THE MISSING DISCOURSE OF MENSTRUATION

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by

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The mention of or referral to trademarked products in these pages does not constitute a challenge to trademarks or products named.
Menstruation is regarded, not only by psychologists and many doctors, but by some feminists, as a sickness, a blank spot, a non-event that women must endure and would be better without, an evil time. This simply is not necessarily so.

--Penelope Shuttle, 1985

The periodical movements which characterize and influence woman’s structure for more than half her terrestrial life, and which, in their ebb and flow, sway every fibre and thrill every nerve of her body a dozen times a year...are, or evidently are intended to be, fountains of power, not hinderances, to her. They are not infrequently spoken of by women themselves with half-smothered anathemas; often endured as a necessary evil and sign of inferiority; and commonly ignored...All this is a sad mistake.

--Edward H. Clarke, 1873

The two above quotations were penned over a hundred years apart, one by a male doctor, the other by a female writer. Yet their similarities are striking. Even in 1873, in an America where women did not have the right to vote and often did not continue in education for any other purpose than to be schoolteachers, nurses, or social workers, Clarke proposed equality for the sexes. Today we have not yet achieved it, but we are much closer. Still, the complaint that Clarke voiced long ago is now being voiced by people such as Shuttle. A natural function unique to women, which in fact is a prerequisite for bearing children, which might even be construed as the essence of femininity, is all but ignored.
Menstruation is a fact of life. Not only a fact of female life, though—it influences everyone. The physical and clinical details of the process do not need to be explained here. It is sufficient to say that menstruation occurs in virtually all females of childbearing age, which is usually defined as roughly between the ages of 13 and 50. It happens every month unless the woman is pregnant or sterile, or unless other factors intervene. If something happens to about half of the population for about half of their lives, why is it not talked about more? It is true that no doctor will say that menstruation is abnormal, and people are usually instructed that its normal function is a sign of a healthy body, ready to reproduce. But why does the aura of secrecy and evil still cling to it? Why is it not talked about except in groups of women, in whispers, or in the context of locker room jokes among grade-school boys? Why do advertisements for tampons and pads go cloaked in the vague language of “feminine hygiene products”?

Aim of the present study

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the discourse, or lack thereof, surrounding the subject of menstruation. There are two main facets to this discussion: public discourse and private discourse. By public discourse I mean the images and ideas we get from our culture, from the media, from advertising, which to some extent shape, and are concurrently shaped by, our conceptions of

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1It is well known that serious illness, rapid loss of weight, or extreme depression, among other things, can alter or halt a woman’s period. See Lein (1979), pp. 74-86, also Glass and Kase (1970) pp 27-28.
menstruation. A brief look at the public discourse of menstruation, as illustrated by advertising and the packaging of menstrual products, constitutes the first section of this paper. In the second part, I attempt a more extensive discussion of the private discourse on menstruation. To this end, I arranged a set of twenty-one interviews with both males and females at private liberal arts colleges. Their answers to questions about menstruation form the second main section of this study.

Much has been made of the 'menstrual taboo' which is said to exist cross-culturally. This menstrual taboo encompasses practices which we may associate with 'primitive' cultures, such as seclusion of menstruating women, but it also encompasses ideas which precede these practices, such as that menstruating women and the blood that they shed are magical, powerful, or simply unclean. In our culture the 'uncleanliness' of menstruating women may have been largely discounted, but correspondingly, so has their 'magic' or 'power.' A novel way to describe the discourse on menstruation, to the extent that it exists, is to say that it operates on assumptions. Advertising makes the assumption that the viewer knows the facts of menstruation and knows what the ad is talking about. School sex education programs make the assumption that either children already know the facts or that knowing the physical facts of menstruation is enough. The deepest assumption of all is that menstruation is a mere physical process about which we know everything there is to know. It is the primary goal of this paper, then, to examine the assumptions that our cultural understanding of menstruation rests upon, the language and the system of semiotics that frame these assumptions,
and the ways that this language and these assumptions can actually cover the truth. This paper is not intended to be a statistical analysis, nor does it propose a solution to the mystery and dis-ease associated with menstruation. It merely attempts to explore some ideas about this fact of life, ideas that are rarely encountered in sex education courses or traditional explanations of menstruation in our culture.

Part I: Public Discourse

The first part of this study was a survey of menstrual products at an Acme supermarket, combined with a brief look at ads for menstrual products in six months of the teen magazine YM. By 'menstrual products' I mean all products for the absorption of actual menstrual blood, including tampons and all forms of pads. I also included pain relievers specifically designed (or marketed) for the relief of menstrual symptoms, such as Midol and Premisyn PMS.

In the aisle marked 'feminine needs' there were four brands of tampons, seven brands of pads, and two of pantiliners. There were also three brands of pain relievers. There were actually more divisions than this, as will be seen. A full outline of companies and products can be found in the Appendices.

I read all the packages for each type of product, noting the language used to discuss menstruation. The most striking thing that all the packages had in common was that the word 'blood' was never mentioned, despite the fact that that substance is what the products are designed to deal with. For a quick comparison, I
checked several brands of band-aids, and 'blood' was not mentioned there either. Four brands of detergent (Ultra Purex, Surf, Cheer, and Just in Time) mentioned blood specifically as one of the types of stains that needs to be washed in cold water.

While it may seem surprising that menstrual products do not mention blood and detergents do, it is important to remember this fact: knowing that certain stains require special washing procedures actually affects the performance of the detergent. It is perhaps in the detergent company's best interest to mention this fact, to ensure correct use and thus increase the probability that consumers might buy their product again. From this point of view, it is not necessary for tampon or pad manufacturers to mention blood on their packaging, because presumably if someone buys a box of tampons, that person already knows what they are used for. The same principle works for bandages, and also might be said to apply to such products as diapers and 'adult undergarments,' because it is hardly necessary to mention urine on a box of diapers; everyone who buys diapers (and almost everyone who doesn't) already knows what diapers are for.

So rather than single out tampon and pad manufacturers as 'covering up' the facts of menstruation, I would chalk up the absence of mention of blood, specifically, to a combination of general guidelines of accepted good taste in advertising and packaging, that is, not mentioning bodily functions, and common sense in assuming that someone with interest in the product does not need to be told, in ordinary language at least, what it does.

The bulk of writing on menstrual product packaging is devoted to explaining why their product is better than the others, or
exactly what technology goes into making their product ‘the best.’ And here is where assumptions come into play—assumptions of both producers and consumers about the nature of menstrual blood, assumptions by the producers about the consumers’ fears regarding the messiness or smelliness of menstrual blood, and assumptions of the consumers that the producers know what they are talking about.

And underneath it all lies the original assumption that no one needs to talk about the process of menstruation and what it means, because everyone already knows. On the basis of this assumption, it makes sense that menstrual product packaging doesn’t discuss the facts of menstruation, only the specific ideas about it that are relevant to the product.

Boxes for menstrual pads often show a cross-section of their pad, or a picture of the whole object with various layers stripped away, to show the amazing absorptive properties of the materials used in its construction. Keywords in pad box language are comfort, dryness, protection, and discreetness. Carefully skirting around direct statement, New Freedom pads proclaim ‘Peach Protection Strip to prevent side accidents!’ Osco pads advertise “confident protection.” Sure & Natural helps you “feel more secure.” Stayfree “helps you feel cleaner and drier.” Pads absorb ‘flow,’ ‘wetness’ or ‘fluid,’ and occasionally ‘odor’ too.

The period of menstrual bleeding is called the ‘period’ once or twice, but is more often referred to as ‘flow,’ as in ‘heavy flow days,’ which has also been shortened to simply ‘heavy days.’

Pads usually have directions for how to use their product on the outside of the package, since no anatomy needs to be mentioned to explain this. This is a contrast to tampon boxes, which will
be further explored below. Indeed, the only anatomy that is mentioned on the pad boxes is the word ‘body,’ as in ‘Directs moisture away from body, into pad...’ (Osco) or ‘rapidly draws fluid inside the pad and away from your body.’

The interesting idea here is that women need not only to protect themselves against accidents, that is, from spilling of blood, but from the blood itself. Keeping menstrual blood from staining clothing is a common-sense goal. Does it make as much sense to want your ‘fluid rapidly drawn away from your body’? I think not. The unwritten idea behind this seems to be that menstrual blood is dirty, uncomfortable to touch, and disgusting. Therefore, as soon as it comes out of your body, you want it as far away from yourself as possible, ‘inside the pad’ instead of ‘against your skin.’ Manufacturers seem to be selling the idea that if we can forget the blood is there, we can forget we are having a period at all, and since periods are times of discomfort when we’re just not ourselves, we’d be better off without them.

There is also the idea that a woman doesn’t (or shouldn’t) want anyone else to know she is menstruating, and thus needs to be protected from bulges, odors, or other signs that might give away her unclean state. These are the messages behind the confident proclamations of comfort and protection.

In contrast to the packages of pads, tampon boxes, with one exception, do not have usage instructions. These are reserved for the package insert, carefully tucked away from the eyes of the discriminating consumer. The single exception is Kotex Security tampons, which actually feature a diagram on the side panel of the box showing how to insert a tampon.
There is a new regulation which makes it mandatory for tampon boxes to have a warning about TSS (Toxic Shock Syndrome, associated with tampon use) on the outside of the box. This is an important change, for this warning used to be relegated to the package insert as well, which many women probably threw away without reading. Furthermore, in the last four years, tampon manufacturers have been required to measure the absorption of their products against an absolute standard of volume. This may seem like common sense, but the fact is, since tampons were first put on the market in the 1930’s, advertisers and producers could claim almost anything about how much different tampons absorbed. Now, however, any tampon bearing the label “regular” absorbs 6 to 9 grams of fluid, any tampon labeled “super” absorbs 9 to 12 grams, and so on. In conjunction with this standard, the TSS warning advises tampon users to use the smallest absorbency necessary, because the risk for this disease is mainly associated with tampons of higher absorbency ratings.

This is an area where language use was (and still is, despite the regulations) very confusing for the average purchaser. This ruling is an advance for women’s health in general, but women need to be educated more about the nature of menstruation. For example, even if we know how many grams of fluid are absorbed by a certain tampon, how many of us know how much blood we lose during our own periods? How many of us even know an average figure for women? Not many.

Returning to the discussion of menstrual products, another difference between tampon boxes and pad boxes is the concern for

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2 See Rome and Wolhandler, "Can Tampon Safety Be Regulated?" pp. 261-273 in Dan and Lewis, 1992
comfort both in insertion and in wearing. Tampax says their product is ‘easy to use, even for beginners,’ Kotex is ‘more comfortable to insert,’ and Playtex’s Gentle Glide Applicator is ‘easier to insert, more comfortable to wear.’ Another aspect of comfort is tampon manufacturers’ strange insistence on the value of deodorant tampons. While cross-cultural studies have found that the majority of women claim that menstrual blood has a distinctive, though mild, odor, it is a scientific fact that nothing has a scent (discernible to a human nose, which picks up molecules from the air) until it is exposed to air. So the blood absorbed by a tampon, which is normally not in contact with the atmosphere until it is removed, will not have much odor, distinctive or otherwise, until it is in the trash can. Yet women must have ‘concerns about menstrual odor’ (Tampax deodorant tampons), for they keep the market for several brands of deodorant tampons alive. The odd factor about the advertising for these products is that they identify smelling ‘fresh’ with being feminine, when what is truly feminine is the bleeding itself.

I suspect that deodorant tampons are the invention of corporate interests rather than a response to a true female need or desire, using the same assumptions mentioned above in connection to menstrual pads. That is, manufacturers assume a fear of blood, or perhaps just distaste for it, and play on that by inventing deodorant tampons. Since women buy these products every month and depend upon them, they honestly believe the manufacturers have designed a product in their best interests, but in fact, there is an imaginary concern here, disguised by the authoritative tone of package inserts and promises of staying

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‘fresh’, as fresh as if there were no blood at all. This, of course, makes the assumption that not bleeding would be better than bleeding. Why do the manufacturers think we think this? Probably because for most of us it is true. Why do we think this? This question will be addressed later in Part II.

In other ways, tampon boxes feature similar language to that of the pad boxes. They refer to ‘menstrual flow’ or ‘light to heavy flow,’ they talk of protection and specifically protection against accidents, and they emphasize discreetness. The Tampax Compak box proclaims ‘a unique, compact applicator so it is more discreet for you to carry. You can tuck it into your pocket or conceal it in the palm of your hand.’ Why anyone would want to walk around concealing a tampon in the palm of their hand is not explained.

The advertisements in six consecutive months of YM build on these themes, of protection, security, comfort, etc. These ads are particularly interesting, since they are targeted at a young audience. Presumably the girls reading YM have not been menstruating very long, and so they need to be indoctrinated into the proper beliefs about monthly bleeding: that it’s painful, that it’s inconvenient, and that you don’t want anyone to know you have it. For example, an ad for Tampax tampons promises that ‘Tampax tampons will stay put, even when you don’t,’ accompanied by a picture of two girls in leotards and tights. For the beginning tampon user, as presumably many of YM’s readership are, another Tampax ad assures them, ‘Trust... It’s knowing Tampax tampons aren’t hard to use. Promise.’ At the bottom of the page is the line ‘no one will ever know you’ve got your you-know-what.’ Ads
for pads follow the same theme, as in an ad for Always Ultra Plus Slender pads which says, 'Cleaner. Drier. Better. Fits even the teeniest bikini panties.' Kotex Ultra Thin Longs (pad names seem to run very long in attempting to summarize their advertising in their titles) offers 'Maxi protection that just won't show.'

A surface look at these ads, as well as the packaging discussed above, makes it seem as if the manufacturers are quite liberated, because they proclaim that women don’t have to be inconvenienced anymore by their periods, that they don’t have to be in pain, and that it can be taken in the stride of the active lifestyle. However, it becomes obvious upon a second glance that the reason the manufacturers put forth for all these modern developments is not that women are taking charge of their lives, or even that they don’t have to listen to the old ideas of the menstrual taboo. Rather, the pain, inconvenience, and varying symptoms of menstruation and PMS are implacable facts of nature, but they can be overcome with the use of our product. This is even more obvious in the marketing and packaging for the various pain relievers, discussed below.

It is rather shocking that young girls, who have recently experienced menarche or are about to experience it, are exposed to such negative views of menstruation. The coming of the blood is, according to these ads, not a mark of maturity or womanhood, but something to hide, something that might hinder you from doing gymnastics if you couldn’t rely on tampons and Ibuprofen.

The three brands of pain reliever, Midol, Pamprin, and Premisyn PMS, have interesting copy on their packages as well. Since these products are not dealing directly with menstrual
blood, but rather with the side effects of menstruation that some women experience, they must spell out more specifically what they are for. The bottles feature lists of the symptoms they claim to relieve, including such 'unsavory' ones as bloating, water weight gain, irritability, tension, head and backaches, and of course cramps. Midol has several 'formulas' including a 'Teen Multi-Symptom Formula' which contains a 'non-drowsy formula for active teens,' a PMS formula, and an all-around Menstrual Formula. Premisyn PMS says it is designed specifically for PMS symptoms, 'for the period before your period,' but it lists the same symptoms and contains the same ingredients. Pamprin has 'menstrual relief caplets,' and this idea is spelled out explicitly: the label bears the motto 'period relief, not just pain relief.' This furthers the idea that it is the natural cycle itself which equals suffering and pain, when instead, in many cases, unpleasant side effects may well be brought about and exacerbated by other types of stress. More will be said about these stresses below.

Because the makers of these pain relievers do not want to single out certain people as sufferers and thus alienate them, they instead generalize on their labels, making it seem as if every woman experiences the symptoms and therefore needs some type of 'relief formula.' The one advertisement for pain reliever I found in YM was for Midol's Teen Formula, and it showed a young woman with a handbag, obviously the kind of girl with an active lifestyle, with the caption "How to make your period less of a pain." Of course it is to the advertiser's advantage to equate period with pain, because then presumably many people with periods
will buy their product. Yet this assumption, that menstruation equals discomfort, can be damaging. Many women do not in fact experience much menstrual discomfort. Such women might actually wonder if they are normal, since what a 'normal' period is includes pain. Women who do experience discomfort may also believe their experience is normal, and remain unaware of other factors in their lives which may be causing the discomfort and tension, and of techniques to combat the pain and other symptoms.

Part II: Private Discourse

A study done on twenty-one college students on the subject of menstruation is the second part of this paper. Eleven of the subjects were female, ten were males, all white. All were between the ages of 19 and 22. There were two bisexual females, one gay male, and the rest were heterosexual. There was a variety of educational background among these students. The majority had attended mostly public schools, with somewhere around one-quarter having attended private or parochial schools for all or part of their precollegiate education. In terms of geographic distribution, students were from all over the United States. To avoid bias of the sample population on the basis of the sex of the interviewer, approximately half of the interviews were conducted by me and half were conducted by a male interviewer. The complete protocol for the interview, as well as charts of responses, appears in the Appendices.

The first set of questions requested background information dealing with level of sex education. If the subject indicated
that they had had any type of sex education class in school, they were asked about what kinds of things they had learned. Fifteen topics were presented, to which the respondent answered yes, that topic had been covered, or no, it had not. The topics were: STD's, Reproduction, Pregnancy, Ejaculation, Menstruation, Abstinence, Masturbation, Orgasms, Puberty, Menstrual Cramps, Birth Control, Safe Sex, Feminine Hygiene, Homosexuality, and Virginity.

Of course, asking subjects about a set list of topics does not give an accurate picture of what they learned in a class, since there could be many more topics that were covered that are not mentioned here. Also, this approach relies on the subject accurately remembering the content of a class that happened in some cases as long as eight to ten years ago. Some of the results may actually be the results of selective memory. Nevertheless, all the women and all but one of the men recalled learning about the topic of menstruation. Only half the women and only one man reported learning about menstrual cramps. Slightly over half the women and none of the men remembered learning about 'feminine hygiene' (which was meant to indicate the products used to absorb menstrual blood, and was explained as such). So it would seem that while both men and women have at some point learned the facts of the menstrual cycle, only a very few men, and only about half the women, learned in class about some of the effects and ways to deal with them. It would seem that either the men don't remember learning about this topic in school because it wasn't relevant to them, or that some sex education classes were segregated by sex, with different topics being covered by each group. Regardless of
what they learned from school, most girls and some boys first learned about menstruation from their mothers or siblings, and the first explanation of menstruation that they remember is the subject of an open-ended question, which will be discussed below.

In the next question, the list of topics was given again, but this time the subjects were asked to indicate if they had ever heard jokes, slang terms, or euphemisms for the topics. Unsurprisingly, all the women and all but one of the men had heard euphemisms for menstruation. Nearly all the women and men had heard jokes about feminine hygiene, and all the men but only half of the women had heard terms for cramps.

The open-ended questions concerned four main topics: The first time the subject learned about menstruation; the first contact the subject had with menstruation (for women, this was defined as the first time they actually had their period. For men, it was defined as the first contact, if any, they had had with menstrual blood—in any context); whether and how menstruation was discussed by the subject and their family or friends; and finally, how, if at all, their attitudes to menstruation had changed since they had learned about it.

The first time that subjects learned about menstruation was universally pre-pubertal. No girl had the unfortunate experience of having her period and not knowing why she was bleeding. In fact, the women remembered looking forward to their first menstruation and being glad or proud when it happened. They were usually told about menstruation by their mothers at an early age and didn’t think much about it at the time, but later it started to make sense. There was one woman who experienced a disturbing
kind of explanation: her grandmother told her that she would bleed every month, and that the blood was what was left of her dead child. Unless the child was 'fed by a man', it would die and she would bleed. This explanation may seem to make sense logically, as a way to explain where babies come from and menstruation in one fell swoop, but this woman reported that she was very sad about the dead child until she learned the truth from a school sex education class.

Boys usually learned about menstruation in school or from their parents, and seemed more confused by the idea than girls. The women had gained familiarity with the process by virtue of the fact that they experienced it regularly, but many of the men said that they had been unclear about what it was all about for quite some time. All were now clear about at least the physical aspects of the process.

This brings us to the second area of inquiry: contact with menstruation. As I mentioned, all of the women interviewed knew what to do when their period started, whether it was tell their mother, get a pad from the bathroom, or call their best friend. They described themselves as being 'excited,' 'proud,' or 'a little nervous.' One woman recalled, with some laughter and mild embarrassment, that when she was eight she had excitedly called her mother into the bathroom to tell her she had gotten her first period. It turned out that the redness she had observed when urinating was from the beets the family had eaten the previous night!

Only three of the men interviewed had had any contact with menstrual blood. Two of these said the contact occurred in the
context of sexual intercourse, and one said it was in the context of emptying garbage cans. None of them were particularly 'grossed out' or afraid of the blood. The two who had had contact during sex said their contacts were with women with whom they were involved in long-term monogamous relationships, and therefore women with whom they were quite comfortable in many ways. The men who had not had contact did not indicate that they had avoided contact, rather, that they simply had not had the experience.

In the area of conversation on the subject of menstruation, everyone had talked about it, usually with friends, less often with family. Women reported being able to talk about it with their mothers, and sometimes fathers too, more than men. Women also discussed it with female friends, and much later, usually in late high school and college, they also discussed it with male friends. Among men, the subject was usually not discussed with other male friends, but was discussed with female friends. On these occasions, it was the females who brought up the subject.

Finally, the subjects were asked if their feelings, perceptions, or attitudes about menstruation had changed in any way since learning about it, and if so, how. Most men reported little or no change in perceptions. They said they had grown more comfortable with talking about it with women, or that they were more aware of it as a factor in a woman’s life, but they didn’t feel fundamentally different about it. Women’s perceptions had mostly changed from strongly positive to mildly negative or neutral. They said that although the onset of menstruation was exciting, it had become much more mundane since they had had to deal with it every month for eight or nine years. Most women said
it was simply a part of their life, that they were used to putting up with it, and that they occasionally complained about it with other women friends. Consider these women's responses to the question about how they felt at menarche:

"I think I was kind of proud of myself... it was kind of like a test or something." (F8)

"I called up my friend who had just had her first a few months before... it was kind of like a bonding thing, you know, like "Hey, I just had mine too!" (F10)

"Oh, my mom gave me the 'entry into womanhood' speech and like it was supposed to happen and everything, but I still felt like it was important." (F2)

Now compare the reactions above to the responses to the question about how they felt about it now:

"I'm getting kind of sick of it. It's really just a part of my life, and most women just kind of accept it for what it is, so I think my attitude is normal." (F8)

"I've gotten more used to it, but I'm kind of annoyed by it." (F10)

"You know, it's just one of things like, you know, it sucks but you have to deal with it." (F3)

The interesting thing about the women's responses, again, is the assumptions that they rest upon. They figured that they had already learned about menstruation, and after all, they experienced it every month, so there must not be anything else to learn about it. When they first began menstruating, their pride was based on the idea that menstruation marked the beginning of womanhood. Yet few of them think much about this idea now. They associate menstrual bleeding and all that comes with it with the negative side of being female, with the curse. In the absence of
positive portrayals of menstruation, these women have slowly changed their initially positive reactions to negative ones, or merely neutral ones. Why do we not feel excited each time we have our periods, the way we did when we had our first ones? Why do we not think of it as a continuing badge of womanhood, of the uniqueness of the female? Why do we think every month of what an inconvenience periods are, instead of what a gift they are?

Most of these women have experienced discomfort in one way or another, usually heavy bleeding or severe cramps, but none reported feeling spurts of creative energy or increased sexual drive, either immediately before, during, or immediately after their period. Most reported having experienced mood swings, irritability, or mild depression, but none reported positive mood swings, feelings of calm or feelings of power. "If you look for the stereotype of the menstruating woman, you will find her" (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1986). Yet studies show that these latter positive symptoms are experienced nearly as often as the painful inconveniencing PMS-type symptoms.

The ideas of pain and inconvenience are the most commonly understood ideas about menstruation in its actual effect on people, and so when people are asked about how they feel about menstruating, they say they are in pain and inconvenienced. Of course, many women do experience severe pain and other disturbances both physical and mental. But few people are in tune enough with their bodies and environments to notice the other, perhaps positive, effects which are not 'normally' associated with menstruation. Fewer still are aware that it may be the stressful environment in which the body finds itself that may provoke it to

*See "The Menstrual Epidemic" in Shuttle and Redgrove, 1986, for more information on this.
react by complaining, in the form of cramps, increased sensitivity, and other aches and pains. It has been shown, to cite one more example from Shuttle and Redgrove that is corroborated in Lauerson (1983), that women may benefit from increased hours of sleep during this time, and this need for sleep which is denied amounts to increased sensitivity to stress, feelings of lethargy, and other symptoms.

The 'normal,' accepted ideas about menstruation are part folklore and part scientific. It is important to realize that the 'scientific' facts and attitudes about menstruation have largely been formalized and disseminated by men. This is not to say that these ideas are wrong, merely that many women would benefit from examinations of menstruation as a physical, social, and emotional phenomenon from the perspective of other women.

For example, Western women did not enter the western work force in large numbers until the postwar era. The division of working time into seven-day weeks with a one-day sabbath is as old as the Bible, with Saturday added to the weekend more recently. God needed six days to create the world, and on the seventh day He rested. So we rest every seventh day. This may work fine for men, but does it work as well for women? Many findings say no. The male-centered workplace, where everyone is expected to come to work at the same time each day, be equally productive every day, and recuperate on Saturday and Sunday, does not follow a female rhythm. The workplace has a different cycle from that of women, a cycle that is assumed to be normal and acceptable to all workers. Women have a cyclic flow of energy as well as blood, a flow which clashes with the established cycles of the workplace.
Women have long been advised to rest on the days of their menses. In preindustrial societies, women often did not perform their normal household work, such as cooking or tending crops, on these days. Sometimes this cessation of normal activities was voluntary and encouraged by the community; sometimes it was involuntary and enforced by seclusion. Our modern conception of rest for menstruating women is different. Women should rest and not attempt physically strenuous tasks because they are less coordinated during menstruation, they are more irritable, and they are generally weaker. Here is the primary assumption: that menstruating women are weak.

Why do we assume that because our female bodies have a rhythm that is different from that of men (if men have any, which is a subject for continuing discussion), they are weak? Male aperiodicity in the workplace, the classroom, and other arenas simply does not take into account the existence of cyclicity in women. Instead of forcing our bodies to conform to this extrinsic structure, women should listen to their bodies. We should be aware that we have different needs than those of men. Primarily, we should be aware that these needs do not make us weak.

For example, some women report increased frustration with daily tasks around the premenstrual or menstrual time. They may not feel like cooking, cleaning, or preparing the budget. They may find it harder to concentrate at work or school. In addition, the physical symptoms such as cramps and water retention make it difficult to focus on external business. This common scenario is widely perceived as weakness on the part of women. We 'just can't function up to normal standards' on those days. We need to push
ourselves extra hard. Why do we do this? Some women, on the contrary, report that if they have different expectations of themselves during menstruation, (note: not less, but different) then they have spurts of creativity, insight, and surprising productivity. These differing expectations can range from ‘listening to your body’ if it needs a nap or a certain food, to actually shutting out the world for a few days, in a personal retreat of menstrual discovery. If women were more aware of their bodies’ changing needs, we could use our cyclicity to our advantage. Not scheduling an important presentation, a conference, or a stressful project during our period is not an avoidance of a weak time, but simply a recognition of the fact that our energies would be most efficiently applied elsewhere during that time. Taking extra hours of sleep is not giving in to laziness, it is tuning in to our energy needs at different times in our cycles.

While the language we use to describe menstruation is widely known to be full of euphemisms, slang, and derogatory terms, it is the silence which is most powerful. If a woman feels the need for more rest, and leaves the office early (or perhaps doesn’t come in at all), she says she has a headache or other minor complaint. This avoids stereotyping her as either a weak menstruating woman or a PMS-suffering bitch. It is simply not acceptable to say “it’s my moon time” or even “I’m having my period”--such phrases are excuses for weakness, not accepted as valid reasons for changing expectations. Girls in school who have painful cramps rarely volunteer this information to request a visit to the nurse; instead they gulp down Midol, Ibuprofen, or Anaprox, dulling the
pain but sometimes also causing drowsiness and fatigue.

The subject of pain brings us to another major assumption: pain equals weakness. And since period equals pain, period again equals weakness. What many women may not be aware of is that if they take the extra rest they need, or do not expect aperiodic performance from themselves, they may have less pain. Pain is a way for our bodies to force us to listen to them. If a woman only relaxes the pressure at work or school when she has severe cramps, the body may use this pain to demand a rest.

It is a similar situation with emotional disturbances associated with menstruation and PMS. Some women report using this stereotype, of the emotionally uncontrollable menstruating woman, as a cover for their emotional outbursts during this time. Ironically, premenstrual and menstrual days are becoming the accepted times for emotional reactions in women, because they are supposedly so irrational and emotionally unstable at this time that they cannot 'keep a lid on it.' Coincident with this is the fact that these same emotional responses are written off because they appear merely to be the products of hormone fluctuation, instead of true emotions that are being vented.

These assumptions of weakness are harmful to women who want to listen to their bodies and make the most efficient use of their energy and time. They keep women from seeing that they may need rest, may function differently, or may feel differently about normal tasks. Until we recognize that these needs are not signs of weakness, until we are not afraid to give menstruation as a reason for staying home from the office or sleeping an hour late, and until these reasons are accepted at work, school, and
everywhere else, we will still be under the curse.

The assumptions that underlie many of our common perceptions of menstruation may turn them into misperceptions. They are borne out in the language of advertisers and product manufacturers, reinforced, probably unconsciously, when we learn about menstruation in school and from friends, and unquestioned by the majority of people. If more people learned to question them, and see the realities of menstruation in their own lives, far fewer people might suffer as much as they do from period pain. If women were encouraged to listen to their bodies instead of trying to pretend they are aperiodic like men, with tampons that absorb the blood and pills that dull the pain, they might realize that being cyclic has its own advantages. There are times when women seem to be tuned in to their inner creative sides, and other times when their energies are focused on others. If women worked with these rhythms, whether they are teachers, nurses, nuclear physicists, or lawyers, they might find themselves accomplishing more, or simply feeling better about what they do accomplish, than if they try to mold their cyclic nature to a man’s noncyclic schedule. Monthly bleeding is, after all, a naturally occurring process that continues for the benefit of all.
APPENDIX I: COMPANIES THAT MANUFACTURE MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS

Tampons: Tampax
- Tampax deodorant
- Tampax Compak
- Kotex Security
- Playtex
- Playtex Ultimates
- O.B.

Pads/Pantiliners: Stayfree--Full line from maxi to pantiliners
- New Freedom--Full line
- Osco Maxi Pads--Full line
- Kotex--Full line, pantiliners under the name Lightdays
- Sure & Natural--Full line
- When Ever--Full line
- Always--Full line
- Carefree--pantiliners

Pain Relievers (with ingredients):

Midol
- IB: Ibuprofen 200mg
- PM: Acetaminophen 500mg, Diphenhydramine 25mg
- Teen Multi-Symptom Formula: Acetaminophen 500mg, Pamabrom 25mg
- PMS: Acetaminophen 500mg, Pamabrom 25mg, Pyrilamine Maleate 15mg
- Menstrual Formula: Acetaminophen 500mg, Caffeine 60mg, Pyrilamine Maleate 15mg

Pamprin
- Menstrual Relief Caplets: Acetaminophen 500mg, Pamabrom 25mg, Pyrilamine Maleate 15mg
- Maximum Cramp Relief Formula: Acetaminophen 500mg, Pamabrom 25mg, Pyrilamine Maleate 15mg

Premisyn
- PMS: Acetaminophen 500mg, Pamabrom 25mg, Pyrilamine Maleate 15mg
APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

I'm going to ask you some questions about things you may have learned about or experienced during adolescence. I'm not going to do a case study on you and I'm not trying to figure out if you're abnormal. But if any question makes you uncomfortable, of course you don't have to answer it. I want to stress that your name will not be connected to anything you say. You will be known only as "subject__". The only reason I'm recording you is to guarantee that I can transcribe you accurately. OK?

I'm going to ask you a few background questions before I turn the tape recorder on.

Do you have any siblings? What are their ages and sexes? Did you ever have sex education in school? If so, when (i.e. what grade level were you or how old were you)? Was it a public or private school?

Where in the country did you live at the time of your first sex ed class?

Had anyone else (parents, siblings, friends) taught you the things that you learned in sex ed class before? Of what you learned in class, would you say that you already knew none, a little, some, most, or all?

Now, I want you to think back to your first sex ed class. I'm going to read you a list of topics, and I want to know if you learned about any of them in sex education. By "learned about" I mean did you learn the word and what it meant, and possibly discuss it. All I need is a yes or no answer. Try to focus on what you knew at the time, and don't relate it to what you know now. (Go through list)

Now I want to read you the list again and I want you to tell me, in just a simple yes or no, if you have heard jokes about this topic, or perhaps slang terms or euphemisms for it. You can tell me specific things you have heard, but you don't have to. (Go through list again)

Now I'm going to turn the tape recorder on and ask you some more open-ended questions that I'd like you to answer.

When did you first learn about menstruation and what was your reaction?
(women only) What was your first experience with menstruation like?
(men only) Have you ever had contact with menstrual blood? In what context?

Did you ever talk about menstruation with siblings, parents, or friends? How was it discussed? (what terms, what reason, what context, etc)

As an adolescent, did you consider yourself well-informed
about sexual issues in general?

How have your feelings, attitudes, and reactions to menstruation changed? What's your perspective now?
APPENDIX III: CHARTS OF RESPONSES

**TABLE 1:** Topics learned about in first sex education class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Females (out of 10)</th>
<th>Males (out of 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. STD’s or Venereal Disease</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reproduction</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Pregnancy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ejaculation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Menstruation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Abstinence</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Masturbation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Orgasms</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Puberty/Dev. of 2° Sex Char.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Menstrual Cramps</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Birth Control</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Safe Sex</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Feminine Hygiene</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Homosexuality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Virginity</td>
<td>9</td>
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**TABLE 2:** Topics about which subjects had heard jokes, euphemisms, slang

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