionalization are constantly reestablishing to adapt to changing technologies, cultures, beliefs, norms, and so on.

With the introduction of new methods to absorb blood, menstruators developed new habits and practices along with them. The traditional diapers could be worn all day and could be made at home, whereas new methods of management led menstruators to adopt new habits regarding disposal and usage techniques, as well as develop methods to purchase products without being too visible or public about it. The shifts in cultural ideas and understandings about menstruation led parents and authority figures to teach young menstruators about the process differently, emphasizing the external body and hygiene, as opposed to older conversations that centered emotional support and social meaning (i.e. reproduction). By emphasizing the external body, menstruation was cast as a “hygienic crisis,” in which menstruators are to manage blood, stains, and odors (Brumberg 1997; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, and Pyszczynski 2002). Physiological conversations were often left for a physician or certified educator to discuss.

Young menstruators often form predefinitions that help to derive meaning from menstrual leaks and odors. Some predefinitions promote the idea that leaks and odors signify a body out of control or a body from a lower social class. With

technological, menstrual developments came a distinctly American way to menstruate (Brumberg 1997). Children of immigrants were often eager to adopt these American habits and customs, or rather, these children were eager to adopt a role performed by American menstruators. At menarche, menstruators step into a role that was likely to be performed to them by other females. This signifies the continuing institutionalization of menstrual knowledge, legitimized through social sanctions. In all, we understand menstruators to be adopting certain habits and routines, like wrapping, that are created within an informal institution that carries the tradition and norm that menstruation is to be hidden.

Subjective Reality

The process of socialization that typically involves teaching one how to manage menstruation transforms this seemingly objective institution into a reality for menstruators today. Menstruators today are socialized into this seemingly objective institution and are taught how to do things 'properly.' Significant others in the context of menstruation are likely to be the individuals mother, though other people and resources contribute (Lee 2008a; Teitelman 2004). School teachers, peers, siblings, fathers, educational movies, and pamphlets are also agents in this socialization process (Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996). Adolescence learn menstrual knowledge from various sources and because meaning is embedded into the routine, internalizations of this knowledge is sometimes very different.

Within this routine, American menstruators today are concerned with managing blood, products, and odors. To manage blood, sanitary products, like pads, tampons, menstrual cups, and/or leak-proof underwear are often used. These products are manufactured to be hidden, whether that means invisible to the eye while in use, or easily concealable inside one's bag or pocket (Freidenfelds 2010). Throughout socialization and subsequent interactions, an individual menstruator experiences the process of externalization, objectivation, and internalization continuously and simultaneously.

The historical and cultural knowledge about menstruation, from the understanding of menstrual blood as dirty and dangerous, to the more modern construction of the "hygienic crisis," promote an American culture of secrecy today (Chrisler and Zittel 1998; Jackson and Falmagne 2013). Norms of concealment promote secrecy. In this way, secrecy and concealment function in the same way: to hide menstruation from the public eye (Lee 2008b). Secrecy is simultaneously externalized and objectified in various aspects of American culture, such as advertisements, educational materials, language and communication, clothing and other practical materials, and more. We must remain cognizant that menstruation and thus the culture of concealment is occurring on and around the body. This body, too, is female. In a culture still dominantly that defines "womanhood" by biological sex, and by institutionalizing menstruation as a polluting process, American females are made to feel ashamed by their status as a female and their bodily processes. Jackson and

Falmagne demonstrate that body shame and particularly reproductive shame are motivators that urge people to monitor and manage their bodies in secret (2013). In this way, shame and secrecy fuel each other. Secrecy, though, can be internalized by menstruators in different ways, often depending on an aspect of the individual's identity, familiarity with menstruation, and preparedness for menarche.

Communication.

Language is perhaps the most powerful and pervasive objectivation within our culture of secrecy. The manner in which we discuss menstruation, whether interpersonally or in educational materials and advertisements, contains implicit messages about the significance and symbolic aspects of the event. Experience is mediated through language and interaction, therefore the words used to communicate an experience affects how another person will interpret the experience (Kissling 1996a). Metaphors used to describe menstruation have been studied by many scholars, such as Emily Martin and Elizabeth Kissling, to deconstruct the meaning-making process and understand the cultural implications of such metaphors. The language used in educational materials or used from an educator towards an adolescent contain messages that menstruation is to be concealed. Menstruators utilize language in different ways to manage discussing this personal event that exhibit the internalization of cultural concealment.

One way in which menstruators today have internalized both the menstrual taboo and the increasing pathologizing of menstruation urging them to maintain secrecy is through it-ification and euphemisms. It-ification refers to the phenomena in which menstruators refer to their periods as “it” or a “thing.” By communicating their periods without naming them, menstruators are objectifying a culture of concealment and secrecy. A study done by Anne Burrows and Sally Johnson (2005) found that among girls aged 12 to 15, there was a significant lack of positive language routinely utilized to refer to menstruation. The study included excerpts from focus groups that exhibit this trend:

Fran: I think it SMELLS.

Lucy: It does.

Fran: Really badly.

Lucy: Yeah, you know, it does.

Jo: It's like, really, ugh.

Lucy: It smells like a ... not washed dog. (P. 241)

Within this short exchange, we see a conversation in which distaste and shame are expressed, we see smells being objectified into something another person could encounter, and we see it-ification occurring, signaling the internalization of negative associations with menstruation. The silence and negative descriptions that result could hinder someone from seeking medical and sexual health services and have a negative affect on an individual's well being (Burrows and Johnson 2005).

Jackson and Falmagne (2013) found that women in their sample avoided using the term 'period,' along with 'menarche' and 'menstruation,' and instead only referred to the process as 'it' or 'this.' One of the participants reported being

excited to begin their period, yet still internalized the secrecy norms, exemplified by her interaction in which she told her mother the news: “Mom, I got my...can you say it? I don’t want to say it” (Jackson and Falmagne 2013:390). In some cases, silence still extended towards menstrual products, much like in the mid twentieth century. Some menstruators today chose humoristic euphemisms and metaphors to ease their discomfort: “We call the supplies Moses ‘cause they part the Red Sea” (Jackson and Falmagne 2013:391). Humor, among euphemisms, could be a tactic utilized to manage unease.

It-ification and other linguistic concealment efforts aim to keep menstruation out of the public sphere of life. They influence menstruator’s interactions and emotions as well. Some participants chose to keep their menarchal experiences to themselves, hiding the information from mothers and peers; people who could offer support during times of change (Kalman 2003a). It can prohibit an individual from finding out more information about their bodies or how to manage associated pains. Linguistic concealments perpetuate female body shame and hide “the reality of women’s lives, from men and each other” (Kissling 1996b:305). Differing experiences with internalization will result in different outcomes. Some menstruators report being more prepared for menstruation prior to menarche and experienced less anxiety and concealment urges. ‘Preparation’ is not always clearly defined, some credit formal education for their menstrual preparation, others their mother or female family members, and some their peers. Others grew up in a household in which their mother would

share information about menstruation with them from an early age, some had mothers that never spoke to them about the subject. In these texts, it is often unclear whether 'preparation' refers to physiological explanations about what is happening to the body, experiential explanations about expectations and management, or both.

In instances where menstruation was verbalized, euphemisms were often employed (Jackson and Falmagne 2013; Kissling 1996a). American euphemisms are typically negative depictions of menstruation to hide the subject or "to defend against embarrassment by being overtly gross" (Delaney et al. 1988:117). Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen (1996) display how this behavior is learned through socialization with the interviews she included in her book, *Blood Stories*. One menstruator clearly articulated how these euphemisms affected her understanding of her body and menstruation: "So I thought my period was going to be icky, too. Because it was called 'the curse.' My mother always called it 'the curse.'" (Lee and Sasser-Coen 52:1996). This terminology created predefinitions for the menstruator to expect the first and subsequent times they menstruated. This was a value the menstruator internalized from an educator, in this case, her mother. Calling 'menstruation' a 'curse' objectifies the negative cultural beliefs about menstruation, that this is something that taints the female experience, rather than a biological part of it.

Advertisements.

The nature in which menstruators discuss menstruation is reminiscent of advertisements, too, as communication taboos mediate and define concealment taboos, and both are interplaying in advertisements (Kissling 1996a).

Advertisements for menstrual hygiene products have been reported to contain messages of secrecy and reinforce the idea that menstruation is an indicator of dirtiness that must be controlled, and that day-to-day activities could still be performed while menstruating because of a certain product (Delaney et al. 1988; Jackson and Falmagne 2013). In a Western, capitalistic society, advertisements are virtually inescapable. When adolescents who lack familiarity with menstruation encounter advertisements, they may understand the information within the ad to be factual, rather than a marketing technique (Simes and Berg 2001). Advertisements, materials produced by popular culture, provide an insight into mass psychology and how we as a society understand menstruation (Delaney et al. 1988).

At first glance, advertisements may appear to contradict the concealment belief because they contain public displays and conversations about menstruation. However, advertisements have been shown to promote and exploit the concealment belief and actually sell shame along with sanitary products (Kissling 1996a). Advertisements about menstruation are unclear: they require the consumer “to have some requisite knowledge about menstruation and menstrual products in order to understand the advertisements” (Simes and Berg

2001:458). For example, advertisements tend to not explain what a product is or does, but emphasize a brand name and utilize euphemisms that assume the viewer has already the cultural knowledge, or in other words, formed predefinitions, about the purpose served by menstrual products.

Advertisements further the narrative that menstruators must avoid being “caught” having their periods and endorse that being outed is an inherently embarrassing event (Simes and Berg 2001). Advertisements can offer ways to avoid getting caught (be fresh, be discreet, be secure, be confident, manage one’s body every day, use this product) that often heighten insecurities and maintain silence and shame (Simes and Berg 2001).

Advertisements are perhaps one of the clearest ways in which we can see our culture externalized and transformed into objectifications. Our culture’s belief that menstruation is not to be discussed in public has been adopted by advertisements, public in their nature. Depictions of blood are not red, messages promote that menstruation is dirty and smelly, and that the process is not one to be discussed or named (Simes and Berg 2001; Erchull, Chrisler, Gorman, and Johnston-Robledo 2002). Advertisements are a marketing technique that are also cultural artifacts because “they represent a version of reality that is influenced strongly by cultural ideologies, and thus they play an important role in the social construction of meaning” (Erchull et al. 2002:459). Advertisements containing the common message that heighten insecurities among adolescence

are likely to promote feelings of shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and fear among viewers.

Education.

Menstruators learn about menstruation in many different ways. Some learn primarily from their mother or other female family members, others from educational booklets, some in schools or from peers, but overall, most learn from a culmination of these sources (Britton 1996). Some of these sources value different types of knowledge about menstruation, for example, schools and educational pamphlets tend to emphasize medical or scientific knowledge, and other females tend to emphasize the experiential or practical aspects (Kissling 1996a). Medical knowledge emphasizes the physiological aspects of menstruation, while experiential knowledge emphasizes the lived aspects, such as menstrual management, and cultural meanings from the event. Experiential knowledge includes how to use hygiene products, which brands are preferred, which activities are or are not permitted, which clothes to wear and more importantly, which clothes not to wear. These two types of knowledge are not distinct from each other, but rather inform each other. Breaking down how a menstruator learns about menarche and menstruation can help us to understand how education influences personal attitudes about the event.

Medical.

Medical knowledge prioritizes the body's physiological functioning and scientific explanations of menstruation. Pamphlets and other educational

materials are highly likely to include medical knowledge about the menstrual cycle. Medical explanations are not immune to concealment taboos. One study that analyzed educational pamphlets and menstrual advertisements found that not every booklet included the terms like *menstruation* and *ovulation*, and many used colloquial terms more often than the scientific name of body parts, for example, *womb* rather than *uterus* (Erchull et al. 2002). As the second most common source for menstrual information are school teachers and school materials, the nature in which these sources convey menstruation is important (Beausang and Razor 2000). These linguistic concealments communicate a cultural message that is printed onto tangible objects. In other words, linguistic concealments are objectivations of a culture externalized into educational resources.

Anthropologist Emily Martin found that medical metaphors used to describe menstruation are based in 17th and 18th century cultural and social assumptions about the female body, resulting in menstruation being perceived as a failure to reproduce (Martin 1988). This study recounted the historical basis for these metaphors and demonstrated how these metaphors were representative of our society and social structure, being both based in a hierarchical signal/response communication system in which menstruation is viewed as a failure to reproduce and “carries the idea of production gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted scrap” in which “dismay and horror” result in the form of blood (247). In these medical texts,

pieces of American culture have been externalized and simultaneously objectified. We saw an increase in the medicalization of menstruation in the early twentieth century, leaving medical descriptions of the process as a “failure” or “horror” to permeate during primary and subsequent socializations. This is representative of the broader medical discourse, in which androcentric attitudes were and are utilized that paint the male body as the norm and the female body as a mystery, leaving females “with a sense of alienation from their own bodies” (Kissling 1996a:494). While the failed-production model was shown to be adopted by middle class women, a study by Kissling (1996a) found that working class women regardless of race offered more information about the look and feelings associated with menstruation than the mechanics of the process.

Increasing medicalization of menstruation, in which medical doctors started taking over roles typically performed by mothers, has led to more and more medical interventions to manage menstruation (Brumberg 1997). Menstrual cycle suppression is a fairly recent trend gaining popularity, especially among young cisgender women (Chrisler et al. 2016). To suppress the frequency of one’s menstrual cycle or the cycle altogether, oral contraceptives are utilized that inhibit ovulation. Some scholars interpret suppression as a “corrective” measure to fix something that “taints” the female experience (Jackson and Falmagne 2013). While suppression and concealment are not synonymous, this paper understands suppression and concealment to function in similar ways that allow a menstruator to enact control over their body (McMillan and Jenkins 2016).

Certain groups may have more pressures to conceal and/or eliminate their cycle, such as trans men. In a study that looked into masculine and trans men's menstrual experiences in adulthood, 40% of participants used medications to suppress their cycles, but this study did not include adolescent menstruators (Chrisler et al. 2016). We do not currently have any understandings of trans and genderqueer menarchal experiences, but addressing the usage of testosterone and oral contraceptives is an area that future research should focus on. Suppression could be a tactic of concealment, while for others it may be primarily done out of convenience.

Experiential.

Mother-daughter relationships have consistently been cited by researchers as a primary source of menstrual knowledge (Costos et al. 2002; Kissling 1996b, Lee and Sasser-Coen 1997, Uskul 2004). How mothers react to their child's first menstruation, how they teach menstruators the bodily process that is happening and the language they use to talk about menstruation all affect how a menstruator experiences menarche and later periods. A study by Janet Lee (2008a) demonstrated that maternal scripts have shifted over time; whereas past studies have reported mothers introducing new menstruators to various restrictions and regulations associated with the feminine, mothers in this study were much more personally supportive (Lee 2008a). In the same study, white mothers were more celebratory and enthusiastic, while mothers of color were remembered by participants to be more helpful and matter-of-fact (Lee 2008a).

Mothers with the latter attitude were associated with more neutral memories of menarche, though having an emotionally supportive mother was associated with the most positive memories (Lee 2008a).

Joan Brumberg (1997) found a trend among American menstruators and their mothers that they “think first about the external body--what shows and what doesn't--rather than about the emotional and social meaning of the maturational process” (29). She explains that the shift in teaching follows a culturally constructed script that has similarly altered. This shift, to Brumberg, is one in which bodies, particularly female ones, have become a site for intense moderating and has become a sort of ‘project’ for American girls to constantly work on. Mothers had a key role in Brumberg’s study; they taught menstruators about hygiene products and secrecy techniques and rules, though conversations about sexuality and reproduction were typically not had.

Mothers are not solely responsible for the menarchal experience of their offspring. A multitude of studies have focused on the cisnormative mother-daughter relationships and point to the mother for any negative experiences embodied by the daughter. We live in a culture with patriarchy embedded into it; we cannot separate the mother from the world she lives in and has experienced. Her experience with menstruation guides how she teaches her child. This is the root of an embodied experience; memories and experience mediate every interaction we have as physical and social beings in a physical and social world. To blame mothers is to forget their experience.

Not all menstruators have or live with their mothers, either. A study by Kalman (2003b) found a theme among pre and postmenarchal participants from single-father homes felt their fathers lacked credibility when it came to menstruation; only two of twelve girls told their fathers when they began to menstruate, and these girls were the only two that had poor relationships with their mother (Kalman 2003a). Menstruators without mothers tended to turn to sisters, older female friends, grandmothers, peers, or no one (Kalman 2003a, 2003b). Two girls in Kalman's study did not seek out anyone for help and learned about menstruation solely through school (Kalman 2003b). One of these girls did not understand what her vaginal bleeding was until her fourth cycle (Kalman 2003b). Further, we have to remember that families do not always consists of a cis woman and cis man as parental figures. Fathers who menstruate, mothers who do not menstruate, families consisting of parental figures who all or who all do not menstruate exist, and analyzing the menstrual experiences of cis mothers and cis daughters is only capturing a portion of the picture.

Peer interactions.

Female peers are shown to be a source of comfort for young menstruators today as the rules of concealment appear to be shifting, allowing for connection and discussion among female friends. In fact, schoolmates and friends are a source some menstruators go to for experiential menstrual knowledge. Sharing menstrual experiences, such as when one had their first period or symptoms they have felt with female friends is a great source of the "reality" of menstruation

(Chang, Hayter, and Wu 2010; Kissling 1996a). Studies have shown that menstruators hold more similar attitudes to their female friends than their mothers, and these interactions could be the only currently available context girls are comfortable discussing menstruation (Kissling 1996a). In these specific settings, there appears to be an increase in solidarity among peers and an increasing ease in discussing the subject.

Having control in this disclosure, in this tension between the public and private, was important to participants in menstrual studies; getting changed in a school locker room was found to be an anxiety inducing situation; “It’s like when you’re getting changed for PE you have to [demonstrates getting dressed with exaggerated care] as people might see the wings or something and people might say ‘er, we saw your ... [sanitary towel]’” (Burrows and Johnson 2005:240). Also important to note from this quotation is that Lucy, the speaker, did not say ‘sanitary towel,’ but implied the presence of the product, perhaps signaling her own or her classmates’ internalization of the concealment taboo that extends to products.

Female friends can be a valuable context in which cis girls can relate to one another and learn pragmatic information. Male friends, peers, parents, and siblings, however, are consistently shown to be context in which concealment and secrecy rules are amplified (Kissling 1996a, Lee 2008b). Menstruators at menarche report anxiety and embarrassment at the prospect of another person discovering that they are menstruating, and these anxiety levels were heightened

when in the presence of male bodies. Male family members who lived in the same home as a menstruator were a source of discomfort for some menstruators, as concealment practices and norms encourage a menstruator to hide evidence of menstruation from males (Lee 2008b). Often, menstruators went to great lengths to hide sanitary products so males could not discover them.

In the following instance, we see rules of concealment being broken by boys at school:

Vicky: A boy stole my bag and emptied it out and they found the stuff [sanitary towels] and started chucking it around the room.

Fran: 'cos once when Lucy had some stuff in her bag and S [a boy in her class] went through it and he found it.

Lucy: ... and I'm like, how embarrassing.

Bee: I had a friend who ... a boy went into her bag quite recently and found sanitary towels and [he said] 'ugh, sanitary towels'. (Burrows and Johnson 2005:240)

Unused sanitary towels, an object created to absorb menstrual blood that prevent blood from being made visible to anyone but the menstruator, have the menstrual taboo extended to them: menstruators, especially adolescent ones, discuss trying to hide their products because they are “embarrassing” and out one as a menstruator. They repeatedly choose to omit terms like ‘sanitary towels’ and call them ‘stuff’ or brand names. They go to these great lengths because of the culture and how we think about menstruators. These objects are “embarrassing” to be made public because the cultural knowledge telling us they are embarrassing has been internalized. In this interaction, Bee and Fran were able to offer their own stories where boys at school discovered hygiene products after being prompted by Vicky. These adolescents were able form some solidarity

among their group because of the similar experiences they had. This also further solidifies to them the world that has been constructed as reality because they do not have isolated experiences of concealment.

Menstruators have also been shown to cultivate solidarity within friend groups while still maintaining rules of concealment by helping each other manage menstruation. Menstruators report asking other cis girls and women to “check [their] pants” or generally watch out for leaks in case the menstruator does not notice a stain forming on their clothing (Jackson and Falmagne 2013:392). Young women are not only vigilant towards their own bodies to conceal menstruation, but sometimes form a network of support to aid in concealment management.

Disciplinary action.

Clearly, menstruation is not an event to be experienced by that menstruators alone, but one that engages other people at many different levels and for different purposes. However, some routines and habits utilize experiential knowledge on an individual level. For example, clothing regulations during menstruation are something a menstruator may learn from others, but personally choose to engage in. Some menstruators never wore skirts or dresses post menarche, and some vowed to never wear white again (Burrows and Johnson 2005; Jackson and Falmagne 2013). Devotion to disciplinary action was mediated by various experiences with menstruation and internalization of menstrual concealment: some menstruators only prescribed to these actions

while actually menstruating, while others followed these rules all the time. While some menstruators reported feeling more comfortable in loose, baggy clothing, some felt much more secure in tighter pants (Uskul 2004). Some menstruators kept coats on or sweaters tied around their waist to hide their bodies and evidence of menstruation (Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996). While these efforts may have been individual, they are not isolated actions.

Disciplinary actions stem from fear of exposure and cultural belief that blood is dirty and dangerous. Menstrual stains are often stated by menstruators to be “the most embarrassing event” that could occur (Uskul 2004:674). Adopting from Janet Lee and Jennifer Sasser-Coen’s (1996) argument that the “stain [...] symbolizes a lapse in women’s task of maintaining the taboo, of concealing the evidence in order not to embarrass others,” I suggest we understand the stain to have been objectivated into a ‘thing’ others can encounter that represents concealment and the hygienic crisis. I think that embarrassment is one way this is internalized, but I also think that the disciplinary actions menstruators take to avoid exposure demonstrate that the values of our culture have been internalized by that person. Other disciplinary techniques include numerous trips to the bathroom to make sure no stains or odors have occurred, stealthily hiding menstrual products on their bodies while making trips to the bathroom at school or other public places, wearing sweaters tied around the waist, wearing panty liners every day of the month “just in case,” and more (Burrows and Johnson 2005; Lee and Sasser-Coen 1996). Disciplinary actions are objectified pieces of

our culture that have been internalized and reinforced every time they are followed.

LIMITATIONS

A large limitation of this study is the lack of recent literature analyzing queer and/or nonwhite menstrual experiences. In order to properly address how the social world is constructed, we have to account for multiple, multi-faceted identities (Crenshaw 1991). Further, all studies contained a perpetuation of gender and sex differences to a certain degree, the most common being a connotation between womanhood and menstruation.

A second limitation is that original research was not gathered for this project. Instead, other scholar's research and interpretations of interviews were used. Most of the studies in this paper used self-reported data, and often entailed a person recollecting their menarchal experience years later, so there is a risk of selective memory or exaggeration.

Future research should aim to include more diverse experiences, like those of boys and genderqueer people who menstruate. Future studies should also aim to better understand nonwhite experiences of menstruation.

CONCLUSION

By using a social constructionist framework, we understand menstrual concealment to be a humanly produced product. The process of habitualization and institutionalization demonstrate how and where our current climate came

from, and why we understand it to be an 'objective' reality. Then, by breaking down processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization within the different contexts of menstrual concealment, we understand reality to be a subjective experience, mediated by knowledge.

Institutions indicate a shared history and provide the mechanics to socially control human conduct (Berger and Luckmann 1967). This paper carries forwards the argument presented by several other scholars that concealment isn't merely an action, but a tactic employed by females to avoid being marked as "other" (Jackson and Falmagne 2013; MacDonald 2007). Menstrual blood and associated products signify one's body as a female. By putting forward efforts to conceal, menstruators are attempting to control their bodies, their blood, their words to hide and stave off embarrassment.

Moving forward, we need to teach young people who will menstruate more pragmatic information to supplement the physiological information they teach in US public schools. This could be done by bringing experiential information to the educational pamphlets and movies American youth typically receive as resources in schools. We need to normalize menstruation in front of all people, both in public and private spheres. This is not just the responsibility of people who menstruate, but a collective effort. Understanding how menstrual shame influences the lives of menstruators helps both menstruators talk about their periods and nonmenstruators to support others when they choose to discuss the subject.

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