



Womanhood, reproduction, and pollution: Greek Cypriot women's accounts of menstruation

Andri Christoforou

European University Cyprus, Cyprus

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ABSTRACT

Through in-depth interviews with 20 Greek Cypriot women between the ages of 23 and 73 living in Cyprus, I explore and examine the multiple and diverse meanings Greek Cypriot women of different generations attribute to the embodied experience of menstruation. Analyzing womanhood and reproduction as the most common meanings attributed to menstruation, as well as the experiencing of the menstruating body as a dirty, polluting, and dangerous body, I explore the significant role that religious ideology play in women's constructions of their bodies and discuss the cultural understandings and the implications of 'being a woman' and 'having a woman's body' in the contemporary Cypriot society. The women's views of menstruation, which remain largely unchanged across generations, are illustrative of the strong cultural association between women and impurity, as well as of the 'compulsory' nature of heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood. I argue that researching menstruation, and especially how women themselves experience, interpret, and negotiate their experiences, can provide significant insight into the multiple and diverse socio-cultural parameters that shape embodiment, as well as into what it means to be a woman in a particular context at a particular time.

Introduction

Menstruation has attracted the attention of several feminist scholars over the years (Bobel, 2010). Research across different disciplines (i.e. anthropology, psychology, sociology, and cultural studies) and research paradigms has resulted in a significant body of literature on menstruation, providing insight into the social construction of menstruation, as well as the lived experience of menstruation in different geographical, socio-cultural, and historical contexts. For example, studies of scientific and medical accounts show that menstruation has been predominantly portrayed as a pathological condition (Laws, 1990; Martin, 2001; Smith-Rosenberg, 1973; Strange, 2001), while studies examining the discourses of menstruation in popular culture show that menstruation is constructed as an illness or as a hygienic crisis to be managed (e.g. Kissling, 2006). Such studies provide valuable insight into the available cultural resources that women might draw upon to make sense of their experiences.

On the other hand, studies examining the everyday lived experience of menstruation contribute to our understanding of how socio-cultural parameters shape embodiment. For instance, the association of menstruation with pollution has been observed across several different cultural contexts, manifesting in culture-specific restrictions for the menstruating women, ranging from cooking and touching food, to washing themselves and engaging in sexual contact, to working and

participating in religious practices (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988; Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1976/1988; Dunnivant & Roberts, 2013; Hawkey, Ussher, Perz, & Metusela, 2017; Lepowsky, 1990). Research conducted with women and girls in western societies such as the United States (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Ginsburg, 1996; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Kissling, 1996; Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996; Martin, 2001), the United Kingdom (George & Murcott, 1992; Laws, 1990; Newton, 2012; Prendergast, 1995), Canada (Uskul, 2004), and Australia (Sear, 2009) shows that, despite certain 'local' variations, women and girls ascribe to a largely homogeneous 'menstrual etiquette'. The etiquette of menstruation (Laws, 1990), which consists of the rules and social practices bound to menstruation (e.g. hiding menstrual products, not discussing menstrual pain or premenstrual changes outside heterosexual relationships, etc.), allows women to avoid the stigma which has been associated with menstruation (Chrisler, 2011; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). The management of the menstruating body also relates to the notion of self-regulation, whereby women are socialized and expected to control their bodies in terms of reproductive phases (Chrisler, 2008). In western contexts, where bodily control is highly emphasized, the leaking of bodily fluids from the female body (e.g. menstrual blood, amniotic fluid, breast milk) constitutes the female body problematic, as well as inferior to the male body, which is constructed as contained, controlled, with definite boundaries (Britton, 1998; Carter, 2010; Longhurst, 2001; Lupton, 2013; Schmied & Lupton,

E-mail address: A.Christoforou@euc.ac.cy.

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2001).

In addition to culture, it has been repeatedly argued that women's experiences and interpretations of menstruation are shaped by women's social locations such as their class, race, generation, and sexual orientation (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013). The anthropologist Emily Martin, 2001 in her pioneering work *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* provided a sociological analysis of how class and race are implicated in women's views and experiences. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews with 165 American women, Martin found that middle class women (both white and black) were more influenced by the mainstream medical views of the body as a machine and of menstruation as 'failed production' than working-class women, who tended to give phenomenological accounts of menstruation. Marvan and her colleagues, who examined attitudes towards menstruation among different generations of Mexicans, found that while younger women were less likely than their older counterparts to associate menstruation with prescriptions and proscriptions (i.e. culture-specific rules and restrictions for the menstruating woman) (Marván, Cortés-Iniestra, & González, 2005), they were more likely to be ambivalent about menarche and menstruation, perhaps due to the mixed messages found in contemporary popular culture (Marván, Morales, & Cortés-Iniestra, 2006). Sexual orientation has also been found to play a role in the lived experience of menstruation. In a study with heterosexual, bi-sexual, and lesbian women, Fahs (2011) found that heterosexual identity, rather than heterosexual activity, was associated with more negative attitudes towards menstrual sex. Ussher and Perz (2013) found that women with PMS in heterosexual relationships experience more distress than women with PMS in lesbian relationships as the latter have their partners' understanding and support to initiate and engage in coping strategies such as self-care and being alone. The study of the lived experience of menstruation, therefore, should be sensitive to the conditions and the parameters that shape women's experiences and interpretations and consider the ways in which women negotiate these, and construct meaning in the context of their everyday life.

This research is a part of a larger study which aimed to explore and examine the multiple and diverse meanings that Greek Cypriot women of different generations who live in Cyprus attribute to the embodied experiences of menstruation and menopause. To address this aim, I combined two theoretical approaches within the sociology of the body. First, I used the phenomenological approach to the body by engaging in an empirical investigation of women's accounts of their bodily experiences (the lived body). Secondly, drawing on the theories of anthropologist Mary Douglas, I engaged with the social regulation of the body to explain the conceptualization of the menstruating body as a dirty body. I approached the body both as a subject and as an object, therefore, by examining the women's experiences and practices on the one hand, the construction of the female body and its representations within discourses and institutions on the other, and how these affect the women's experiences in the context of everyday. In this framework, I have paid particular attention to women's agency, viewing women as embodied social actors who reflexively construct meaning and interpret their experiences. The focus of this study on a population not researched before, as well as the examination of lived experiences across the entire adult reproductive lifespan, make significant contributions to the literature on menstruation. In this article, I argue that studies which provide detailed, in-depth accounts of how women *themselves* experience, interpret, and negotiate the embodied experience of menstruation can enhance our understanding both of the conditions that shape women's embodiment in a specific socio-cultural and structural context at a particular time and of the cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman (cf. Jackson & Jones, 1998).

Method

My data come from in-depth, semi-structured interviews I conducted in 2010 with 20 Greek Cypriot women between the ages of 23

and 73. As the Cypriot society has undergone many social changes within a relatively short time that affected women's lives in profound ways, I chose to look critically at the generation of the women I interviewed and to examine how women of different ages and generations interpret their own, but also others', experiences of menstruation and the meanings they ascribe to them. Such social changes include the sudden – and forced – urbanization of the people displaced from the North during 1974, the development of the services and tourism industries and the accompanied economic growth, as well as the increasing immigration of women from Eastern European and non-European countries (Anthias & Lazaridis, 1999; Papadakis, Peristianis, & Welz, 2006; Peristianis, 2001; Sepos, 2008). The social, economic, political, and cultural consequences affected the circumstances of women's lives quite rapidly, resulting in significant material and demographic differences between successive generations of women, independently of social class (e.g. younger women tend to be more educated, to work full-time, to marry later, and to have fewer children than their older counterparts) (Statistical Service, 2012). In addition, these changes resulted in the coexistence of traditional and modern value systems, a complex situation often resulting in tensions, where elements of both ideological positions are combined and met across all social classes (Green & Vryonides, 2005).

The sample was developed through snowball and purposive sampling procedures. After securing ethical approval from the university, I resorted to my social, informal networks and asked them to reach out to women who were willing to be interviewed for my study. My methodology enabled me to interview any Greek Cypriot woman over 18 years of age as I did not have any restrictions on any demographic variables or on specific reproductive experiences. After completing about three-quarters of the interviews and after realizing that I had reached a point where I was not hearing anything new, I employed purposive sampling in terms of the respondents' ages because I wanted to interview women of different ages (e.g. women in their 60s) and answer some questions that began emerging from the preliminary analysis of my data.

I conducted most of the interviews at the participants' houses, although a few took place at my house and my office, and one in a coffee shop. The women read and signed the consent form and the interviews were audio recorded. My interview guide, which was largely based on Emily Martin, 2001 study, served as a starting point of inquiry. As the study was exploratory in nature, the questions were used only as a guide that allowed me to be flexible and sensitive to the particularities of each and every interview. The four pilot interviews I conducted in the beginning of the fieldwork helped me reflect on my interviewing style and also notice which of my questions were unclear or irrelevant to the participants. I employed a style of interviewing that can be described as feminist interviewing (Oakley, 1981), requiring flexibility and responsiveness to the answering style of the respondent, as well as openness, intimacy, and sharing of the researcher's own experiences. I usually asked the questions in the Cypriot dialect, which is used in everyday interactions with friends, peers, and families, rather than the more formal Greek language, which is used at school and at professional settings and it is the language of the media (Arvaniti, 1999). I also used words commonly used in everyday, ordinary interactions in regard to menstruation to allow respondents to view the interview as an informal conversation among women, and in effect to feel comfortable to express their feeling and views openly and provide more complete and accurate accounts. In addition, I usually answered the questions participants asked me my own experiences of the first period and menstruation in general, and my own opinions (e.g. about menstrual suppression or hormone therapy) because I thought this would make the interviews more casual and the participants more willing to share theirs.

As it is often the case in qualitative research, the analysis of data was not a separate phase, but rather a continuous one, interwoven with data production (Silverman, 2010). I transcribed each audio recording

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