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Women's menarche stories from a multicultural sample

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a focus group study that examines how women have experienced menarche at the personal level and in relation to the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment. Fifty-three women from 34 different countries were recruited in 13 focus groups. On the one hand, at the personal level, menarche stories shared in this study revealed salient themes concerning feelings experienced at the time of menarche, the importance of mother's reactions to their daughter's first menstruation, difficulties around understanding the meanings attached to menarche by others, managing menstrual products, as well as making sense of formal education related to menstruation, and the age of menarche. On the other hand, the discussions concerning how women experienced menarche in relation to the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment revealed secrecy to be a defining feature of many stories. Cultural expectations of learning, and following the rules and regulations surrounding menstruation led to different reactions in women at the time of their menarche. Very few women mentioned a ritual or celebration at the time of their menarche. Findings are discussed in terms of similarities and differences in menarche stories of women from different cultural backgrounds. Limitations of the study are mentioned and suggestions for future research are provided.

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Introduction

Menarche, the onset of the first menses, is a significant milestone in a woman's life and reproductive cycle. For the female adolescent, it is a sharply defined, sudden, and distinct biological event (Golub, 1992; Koff, Rierdan, & Silverstone, 1978). Menarche is also a socio-cultural event that is shaped and constructed by cultural institutions such as religion, science, and media (e.g., Chandra & Chaturvedi, 1992; Laws, 1990; Paige & Paige, 1981).

In psychology, menarche has attracted researchers' attention, especially during 1970s and 1980s. Current studies on menarche are sparse, but a few recent publications on this topic may indicate re-emerging interest in this topic (e.g., Beausang & Razor, 2000;

Chrisler & Zittel, 1998; Kissling, 2002). Menarche studies in psychology typically examined the experience among young female adolescents or college students in North America. Although a few studies have looked at cultural similarities or differences in women's menarche experiences, it is usually in the area of anthropology where we find cross-cultural studies. This particular study was designed to contribute to the slowly growing cross-cultural psychology literature on women's menarche experiences. The goal was to hear and record menarche stories of women from different cultural backgrounds, and thereby to explore salient themes that emerge in their menarche experiences. The study then draws upon these accounts to analyze the effects of the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment on personal experience.

It is important to look at how women experience their menarche in relation to the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment, especially as many cultures portray a negative image of menstruating women. For example, in most cultures menstruation is associated

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with physical discomfort, increased emotionality, and restriction of social and physical activities (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1982; Clarke & Ruble, 1978). This image is further complicated by the various religious and cultural meanings that have been associated with menstruation (see Laws, 1985; Shuttle & Redgrove, 1980; Ussher, 1989). For example, menstruating women are excluded from religious activities and ceremonies in certain sects of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and are considered dirty, sick, unbalanced, and ritually impure (Daly, 1984; Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1988). The media further reinforces this negative image by promoting the idea that menarche is a 'hygienic crisis' rather than a normal developmental event (Berg & Block-Coutts, 1994; Morse & Doan, 1987), that menstruation is an illness causing physical discomfort that needs to be cured (Whisnant & Zegans, 1975), and that it is a problem for girls and their parents that needs to be 'solved' (Kissling, 2002).

Menarche studies in psychology have predominantly examined how girls experience menarche, and have shown that women typically have detailed memories of this event (Golub, 1992; Moore, 1995). In most studies, adolescent girls reported experiencing negative and sometimes mixed emotions (e.g., Koff, Rierdan, & Jacobson, 1981; Woods, Dery, & Most, 1982; Beausang & Razor, 2000). But it has been found that women tend to experience menarche as a shift to physical maturity (Koff, 1983). The experience of menarche is influenced by the girl's preparedness for this biological event and its timing (Koff, Rierdan, & Sheingold, 1982; Ruble & Brooks-Gun, 1982); and adolescent girls reported that mothers and schools were the primary source of information (e.g., Morse & Doan, 1987; Moore, 1995, Beausang & Razor, 2000).

While helpful to defining the individual girl's experience of menarche, most studies to date have been limited to specific populations, namely only girls or women in the western world. Moreover, most of these studies have not focussed on the social and cultural construction of menarche and how girls experience it in relation to the larger meaning of the event. A certain number of studies have been conducted with women from other parts of the world than North America or Western Europe, however, and the following section provides an overview of this research.

Menarche experiences of different groups of women

In their analysis of detailed menarche stories of women from Lithuania, United States, Malaysia, and Sudan, Chrisler and Zittel (1998) found some differences between these four groups. For example, the issue of timing of the first menstruation appeared to be more salient to the Americans than to the women from other countries. Also, although most women from Sudan,

United States, and Malaysia reported that they were prepared for menstruation, only half of Lithuanian participants mentioned being prepared. Further, most American participants mentioned their mother as the person with whom they shared their first menstruation, whereas the percentage of the participants from the other three countries who did so was lower. The Americans and Malaysians were more likely than Sudanese and Lithuanians to express mixed feelings about their experience of menarche. Participants also recalled changes in body image. Lithuanians reported more philosophical meanings attached to their menarche than women in other groups, while Americans were more worried about daily issues such as playing sports. Americans also reported having started thinking more about sexuality related themes after their first menstruation.

A study conducted by McMaster, Cormie, and Pitts (1997) in Zimbabwe revealed that most women discussed their menarche experience either with their mother or another female relative. Feelings concerning the onset of menstruation were fairly negative, with fear and worry being the most commonly reported emotions.

Logan (1980) looked at cultural variations of the menarche experience by interviewing 95 women from 23 nations. The interview questions focussed on how women prepared for menarche, the kinds of messages they received from others at the time of menarche, and their emotional reactions to the first menstrual period. Logan found the mother to be the most common source of information prior to the menarche, but in one-third of the cases, mothers did not assist the girl before the menarche. However, as in other studies, she found that girls preferred to discuss the matter with their mother. Only in Iran did an important number of women talk to their sisters. Preparation for menarche at school was reported by only 22% of the sample. Almost 30% of the women reported not having been adequately informed; some of them did so despite having received education about the matter at school. The messages women reported having received at the time of menarche concentrated on the hygienic routine, except in Iran where the girls were assured of the normality of the event. Another common response was that womanhood has begun. In terms of girls' own reactions toward the menarche, Asian and Zambian women generally reported to have negative emotions, whereas Iranians expressed feeling "more grown up". For other groups, generalizations were difficult to make because of the diversity of the responses.

Thuren (1994) examined the question of whether old Mediterranean ideas of sexuality as impure and shameful are still valid in an urban context in Spain. In her interviews with 36 working class women in Valencia, Spain, Thuren focused on women's first menstruation. She found that negative experiences dominated the

women's stories, although some women reported neutral experiences. On the one hand, most women over 30 years of age reported not having received enough information at the time of their menarche. These women recalled that they preferred females of their own generation rather than their mothers to share the event believing that mothers communicated too much shame and too little of what they needed to know about menstruation. Most women reported feelings of shame and fear. These feelings seemed to go along with messages that conveyed a danger of sexuality and becoming pregnant.

On the other hand, women under 30 reported having more information about menstruation before the menarche and having more positive or neutral experiences. The girls were still be made to feel shame, however, in spite of the reported changes. The messages coming from older women, from religion, and from mass media still emphasized the negative rather than the positive consequences of starting to menstruate. Thuren concluded that despite the cultural changes occurred in Spain in the mid-1970s, menstruation has not been redefined as a positive event.

Amann-Gainotti (1986) interviewed 258 adolescents from Southern Italy on the kind of knowledge female and male adolescents have about menstruation as well as their sources of information. The results revealed that lack of accurate information about menstruation was common. Half of postmenarcheal girls expressed a negative evaluation of their menarche. Amann-Gainotti's study showed that a positive evaluation of menarche and the family's or cultural milieu's positive attitudes toward menstruation were positively related. Similarly, a positive relationship was also found between positive judgment of menarche and advance information.

These studies have shown that women from different cultural backgrounds experience menarche differently, as in the issues that become salient with menarche that were shown to vary from worrying about daily activities such as sports to interpretation of the event as a step to womanhood. There are some commonalities, however. For one thing, in most cases, negative emotions prevail, even though women who have had menarche more recently have tended to report more positive feelings. For another, most girls consulted either their mother or a close female relative at the time of menarche. Even so, a considerable percentage of the women mentioned not having been prepared for menarche, sometimes despite having received formal education about it.

The present study

The qualitative research reported here was designed to arrive at an in-depth understanding of women's menstrual experiences and particularly how they experienced menarche in relation to the larger cultural,

religious, and societal environment. The present study differs from the existing studies in psychology that recruited women from different countries in the following ways. First, focus group methodology was used to elicit discussions among women from different countries in terms of how they experienced their menarche and what the similarities and differences in these experiences were. Second, menarche was examined not only in terms of how women experienced their menarche at the personal level, but also how they experienced it in relation to the broader cultural, religious, and societal environment primarily by encouraging women to talk about how they responded to the rules and regulations surrounding menstruation at the time of their menarche. Third, the sample is composed of women from a broad range of cultures. This will provide a variety of perspectives of women's adjustment to and coping with menarche as a culturally constructed event. At this point, it needs to be emphasized that the goal of the present study was not to make generalizations across countries. The goal was rather, to attempt to reveal salient differences between women's menarche experiences, while also looking for the underlying commonalities that may be predictors of some menarche-related attitudes, behaviors, or emotions.

Method

Participants

Fifty-three women participated in focus group discussions about their menarche experiences.¹ These women were recruited at an international women's summer school that was composed of 450 participants from 115 different countries. Recruitment was done by introducing the purpose and the methods of the study to the summer school attendants in social conversations and asking for their voluntary participation. Those women who agreed to participate were scheduled for one of the focus group sessions. Some participants approached the researcher expressing a willingness to participate in the study having heard about it by word of mouth.

Procedure

The women attended one of 13 focus group discussions that ranged from 45 min to 2 h. Three to six women participated in each session.² Before the focus

¹This manuscript covers only one part of a larger research project in which not only menarche but also menstruation was discussed in the focus groups.

²Only one focus group consisted of three women. In most of the groups, either five or six women participated.

group discussions began, the purpose and method of the study were reiterated. Participants were asked to sign a consent form and fill out a brief demographic information form. All group interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Discussions were facilitated by a semi-structured protocol, which was developed in accordance with established guidelines for focus group research (Basch, 1987; Krueger, 1994). This protocol consisted of focused questions that would make group participants comfortable and provide desired information. Protocol questions were designed to learn about (1) how women experienced their menarche, (2) similarities and differences between menarche stories of women who come from different cultural backgrounds, and (3) how women's menarche experiences related to the general cultural environment in which they experienced their first menstruation.

An effort was made to comprise the groups of women from a wide age range and different countries in order to allow cultural diversity in the groups to highlight similarities and differences between countries. It was hoped that hearing other women's menarche experiences, participants would comment on the similarities and differences in their own menarche experience or point to the treatment of menarche in their particular cultural environment. A secondary reason for having groups composed of women with diverse cultural backgrounds was practical: limitations related to the availability of women made it difficult to gather participants from the same country in one group.

Focus groups: Menarche and menstruation constitute a private realm, difficult to access with conventional scientific methods, and hence a qualitative research approach was believed to be more appropriate for this sensitive topic. Focus groups were chosen over dyadic interviews, because research has shown that in focus groups, people may be more, rather than less, likely to self-disclose or share personal experiences (Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Carey, 1994; Kitzinger, 1994). Also, feminist critiques of one-to-one interviews (Oakley, 1981) anticipate the more recent finding that people can feel relatively empowered and supported in a group situation, surrounded by peers or friends (e.g., Fuller, Edwards, Vorakitphokatorn, & Sremsri, 1993). Moreover, as Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) suggested, bringing discussion of sensitive topics into a relatively public arena may open up new possibilities for analyzing the social construction of sensitivity, and the identification and illumination of group norms and taboos.

Although the advantages of focus groups over interviews to discuss sensitive issues have been enumerated in the literature, this has not been reported to be the case within groups that are culturally diverse. Thus, to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the face-to-face interview method with the focus group research method, it was decided to try both methods in a pilot

study. Four interviews and two focus groups were held, using the same protocol of questions that were used in the actual study. The researchers' experiences showed that women felt more comfortable in the focus group setting and were more ready to discuss issues related to their menarche. After the interviews were completed, three women reported having felt uncomfortable talking about their menarche experiences; they said they had not shared some of the information that came to their minds. In the focus groups, however, participants reported having been more motivated to speak about their menarche experiences after hearing other participants share their experiences. Participants in focus groups also mentioned that the group discussion motivated them to start thinking more critically about their menstruation and how menstruation is treated in the society. The results of the pilot interviews and focus groups led the researchers to choose a qualitative design using focus groups for the investigation of women's menarche experiences.

Data analysis

After the audiotapes were transcribed, the author reviewed all transcriptions for accuracy and for the purpose of recalling the group discussions.

According to Krueger (1994), focus group discussions should be analyzed in a systematic manner to infer and interpret descriptive statements from the transcripts. In order to do this, Basch (1987) recommended developing categories of ideas, based on the content of focus group discussions, to generate themes. In the present study, the author used the transcripts to extract descriptive statements and identify salient themes. Themes raised by a majority of participants were included in the 'Results' section. Then, the author extracted the commonalities in participants' accounts of similar issues. In most cases, the underlying commonalities were related to whether the participants were from an urban or rural, strongly religious or less religious, traditional or non-traditional background. Where possible, the author made a grouping based on the geographical region from which the participants came (i.e., South Asia) because of the largely shared practices, values and traditions in that particular region. Finally, themes reported in the 'Results' section were not restricted to the answers given to the focus group questions asked by the researcher, but drew upon the entire group discussions.

Throughout the analysis, the author used QSR NUDIST (1995) to organize and categorize data. QSR NUDIST (1995) is a computer program that facilitates qualitative data analysis by helping the researcher to code, identify, and explore relationships and patterns and compare and contrast categories between and across units of analysis.

Results

The following section describes the analysis of the qualitative data collected in the present study, along with the interpretation and discussion of the data, including how the findings relate to previous studies on menarche.

Sample description

The sample consisted of 53 adult women from 34 different countries, aged 23–52, with a mean age of 29.5 years. Thirteen were married, and six of them had children. Most were in a middle to high-income bracket and had a high level of education (18 were Ph.D. candidates, 18 held a master's degree, and 17 had an undergraduate degree). Most women were originally from large urban centers in their countries. The composition of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Women's menarche experiences

The analysis of women's menarche stories revealed that women remembered their first menstruation very clearly and vividly. As shown by earlier studies (e.g., Golub, 1992; Moore, 1995; Pillemer, Koff, Rhinehart, & Rierdan, 1987; Sasser-Coen, 1997), details about their menarche were still fresh in women's memories. The following comment by a Scandinavian woman (26)³ is an example for the detailed nature of these memories:

I was, at my teacher's wedding, she had invited 5 of us..., to her wedding as like bridesmaids. We were there in this tiny village, in central Finland. We were all well-dressed. We were peeling potatoes and helping out with the whole thing. We were there for the weekend, and well, that's when I got my first period. So it was like, a couple of my classmates of mine, but not my family, so it was like a strange environment, and I was really ashamed, I couldn't like tell anyone, ...,telling myself, well, this is bad, I'm just going to look like very cool, (laughs), and sneak out, you know, and go out and buy my stuff.

Most women in the study mentioned their feelings at the time of menarche. These emotions can be grouped into either positive or negative emotions. The negative emotions included embarrassed, ashamed, scared, awful, shocked, confused, terrible, miserable, frightened, depressed, and freaked out. The positive emotions men-

³The numbers in brackets represent the participants' age. Instead of country of origin, only the region from which participants came was reported. Mentioning the country of origin of the participants could cause violation to their anonymity, since there was only one participant from some countries.

Table 1
National composition of the sample

Nationality	Of participants
Argentina	3
Australia	3
Bangladesh	1
Birma	1
Brazil	2
Cameroon	1
Canada	1
Columbia	2
Estonia	1
Ethiopia	1
Finland	1
Former Yugoslavia	1
Germany	5
Greece	1
Hong Kong	1
India	4
Italy/Denmark	1
Kenya	1
Morocco	1
Nigeria	1
Palestine	2
Papua New Guinea	1
Peru/Japan	1
Republic of Benin	1
Romania	1
Sierra Leona	1
South Africa	2
South Korea	1
Spain	1
Switzerland	1
Tajikistan	1
Turkey	2
USA	4
Zambia	1

Total: 53 Participants from 34 different countries.

tioned were happy, proud, cool, relieved, and excited. Most women reported having experienced negative emotions only; a few mentioned having either only positive emotions or negative and positive emotions simultaneously. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that showed that most women report negative emotions at the time of menarche, but also provide support for studies that found girls experiencing positive or mixed feelings (Golub & Catalano, 1983; Koff et al., 1981; Woods et al., 1982; Beausang & Razor, 2000).

Several themes came up with regard to why certain emotions were experienced more strongly than others. A majority of the women who reported positive emotions at the menarche also reported that they were well informed beforehand or that they were impatiently waiting to have their first menstruation. The most important source of information for these women was

seeing other women experiencing menstruation, mostly in the household. This finding is consistent with the positive correlation between positive evaluation of menarche and advanced information shown by Amann-Gainotti (1986). Women who mentioned negative emotions at the menarche referred to reasons such as not having been informed about it at all, being in an environment with unknown, or not very close people, with whom they could not share the event, or finally, not wanting to start menstruating, since this would mean a shift from childhood to womanhood.

Those women who knew little about menarche or who had learned about it but still did not understand what was happening to them at the time of first menstruation interpreted the first sight of blood as having a cut, getting sick, or simply that there was something wrong going on with their body. These findings are consistent with what Logan (1980) has found in her study with women from 23 different countries.

Social sharing of the event and mothers' reactions: The majority of the women experienced menarche as a personal event, which they did not want to share with many people. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Amann-Gainotti, 1986; Logan, 1980; Whisnant & Zegans, 1975), the mother was the person with whom most women shared their experience. Of special note was the girls' avoidance of their fathers at the time of menarche. Six women remembered that their mother treated their daughter's menarche as a public event, although these women experienced it privately. In fact, several participants recalled being angry with their mothers for sharing the event with others, especially with their fathers, without their consent.

How mothers reacted to their daughters and dealt with the event appeared as a salient theme in the women's stories consistent with Beausang and Razor's (2000) analysis of women's personal stories of growing up sexually. In their study, some stories about how mothers reacted showed that these women were disappointed by the way their mothers approached them, and that they would have preferred a different response. In the present study, findings revealed that some mothers treated the event as something ordinary and did not pay any attention; some provided emotional support and used this opportunity to educate her daughter on issues related to sexuality; others were happy, sharing the news with other female members of the family or their friends, and celebrating the event. African women in whose countries menarche tends to be celebrated mostly reported the latter pattern.

How mothers approached their daughters at the time of menarche seemed to have a powerful impact on girls' experiences with menstruation. In most cases, it was apparent that women expected attention, information, and comfort from their mothers. The women who did not get this attention reported the lack in a bitter way,

whereas those who did shared their experience happily with the group. A Southeast European woman's (26) recollection of how her mother responded to her menarche falls under the first of these patterns:

Mine was a very miserable experience, because I got my first menstruation in [outside of her original country]. I did not have friends. I had no girl friends to talk with. I vaguely knew that something like that would happen. My mother strangely enough –she is a pharmacist– had never told me about this.... So I was lacking both an adult that was giving me information and peer contact which would have made it easier for me. So one day I went to the toilet and I was so frightened, I just went to my mother and without me saying anything I guess I must have been white like a chalk and she said 'oh, did you have your menstruation? OK, in the cupboard in the bathroom, there is a pad' and this was all she did, it was so strange. I went to the cupboard and I had to read the instructions how to put it on and everything. I was so shocked. I think I was also hurt by not getting any attention.

As was found in previous studies (e.g., Lee, 1994; Thuren, 1994; Beausang & Razor, 2000), some of the mothers of the women in this study told their daughters what starting to menstruate meant in terms of their sexuality and emphasized that they need to be aware of its consequences. They warned their daughters, saying that they had to be careful from now on and were "not supposed to follow any bad boys." (African woman, 36) Such messages were difficult to understand by many women in the study, as has also been suggested by Rierdan, Koff, and Flaherty (1986). Many women in this study mentioned that they were primarily preoccupied with learning how to use and manage menstrual products rather than learning what menstruation meant for their reproduction and sexuality.

Getting used to menstrual devices: For the most part, the alien things that women used for bleeding made them feel uncomfortable, distressed, and irritated. It took some time to get used to the inconvenient and disturbing products, and to learn such things as how to use them properly, how frequently to change them, and how many to carry. Women from South Asia (26), Europe (36), and Australia (29), respectively, described the difficulty they experienced regarding managing menstrual protection:

A: And I told my grandmother... she made... something home-made and she asked me if I had a lot of problems, (laughs), to get it between my legs because we wore this traditional dress, and it is structured in that way, you don't need underwear, you know, it is this loose shalvar, women usually don't wear underwear and you don't need it actually. So, I had problems sticking in, ... I couldn't manage

things and I felt very clumsy and I think it gave me, a kind of inferiority complex, that how others can manage and I cannot.

B: I started out with using these ready-made pads that you could buy in stores when I got my period between spring and summer. In the mornings it might be cool and then by the time you go home for lunch, it would be hot as heck and then, you just feel like you are melting in your lower regions because you have all this plastic and polyester and these wads between your legs. I thought the whole thing was uncomfortable and irritating more than anything.

C: I started using tampons right away, but listen to this: ... I went to the bathroom and tried to get in a tampon. I was sitting there and trying like “1, 2, 3...”. I was reading the directions on the pack. I must have gone through about 7 tampons. At the end I was crying “please, please let this be right.”

As these women’s accounts clearly show, the problems related to management with and adjustment to menstrual devices was not related to a particular type of menstrual device. In all cases the difficulties experienced with getting used to these devices seemed to contribute to uncomfortable feelings about menarche and menstruation.

Meanings associated with menarche: Although a majority of the women in the study said that they were mainly occupied with the practical aspects of menstruating, meanings associated with menarche were mentioned in the group conversations as well. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Chrisler & Zittel, 1998; Kissling, 1996), the major themes that emerged here in relation to the meaning of the menarche were transition from childhood to adulthood and/or womanhood and becoming different from males. In general, menarche was not experienced as a positive transition when such meanings were attached, and fear of becoming a woman and of losing the innocence of childhood was commonly mentioned. One woman’s description (23) of her feelings typically reflects this fear:

I can never forget my experience. It was that day when I realized that I could not escape from the fact that I am a woman. All my life I tried to show others that I am very tough. I wore pants, trousers all the time. When I got my period, I used to hide it badly. I did everything to prove that it’s not an issue at all. I didn’t want anyone to know.

Ten women clearly mentioned that they were happy about starting to menstruate because they had now joined the world of adult women, entered a new woman’s space, a new era, and therefore felt grown-up.

Women’s personal feelings and meanings they associated with menarche did not necessarily derive from the

larger cultural meanings that are attributed to menarche. A woman from Central Asia, for example, mentioned that many women in her country wait for the arrival of their period because it means being capable of bearing children and becoming eligible to get married, which are very highly valued in that culture. Another woman from East Asia said that menstruation is experienced as a positive event in her country because of the importance placed on reproduction. In both of these cases, the cultural value of menarche did neither help the women to have a pleasant menarche experience nor made them think about menstruation as a positive event.

As shown by Lee (1994) for some women menarche means a changed relationship with boys and men. The women in this study who experienced their menarche as an event that made them different from males reported resentment and unwillingness to accept the reality that they had started menstruating. Feelings of alienation from the social environment and frustration were particularly true for girls who had hitherto spent considerable time with their fathers, male friends, and brothers. One woman remarked:

I remember I think what upset me most about it was the fact that my father and I were very close. All of a sudden this separated me from him because he was very rough with me also, I probably did all this rough stuff more than all my brothers did. We were on the floor. He was throwing things against me. All of a sudden that changes because now at certain times it was OK, at certain times I couldn’t just jump in with him. (African woman, 27)

Education about menstruation: Women referred to several sources of information about menarche and menstruation. Having older sisters and other female relatives in the house was mentioned as one of the ways of getting educated. As in previous studies, other sources of information about menstruation were school, peers, books and girls’ magazines (Beausang & Razor, 2000; Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Morse & Doan, 1987; Whisnant & Zegans, 1975). The sex education at school that was available in some countries did not seem to be incorporated easily into the girl’s ideas of menstruation, however, and this was also found by Beausang and Razor’s (2000) in personal stories of women who did not recall remembering much from educational sessions at school. The women in the present study recalled that information provided by teachers and pictures shown in class, seemed distant, abstract and alien. A European (36) woman described how she felt about the sex education she received at school: “he (the teacher) talked about it but all in sort of abstract terms, ... he could have been talking Chinese or about I don’t know, pottery or gold, and it would have made as much sense.” Another European woman (30) added:

Oh yes, I had similar feelings when my mom tried to prepare me. I remember once she said, well, come in, because I was playing outside and said, what do you want? She took a plain piece of paper, and drew a triangle and was talking about something moving from there to there and I just was waiting, when she would finish, so I could go out again. I simply couldn't understand what she was talking about.

One theme that emerged was that at menarche, the need for information about practical aspects of bleeding was greater than, for example, the need to learn its biological mechanism or possible meanings attached to it. It was mostly peer interaction through which girls tried to find out what was normal and what was abnormal regarding the length of the cycle, the amount and duration of bleeding, the color of the blood, and the physical changes that come with menstruation, such as pain.

The women's accounts in this study pinpoint the need of having practically oriented, concrete information to prepare the girl for a positive menarche experience. But as [Kissling \(1996\)](#) pointed out, information may not necessarily constitute preparation. To make the content of the educational material understandable by young women, attention should be paid to issues raised by women themselves, such as the importance of knowing about the every day practical aspects of menstruation, rather than simply following the medical/biological model approach that often shapes the health education models ([Britton, 1996](#)).

Age of menarche: Inconsistent with [Chrisler and Zittel's \(1998\)](#) finding that showed that only North American participants spontaneously mentioned timing, in this study, age of menarche was mentioned by women who had their first menstruation much earlier or much later than their peers, regardless of where they came from.

Starting to menstruate earlier than other girls could either be a source of shame or pride depending on whether girls perceived menstruation as a negative or positive event at the time. Girls who were waiting for their periods were quite happy when they finally started menstruating and were very proud of getting it earlier than others. In contexts where menstruation was not seen as a positive event, especially in schools where it was a topic to be made fun of, the early menstruating girls experienced this negatively and made sure that nobody knew about their menarche until other girls started menstruating. Women who started to menstruate later than others reported being worried, thinking that there could be something wrong with their body. It caused feelings of remaining childlike. Starting to menstruate in these cases was usually a source of happiness and relief.

Menarche and the broader culture

Several themes emerged when the women talked about how their menarche experiences related to the general cultural environment in which they experienced their first menstruation.

Secrecy: The theme of secrecy ran through women's stories about menstruation to varying extents. At the time of menarche, the majority of the women believed that menstrual blood and menstrual products had to be kept invisible. Leaking, or having blood visible in public was mentioned as the most embarrassing event that could occur to a girl replicating the findings of some earlier studies (e.g., [Lee, 1994](#); [Moore, 1995](#)). There was a whole list of precautions taken by girls to prevent blood from being seen by others such as preference of dark colored, tight, secure pants; some tied a jacket around the pants. At school if a girl had started leaking, women remembered showing solidarity by accompanying her to the bathroom by lending her pads to use or sweaters to tie around the waist.

The euphemisms used to address menstruation were also a way of avoiding open talk around it. A secret, shared language was created by girls to refer to menstruation and related issues. A North American (28) woman recalled the following:

We came up with this whole series of make up metaphors, I think a tampon was lipstick and a pad was a compact, so it would be like, can you loan me some lipstick and there was, I guess, it was for showing off about talking about that, but there was never really any open talk until we were about 15, and we started talking about, do you use tampons?

Especially in Eastern-European and Asian cultures, talking about menstruation with men was out of question, but in other cultures as well it was treated as a topic that should not be public. Another North American woman (23) told how menstruation was treated in her family, and in this case, especially by her grandmother:

No, it's more, just a sort of, agreement, a collective silence, you know, an agreement not to speak about it, address it, not to have things like tampons or whatever, publicly visible or anyone aware of it, like the prohibition is on acknowledging this thing, ... especially with my grandmother, we don't discuss down there, down there isn't, it's under the table and that I think is the prohibition was on discussing it in public and any discussion of it becomes this sort of, vulgar exhibition, somehow.

The secrecy related to menstrual products was also commonly mentioned. In the first years following their menarche, girls preferred to ask somebody else to buy

the menstrual products for them. In traditional countries going to the shop and asking the salesman or the male pharmacist for pads was perceived as inappropriate. This face-to-face interaction with a possible male acquaintance made it difficult for women to go on their own, as this would make their menstruation visible to an outsider. They preferred asking their brother, a child, or the servant of the house to go and get the pads for them.

In western parts of the world, the purchase of menstrual products was not mentioned as a difficult, embarrassing issue, mostly because of the anonymity produced by shopping in big supermarkets. Nevertheless, some women from the West mentioned that for them buying the menstrual products was still not the same as buying something else. A West European woman (29) explained her self-consciousness when buying pads or tampons: “Sometimes I really feel different, if I stand in front of the shelf with marmalade or with pads, tampons. When I put things at the cashier, I put it like openly because I am interested in how people react toward this kind of taboo thing.” Another West European woman (33) added: “... I would also run around with that, like that and also because I might be like an anti-demonstration, I do not want to have to hide it but I just deal with it like I would deal with a package of soap.” As these examples show, the taboo aspect related to menstrual products can have different expressions, and although issues related to menstruation seem to be more restrictive for women in traditional cultures, the way Western women experience menstruation in general is not totally value free, either.

Not only the purchase, but also the way menstrual products are kept hidden at home and in the school emerged as a theme. Some girls had special mini bags for tampons and pads that helped them carry the products in secrecy. Most women reported that they were careful about not leaving their pads or cloths in either the bathroom or their rooms. One woman from Eastern Europe said that in her country, manuals on menstruation historically focused on not leaving the self-made pads around.

As these accounts show, the secrecy surrounding menstruation in the broader cultural environment shaped girls’ personal experiences of dealing with their menstruation and treatment of menstrual equipment. In a way, the secrecy seemed to create an interpersonal space that belonged only to women and promoted solidarity among them.

Rules and regulations surrounding menstruation: For the women in this study, rules and regulations concerning menstruation were mainly transmitted to the menstruating girl by either the mother or an older female in the family. In cultures where religion plays an important role in determining the rules of daily life, the restrictions around menstruation were more diverse and strict. Menstruating girls were not allowed to enter holy

places such as mosques and temples or practice some religious activities such as praying or fasting. Women from some countries (e.g., Spain, Brazil, India, Italy) mentioned other restrictions that did not necessarily originate in religion, such as not touching certain kinds of food during menstruation, not swimming, taking a bath, or not crossing over other people who sleep on the floor.

The women in this study remembered that they were expected to learn and start following these restrictions as soon as they started menstruating. Women reported that they had a difficult time making sense of why their lives had to change just because they had started menstruating. They had difficulty learning the complex rules surrounding menstruation mainly because it required unlearning the usual habits that were established before: “It’s funny because it took me a very long time to get used to the new rules..., because I had all these habits, you know, if I want to do something, you know that it is wrong, I should not do it. It was tough you know.” (Middle Eastern woman, 24) The following example also shows how problematic it can be to adjust to the rules:

I needed to learn about the rules concerning fasting and menstruation. For example, it is really embarrassing if you don’t wake up after midnight -because people get up for eating after midnight- that means that you are having your period. So the modest girl and all women always wake up not to let others know about her menstruation and this was also what other women in my house expected me to do. (South Asian woman, 25)

As this woman’s account shows, the process of learning the rules of menstruation can be further complicated by a paradox: while women are asked to treat their menstruation as a secret, the way menstruating women are treated by culture and religion may result in this issue becoming public. As in the case above, in Islam, women are expected to wake up with everybody else to join the meal before the fasting time starts, in order to turn the event into a private one.

In traditional cultures where religious and cultural restrictions were dominant, some women reported confusion, resistance, anger, and feelings of discrimination as a result of being subject to these restrictions. The accounts of two South Asian women illustrate this very clearly:

A: That you are not supposed to go wash, you cannot go to the temples, you can’t perform any rituals, you are impure. Actually it was because of this reason that I became kind of an atheist, in certain days you are not allowed in, the other days you are supposed to do it more, and it balances out, and I never forget it. So I stopped going to temple and doing all this (35).

C: Forever? (South African woman, 28)

A: Yeah, partly because he made boys free and he's restrained our activities I physically really suffered from this, so I said, if there is this kind of injustice, then forget it, why should I pray? So, I don't do all this anyways, anymore.

B: Don't know but inside me there is this anger I think, that somewhere I would be restricted in movements and the more I got angry, the more I tried to be mobile, even if it was very painful. What I did was, I think I, was fighting against something, what could it be? (45).

A few women reported having done exactly the opposite of what they were told by their mothers or other women in their environment as a way of finding out about the correctness of the restrictions being imposed or as a way of rebellion: "When my mother told 'don't take showers', I did it, I just try to, you know, do exactly the opposite, just to reaffirm myself as an independent woman." (South American woman, 32)

These stories show that menarche is experienced in relation to the sociopolitical constructs of specific societies (Lander, 1988; Lee, 1994; Ussher, 1989). In some women's lives, menarche was the time when they renegotiated their relationship with the society, religion, and regulations around being a woman. As Martin (1987) suggested, while negative discourses around menarche shaped women's relationship with and perception of their body, the woman in the body may resist.

Celebrations and rituals: In about half of the world's cultures, menarche is celebrated with rituals and ceremonies (Paige & Paige, 1981; Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1982). Women in this study were asked to share the patterns of formal recognition of menarche in their cultures. Most women did not report any celebrations or rituals for girls who start to menstruate. Some women said that in some parts of their country there were rituals but they did not know about them. Women from Republic of Benin and Cameroon reported that with menarche, girls get towels, perfume, and undergarments as a kind of preparation. In Zambia, the girls also get new pajamas, dresses, and towels and are kept home until their first period is over; they are not supposed to do any work and are treated like queens. In South India, a big celebration is organized for the menstruating girl. A lot of people are invited to the feast and the girl is given jewelry.

The few women in this study who were subjected to positive rituals, albeit celebratory ones, when they started to menstruate remembered those days as more entertaining for others than for themselves. A woman from Zambia mentioned that she felt very embarrassed by the exaggerated attention she received from her female relatives and did not like the fact that her

menstruation had become public. As this woman's recollection suggests, how society officially views and treats menarche does not mean that the girl who is having her first menstruation will experience the event in the same positive way.

Not all the rituals mentioned were positive. Turkish participants mentioned that, in Turkey a girl would get a slap from her mother or any other woman who is present at the time the girl starts menstruating. The slap has been interpreted in different ways varying from a punishment for pride at menstruation, to a means of bringing blood and color back to the cheeks (Culpepper, 1991; Kissling, 1996; Milow, 1983). Women who told about the rituals and celebrations added that these are more prevalent in traditional or rural areas of their countries.

The above-mentioned examples point to the way in which the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment affects the personal; how menarche is viewed and treated in the larger context creates a deep sense of becoming a different person for women than before. Women in this study remembered their menarche as a source of isolation, of differential treatment, of having to learn new codes of behavior, and receiving new responsibilities in life that were strikingly different from those in their previous lives, such as taking care of menstrual pads in secrecy. To them, there seemed to be a disconnection between what happened to them physically and the net of social, political, and religious changes that came along with it. The women's accounts in this study represent the naïve, but sometimes very radical attempts of coming to terms with physical change and its consequences.

Similarities and differences between women from different backgrounds

For the most part, women's menarche stories summarized in this paper were more similar than different despite women's different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless important differences emerged in the following domains: existence of formal education on menstruation, the power of religion and traditional rules, regulations surrounding menstruation, and the presence of rituals or ceremonies for menarche. It was mainly Western-European, and North and South American women who mentioned having formal education about menstruation. The majority of women from other parts of the world mentioned that sexual matters were not part of their school curriculum, except when the school was a girls-only school. However, some of these women commented that most schools in their countries have now started to include health and sexual matters in their curriculum.

Cultural differences in the degree of rules and regulations imposed on menstruating women seem to

have affected how women have reacted to menarche and to the source of these rules and regulations. Women who came from countries in which traditional and religious rules regulated people's, especially women's, lives mentioned having had more difficulty in adjusting to menstruation and understanding the connection between menstruation and the regulations that accompanied it. The restrictions around menstruation led some women in these cultures to question their female identity, and how it was perceived and treated by the dominant culture. Women's stories showed that in some cases, this questioning led to a rejection of religion or to a reactionary attitude that resulted in their doing exactly the opposite of the doctrines that were transmitted to them.

Although the broader cultural and religious norms and values seemed to lead to differences in women's attitudes toward menarche and menstruation, the immediate home environment appeared to play an important role as well. Not every household seemed to have incorporated these norms and values to the same extent. How the mother handled her daughter's first menses and whether there were other women present in the household had an impact on how menarche was experienced. One South Asian woman (28) recalled: "I remember that my mother warned me against going to the temple while I was menstruating, but my grandmother got angry and said 'let the little girl go, who would know it anyway?' Culture seemed to provide the general framework associating menstruation with specific ideologies, but the effects of these ideologies on women's personal experience with menarche seemed to be filtered by women's immediate environment.

Conclusion

The present study represents an attempt to listen to women's menarche stories, to examine what women have experienced at a personal level, as well as to look at the ways in which the personal has interacted with the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment. At the personal level, menarche stories shared here reveal certain common and salient themes concerning the feelings experienced at the time of menarche, the importance of a mother's reactions to their daughter's first menstruation, the difficulties of understanding the meanings attached to menarche by others, the problems associated with managing menstrual products, making sense of formal education related to menstruation, and finally the age of menarche. Most of the findings that fall under these themes were in support of earlier work that examined women's menarche experiences.

In the women's menarche stories, it became clear that the personal interacted with the larger cultural, religious, and societal environment. This was especially so in places where people's lives, especially women's lives,

were regulated to an important degree by either religious or other cultural rules. Nevertheless, the family environment appeared to be a filter through which these regulations were experienced. In sum, both individual and cultural or religious factors affected women's reactions to menarche.

Limitations: Not having women from the same regional background in the same focus group may be seen as a drawback to the study. But although homogeneity is considered to be an important element in focus group research (Krueger, 1994), when it comes to cultural environment people come from, it may be difficult to find shared cultural characteristics even among members of a certain country. Cultures are made of different elements, such as religion, class, social norms and values, and even people from the same country may differ considerably in terms of specific cultural elements. In this study, heterogeneous groups were deliberately set up in order to elicit similarities and differences between cultures; and in fact, women in the focus groups responded to other women's accounts by giving examples from their own experiences and culture.

Asking women to give retrospective accounts of their menarche experiences may be seen as a drawback to the study. As Pillemer et al. (1987) stressed, menarche is so salient and distinctive that retrospective descriptions of the event can be easily elicited as shown by detailed and vivid memories of the event (e.g., Golub & Catalano, 1983; Moore, 1995).

The fact that participants had to share their stories in English rather than in their native languages may be seen as a further limitation to the study. All participants were highly fluent in English, since this was one of the main criteria of attendance at the summer school where this study was conducted. As Chrisler and Zittel (1998) reported, this does not cancel out the possibility that 'nuances may have been lost in the translation' (p. 311). Giving women the opportunity to talk in their native language would definitely capture more details in their menarche stories.

The participants in this study were women who were highly educated and who could leave their countries for three months to attend a summer school in Germany. It can be claimed, therefore, that these women represent a particular segment of their society. The study may have revealed different results when conducted with women having different socio-economic characteristics.

Suggestions for future research: Although the findings of this study suggest that many aspects of women's menarche experiences are universally salient, they also show that there are themes that are variable across cultures. Future studies should further examine the similarities and differences established in this study by designing more homogenous focus groups composed of women from similar backgrounds, not only from the same country, but matched in terms of socio-demo

graphic characteristics such as age, education, and socio-economic status. This would permit a different means comparing the menarche experiences of women.

This study points to the need to examine changes in women's menarche experiences in different parts of the world. It should be noted that women in this study went 15–40 years back in time to recall their menarche experiences. Future research should explore how those experiences have been changing with increasing technological advancement, exchange of information, and globalization. For example, the advertisement of menstrual devices on television, with increasing availability of satellites and diverse TV channels, has only recently become part of everyday life in some parts of the world; this can contribute to changes in formerly taboo subjects. Similarly, the change in school curriculum in nonwestern parts of the world to include sexual matters and menstruation may constitute an area where one can examine the impact of formal education on women's attitudes and experience, by comparing women who have been exposed to it to women who have not. As Thuren (1994) has suggested, age could be another important factor to be taken into account, especially in societies that undergo radical changes.

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