

Experience of Menarche Among Jordanian Adolescent Girls: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis



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ABSTRACT

Study Objective: Menarche is a significant physical and emotional experience for adolescent girls, especially in certain cultures, where it is viewed as a rite of passage, affecting the meaning of lived experiences. The purpose of the study was to explore the menarche experience among Jordanian adolescent girls when they reach menarche.

Design: Interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Setting: Az-Zarqa City, Jordan.

Participants, Interventions, and Main Outcome Measures: A homogenous sample of 7 Jordanian girls, ages 12-14 years, who had their first menstruation within the past 6 months. Participants were asked to narrate their experiences through journal writing; their reports to be used for interpretive phenomenological analyses by 2 independent researchers, to ensure the findings' trustworthiness.

Results: Three major themes emerged as: (1) menstruation as a forbidden topic; (2) keeping the "topic" to oneself; and (3) no more secrets. Each theme was characterized according to distinct sets of emotions and knowledge-seeking patterns because Jordanian culture and Islamic teachings had greatly influenced the girls' experience of menarche. Menarche was considered a social taboo; not to be openly discussed. At the first signs of menarche, participants were shocked, scared, confused, and anxious. They had limited information and support from their family or school system. Therefore, they relied on self-perceptions about menarche, and viewed the experience of menstruation with profound negative emotions. Participants hesitated to share their experiences with their mothers and close friends. They felt alone and experienced their emotional turmoil in isolation and without support.

Conclusion: Jordanian adolescent girls need formal health education to understand and manage the reproductive changes that occur in their bodies.

Key Words: Menarche, Menses, Menstruation, Jordan, Interpretive phenomenological analysis

Introduction

Menstruation is a natural physiological occurrence and a normal part of female lives but menarche, unlike other changes, is a significant event for adolescent girls.¹ Menarche or the first menstruation is a main developmental change in puberty and is viewed as the rite of passage to womanhood in numerous cultures.^{2,3} Puberty commonly occurs over a 2-year period, but menarche, as the last part of a female's physical developmental phase, starts unexpectedly and often results in emotional upheaval that many girls remember for a long time.^{1,3}

The psychological effect of menarche can last for years and is frequently associated with girls' attitudes toward menstruation, health behavior, and the female body image.⁴ Menarche is also a significant event, because it happens at a critical time of emotional development, in which adolescent girls struggle with self-image, identity, peer pressure, mood

changes, family conflicts, and even depression. According to the National Co-morbidity Survey-Adolescent Supplement, nearly 11% of adolescents develop some form of depressive disorder by the age of 18 years, with depression twice as common among girls than among boys.⁵ Depression, anxiety, and inability to concentrate are common psychological symptoms reported by adolescent girls during menstruation.⁶

Culture and social norms in any society influence the way adolescent girls experience menarche, and also serve to shape their personal perception of that experience.^{1,3} Cultural traditions determine positive or negative socio-cultural perceptions of menarche. For example, in the nations of Benin, Cameroon, and Zambia, menarche is considered a joyful event, where girls receive new pajamas and towels to prepare for menstruation.³ In Zambia and Sri Lanka, women go into seclusion during menstruation for respite and girls at menarche receive gifts of jewelry and new dresses.^{3,7} Likewise in many states in Southern India, menarche is celebrated by a big feast and girls receive jewelry.³

In contrast, in other societies menarche and menstruation are perceived as a taboo subject and parents, relatives,

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and friends prohibit open discussions about menses.^{1,7,8} Negative emotions associated with menarche are reported as feelings of being ashamed, scared, fearful, annoyed, embarrassed, surprised, shocked, worried, and confused.^{3,7,9–12} Negative feelings toward menarche could be influenced by the girls' inadequate preparation for menstruation, perceived loss of childhood, general low self-esteem, and lack of support and knowledge.^{3,9,10,12}

In some cultures, menstruation comes with certain social restrictions.³ Upon menarche, girls are expected to behave as an adult women, be aware of their social contacts and whereabouts, and have certain etiquette when sitting, dressing, and interacting with men.^{1,13} Other postmenarche restrictions are related to not eating specific foods, not drinking cold water, proscription of swimming, and bathing, being physically active or stepping over someone lying down on the floor during their periods.^{2,3,13} In rural Turkey, when a girl reaches menarche, an elderly woman in the family would slap her to blush and to be reminded of her chastity and modesty.^{3,14} In some religions, such as Islam, a menstruating woman is restricted from visiting the holy shrines (mosques) and from fasting, from attending daily prayers, or touching the holy book.^{3,13}

It is arguable that positive perceptions of menarche and menstruation by a community contributes to a healthy development from childhood into womanhood.^{10,15} An accurate perception of menstruation as a natural process helps relate menstruation to femininity¹² and childbearing potential,⁷ and can, in the right circumstances, form a supportive daughter-mother relationship.¹⁰ Above all, in many cultures, a girl with previous knowledge and preparation for menarche is considered essential for having a positive life experience.^{1,3,9,12,16}

Jordan is a small country in the Middle East with a young population of approximately 7 million; mostly Muslim. Thirty-seven percent, or more than one-third, of the total population is younger than 15 years of age and near puberty.¹⁷ The age of menarche among Jordanian girls ranges between 9 and 18 years with a mean average of 13.5 years.^{6,18} Jordanian culture is deeply influenced by Islamic teachings, which consider menarche a sign of female maturity. The girl is now viewed as accountable for her own actions and eligible for obligatory religious practices such as daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan. To date, no study has described the attitudes and lived experience of Jordanian girls at menarche. Here we focus on exploring the experience of the onset of menarche among a small sample of 7 Jordanian adolescent girls.

Materials and Methods

Design

Researchers found that interpretive phenomenological analysis was the most appropriate design to explore the lived experiences of Jordanian adolescent girls at menarche; a decision made on the basis of the fact that only very limited information was available to expand on such a phenomenon.^{19,20}

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Using a small sample is encouraged for an interpretive phenomenological analysis design, to ensure homogeneity and a rich description of individuals' lived experiences.²⁰ In fact, when suitable participants are scarce, a snowballing approach can be used to identify potential participants. Researchers in this study applied a snowballing technique to ensure sample homogeneity and found that the most adolescent girls were hesitant or refused to participate when approached by the researchers. Those who agreed were asked to introduce other girls to join the study as part of the sample recruitment process. Consequently, a small total of 7 Jordanian adolescent girls, at menarche, volunteered to participate in this study.

Study participants resided within a 5-km radius of AzZarqa, the second largest city in Jordan at the northern part of Jordan's capital, Amman. The inclusion criteria for sample selection consisted of: (1) being an adolescent female; (2) between the ages of 11 and 14 years of age; (3) at menarche within the past 6 months; and (4) cognitively and physically fit to understand and respond to questions about the menarche experience.

Ethical Considerations

The ethics and scientific committee at Jerash University in Jordan approved the informed consent; voluntary participation was clearly specified on the consent form, which was signed by adolescent girls and their parents. In addition to the written consent form, an information sheet for the participants was prepared that detailed the study's objectives and emphasized the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants' anonymity and privacy were established by assigning numbers to each name and data confidentiality was maintained in a password-secured file only accessible to the researchers.

Data Collection Procedure

Researchers recognized that adolescent girls at menarche were vulnerable, hesitant, and extremely uncomfortable to discuss sensitive issues related to menarche with a male or female researcher. Therefore, instead of face-to-face interviews, the narrative or journal writing model was chosen as the optimal way to obtain personal details of the girls' lived experiences. Participants kept a daily journal for 1 week between March and December of 2014 and narrated their feelings, perceptions, and thoughts on having their first menstruation. The primary investigator collected the journal notebooks containing answers to general questions such as, "Would you please explain in details how was the day you had your first menstrual period," and, "What was your reaction when you had your first menstruation," or, "How did your parents, family members, peers, and schoolmates react?" Narrating lived experiences through journaling is considered to be one of the most suitable ways of exploring culturally sensitive issues²¹ for reluctant participants.

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