

Menarche and Menstruation Through the Eyes of Pubescent Students in Eastern Taiwan: Implications in Sociocultural Influence and Gender Differences Issues

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ABSTRACT

Background: Menstruation is a significant part of women's lives. It has been studied from many perspectives to draw various conclusions about biological and physiological development, gender differences, and sociocultural environments.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore how male and female pubescent students perceive and interpret menarche and menstruation and how their perceptions reflect gender differences and the sociocultural environment in eastern Taiwan.

Methods: This was an exploratory qualitative study that employed focus group interviews. Data were collected from 20 girls and 27 boys, aged 10–12 years, who were recruited from two elementary schools. Participants engaged in 19 focus group discussions, which lasted 45–60 minutes each. Discussion transcripts were collected, encoded, categorized, and analyzed using the Atlas V 5.0 software.

Results: The central theme in menarche and menstruation experiences among pubescent students in eastern Taiwan can be summarized as, "Struggling to grow up amidst contradictions," an attitude that reflects gender divisions and sociocultural representations and practices. Generally, participants' views on menstruation fell within five subthemes: "Ambiguous," "Disregarded," "Dirty," "Personal," and "Transitional." These themes were analyzed within the contexts of society, school, and family.

Conclusions/Implications for Practice: In line with previous research, this study shows the need for more individual reproductive health consultations, reliable sex education, and well-planned health policies to assist pubescent students manage menstruation. In addition, this study suggests that the subjugation of girls and women remains a critical issue that must be addressed and challenged.

KEY WORDS:

menstruation, pubescent, qualitative research, sociocultural perspectives, gender differences.

Introduction

The first menstruation, or menarche, symbolizes a young girl's entrance into puberty. During this period, pubescent girls experience significant physical and psychological changes while adjusting to their new role in life as maturing women. Previous studies have shown the profound effect that cultural beliefs and attitudes can have on how pubescent girls (and women in general) perceive and experience menstruation (Tang, Yeung, & Lee, 2003; Uskul, 2004; Yeung, Tang, & Lee, 2005).

Recent literature also reflects the reality that a proper study on the experience of menstruation cannot be limited to women's perspectives (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Chang, Chen, Hayter, & Lin, 2009). The beliefs and attitudes of men toward menstruation are an important sociocultural influence on women's lives and deserve more attention. A study on the experience of menarche and menstruation without a discussion of the male viewpoint would be incomplete and problematic (Chang et al., 2009; Tang et al., 2003; Uskul, 2004; Yeung et al., 2005).

It is therefore critical to address gender identities and the sociocultural environment when examining the biopsychological experience of menarche and menstruation to achieve a comprehensive, holistic, and effective study that arrives at relevant implications in reproductive health, sex education, and health policy (Beitz, 1998; Crouch & McKenzie, 1999; Lin, 1997; Wang, 2000). The purpose of this study was to understand how pubescent students in contemporary eastern Taiwan process the experience of menstruation according to differences in gender and within an overall sociocultural context.

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Literature Review

The onset of menstruation is a significant moment in a girl's life that marks her transition into womanhood. The experience is often complicated by other various changes that occur during puberty. A body of scientific research on the experiences of menarche and menstruation for girls and women shows the powerful influence of sociocultural factors. These studies showed that social constructs create complex, passive, and even unhealthy attitudes in young women toward their own bodily development (Cheng, Yang, & Liou, 2007; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Forbes, Adams-Curtis, White, & Holmgren, 2003; Furth & Ch'en, 1992).

Studies have shown that the idea of menstruation is almost universally surrounded by taboos, stereotypes, and folklore in countries, cultures, and indigenous belief systems (Crouch & McKenzie, 1999; Garg, Sharma, & Sahay, 2001; Uskul, 2004; Yeung et al., 2005). Classical anthropological accounts on menstruation link it with taboos and the belief that it pollutes the body (Furth & Ch'en, 1992). Kissling (1996) found that the origins of the menstrual taboo lie generally in men's aversion to blood and fear of castration. It was also found that men once believed in the supernatural power of menstrual blood, a potent mixture of life, healing, and/or death (Donelson, 1999).

In Western cultures, menstrual taboos have affected women unconsciously in their perception of menstruation as exemplified by the restrictions associated with menstruation: concealment, activity, and communication (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Kissling, 1996). In India, women are considered impure or unholy during the menstrual cycle. They are not allowed to engage in any religious practices or social activities and face restrictions on work, food, and bathing (Garg et al., 2001). Similarly, studies in Hong Kong showed that popular religious teachings still perpetuate the belief that menstruation may bring "bad luck." In these religions, women are required to abide by certain ceremonial behaviors and restrictions during the menstrual cycle (Tang et al., 2003).

These cultural attitudes and religious beliefs continue to create negative perceptions of menstruation that significantly degrade the dignity, self-concept, gender identity, and even social acceptability of women (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Marvan, Cortés-Iniestra, & González, 2005). Girls learn from their mothers the need to conceal menstrual events because of the perception that it is "secret, shameful and disgusting" (Chang, Hayter, & Wu, 2010).

Moreover, Crouch and McKenzie (1999) indicated that menarche may be even more stressful for girls in Western cultures because of the absence of "rites of passage" or "increased misuse of initiation rites." The stress placed on girls during menarche may be at the root of various problems for adolescents in contemporary society. Studies have shown that Chinese medicine presents its own "misuse" in menstrual care. Chinese women believe they should not wash their hair on the first day of their period and should not eat raw or cold foods during their period because of menstruation-related weakness (Furth & Ch'en, 1992; Yeung et al., 2005).

The belief in the debilitating effect of menstruation has been studied in the West (Marvan et al., 2005). Researchers found that girls who received their education largely from male sources considered menstruation to be more debilitating and negative than girls who received their education from fewer male sources (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1986). From a psychoanalytic perspective, pubescent girls who think they are weak during their period may experience a loss of freedom, power, and autonomy and may, in turn, envy pubescent boys for their freedom and sense of control (Kissling, 1996; Marvan et al., 2005).

A study on the characteristics associated with menstruating women found that men portrayed women as less open, agreeable, and conscientious and more annoying and irritable when they are menstruating (Forbes et al., 2003). Because of sociocultural denial and misinterpretation of menstruation, open discussions on the subject tend to be brushed aside and deemed unimportant or pointless. This adversely affects the self-image and establishment of self-efficacy for pubescent girls in development (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1986; Chang et al., 2009).

Furthermore, behind the silence and oppressive taboos related to menstruation, pubescent girls face a new set of obligations and entitlements stemming from their emerging reproductive potential (Crouch & McKenzie, 1999). Specifically, girls reaching puberty encounter the expectation to display healthy, positive sexual attitudes and behaviors toward the opposite sex. A study described a young girl's psychological reaction to menarche as a state of mind "in which the approaching adulthood and sexuality are experienced as a threatening danger" (Chang et al., 2009). Under these circumstances, girls may develop improper attitudes and behaviors in gender interactions, which ultimately results in poor reproductive health (Chang, 2010; Chang et al., 2009).

In addition to enduring taboos and cultural stereotypes, the experience of menstruation for pubescent girls is also strongly colored by the behaviors and attitudes of their male peers (Chang et al., 2009; Cheng et al., 2007). Studies have shown that adolescent boys were highly influenced by the ambiguous and ambivalent attitudes of adults toward menstruation (Chang, Hayter, & Lin, 2012; Cheng et al., 2007). As a response, boys taunt their female peers over menstruation to annoy and embarrass them (Chang et al., 2009; McPherson & Korfine, 2004).

Lack of open discourse on menstruation is an issue for boys as well as girls. Menarche is a significant symbol of female sexuality and sexual maturity. Thus, boys are largely silent and passive about the issue, feigning disinterest. However, research has shown that, in actuality, boys are more likely than girls to seek alternative sources of information on menstruation and reproduction (Chang et al., 2012).

These studies directly and indirectly support the idea that sociocultural influences and gender differences play a large part in the menarche and menstruation experiences of women. Taiwan is a highly developed modern society; however, menstruation is still a subject surrounded by myths

and taboos. These traditional ideas find their way into discussions and education on menstruation and distort the attitudes of pubescent boys and girls. The purpose of this study was to explore in depth the interpretation and construction of the menstruation experience in pubescent children. It is hoped that study results can be applied to improving sex education for both male and female students to help them find more positive and healthier gender interactions and reproductive lives.

Methods

An exploratory qualitative approach was used to study how pubescent students construct and perceive the menstruation experience within the sociocultural context of eastern Taiwan. Focus group interviews collected data to examine narratives in a more comprehensive manner and to reduce participant embarrassment, shyness, and anxiety. The focus group discussion format also helped bring out commonalities among participants, helping them feel more comfortable with exploring their internal feelings, debates, or confusion toward menarche and menstruation.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling from two elementary schools in Hualien County, Taiwan, with a combined student population of 1,555. The sampling procedure involved first contacting relevant departments and staff of the two elementary schools to explain the study's purpose and methodology. After the schools granted permission, the study was presented to fifth and sixth grade female ($n = 183$) and male students ($n = 92$) who were asked to participate. Parents of these students received information about the study by mail. Informed consent was obtained from both participants and parents/guardians before data collection. The sample consisted of 20 postmenarche girls and 27 boys, all aged 10–12 years.

Data Collection

Participants were divided and assigned to one of nine focus groups according to gender, age, and familiarity with each other. Each group of five to seven participants met two to three times for sessions of 45–60 minutes. Focus group discussions were facilitated using a semistructured schedule of questions aimed at eliciting sociocultural influences. Open-ended questions were chosen based on a review of previous literature. The interview questions were as follows: “Are you comfortable discussing menstruation with your teachers, parents, or other adults?”; “Do you feel that you are treated differently after menarche (for female students)?”; “Do you feel your classmates are different after menarche (for male students)?”; and “Have you changed your behavior or attitudes in gender interactions since menarche (for male and female students)?” Participants were encouraged to speak freely and share as many details as they could. Interview data were collected by tape recorder and transcribed verbatim for

analysis. In addition, field notes were taken during discussions to record key information and viewpoints.

Rigor

We drew on the principles of credibility, dependability, and transferability to ensure trustworthiness throughout data collection, content analysis, thematic interpretation, and representation of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000). Some measures taken included adjusting the frequency and duration of focus group discussions after consulting class mentors and teachers on the course loads of their students, piloting questions to ensure clarity, involving both male and female students in the design of the study to understand how to create proper conditions for free and open discussion, and asking participants to verify the summarized comments in our field notes at the conclusions of each focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). We served as group moderators while making observations and recording the context of interactions and were also responsible for initiating internal reviews of data analysis results. Any issues during the transcription, segmenting, labeling, and analysis of data were resolved through dialectical argument. Data were proofread and confirmed at least three times through “peer review” by two qualitative research scholars, as well as nursing faculty from the technology college before study results were finalized.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were organized, categorized, and analyzed using Atlas V 5.0 software. Data analysis was initially divided according to gender, and the findings were synthesized holistically. Thematic analysis was performed, during which the transcript text was reread, categorized, and coded with consistent labels. Once labeled, relevant text was reinterpreted within the context of designated thematic areas. The salient themes that emerged from the data were merged to form a single central theme. Table 1 provides data on theme development by demonstrating how segments of data coalesce into one thematic area and further into one central theme.

Results

From a sociocultural perspective, pubescent students in eastern Taiwan perceive menstruation in accordance with a central theme, namely, “Struggling to grow up amidst contradictions.” The overall perceived experience of menstruation is less traumatizing for boys than girls; however, because of complex sociocultural circumstances preventing boys from discussing menstruation-related topics openly, an inherent sense of confusion and paradox may result. Pubescent children have complex, ambivalent, and contradictory feelings toward menstruation. Their perceptions are categorized into five subthemes: “Ambiguous,” “Disregarded,” “Dirty,”

TABLE 1.
Structure of “Transitional” Theme

Explanatory Theme	Data “Segment”
Transitional: positive excitement of development and negative apprehension toward sexuality maturity	Attained maturity; adhered with traditional medicinal care Anxiety toward reproduction Ambivalence toward sexuality Being responsible for self-protection: being restrained and loss of autonomy Change gender interactions Contrary perspectives of menstruation-related behaviors

“Personal,” and “Transitional.” A few paradigmatic examples of the participants’ narratives are as follows.

Ambiguous

The ambiguous feelings toward menstruation showed by participants reflected the embarrassment, shyness, and reluctance that parents, teachers, and other adults displayed when discussing the topic of menstruation with pubescent children. Because of this behavior in adults, pubescent children may feel shame, rejection, and even fear of learning more about menarche. This was particularly true for male participants. One boy said: “I was shy when the teacher taught us about menarche and menstruation. I often acted like I ‘knew nothing’ because I didn’t want to be seen as a ‘freak’ in front of the class” (M1, 12 years 8 months old). Another boy said, “Some of my classmates went home and asked their moms if they could attend this discussion on menstruation. Their moms said that this was an ‘abnormal subject’ so they weren’t allowed to come even though they actually wanted to...” (M15, 12 years 1 month old).

Other boys reported similar feelings: “We used to talk in whispers in the bathroom about menstruation because we were curious but afraid to ask adults because of their strange and ambiguous body language” (M2, 12 years 7 months old and M5, 12 years 2 months old). Girls also stated that they were uncomfortable and shy when addressing menstrual issues: “I felt very embarrassed to discuss menarche with my parents or teachers. I didn’t know how to express myself properly and normally...I was afraid I would sound like an abnormal or strange girl” (F1, 11 years 8 months old).

In addition, the embarrassment that pubescent children feel toward menstruation may cause boys to taunt their female counterparts. Through their taunting, boys may transmit inappropriate attitudes toward menstruation, resulting in anger and irritability in girls. For example: “Some

male classmates like to taunt girls and say there is a leakage in their trousers. They (the boys) think it’s fun to see the girls being agitated” (while shrugging, M8, 11 years 9 months old and M10, 11 years 8 months old). In turn, girls describe their anger at being victims of inappropriate behavior and jokes: “I was furious when boys touched me or searched my school bag for sanitary products...they would laugh at us loudly when they saw us ‘leaking.’ It feels awful...” (F2, 12 years old and F4, 11 years 4 months old).

Disregarded

The data showed with clarity that female participants were concerned when menstruation would start. However, they received little support or consultation. A few girls spoke of how their first menstruations were treated as unimportant. They had feelings of loss and disappointment, particularly associated with the responses of their mothers: “My first period occurred at home and I was scared. I yelled out, ‘Mom, I am going to die...I have blood in my underwear!’ But my mom did not pay attention to me. She merely said, ‘It’s ok!’ without any explanation...I remember being hurt and worried” (F7, 11 years 4 months old).

“I asked my mom what was happening when my first period came but she did not explain anything. She seemed embarrassed when she said, ‘Menstruation is normal.’ All she told me was that ‘When you get older, you will learn about menstruation naturally’” (F9, 12 years 2 months old). Some girls mentioned lack of ritual and expressed feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction: “My family did not celebrate or do anything special. I was treated like normal. I knew I was ‘growing up’ but so, what? Is it a big deal?” (F12, 11 years 9 months old and F16, 11 years 3 months old).

The boys in the group discussions tended to ignore the topic: “We don’t have time to talk about or pay attention to menstruation because we have a lot of schoolwork and tutoring classes after school. And it (menstruation) is not related with my work...so, I don’t need to learn about it” (M2, 12 years 7 months old and M5, 12 years 2 months old). Another boy mentioned his parents’ attitude toward the discussion on menstruation and how it influenced his own views: “They (parents) don’t want us...or allow us to know about that (menstruation)...they said we should pay attention to our studies...that thing (menstruation) ...may disturb us...it is not an important issue for us” (M8, 11 years 9 months old).

Dirty

This theme clearly reflects the stereotypes and sociocultural perceptions of menstruation and menstrual blood as being “unclean.” Some girls were forced to conceal menstruation: “I am required to wash my clothes separately during my period because my grandmother said, ‘It’s dirty’...meaning menstruation is dirty” (F5, 12 years 1 month old). “My grandmother will not take me to the temple if I am on my

period...She said that it is disrespectful to the gods" (F10, 11 years 8 months old). Another girl changed her behavior during her period: *"My family wondered why I was cleaning the trash can so ardently. I did not want them to see the menstrual blood. It was disgusting"* (F13, 10 years 7 months old). Menstrual blood proved to be a central theme in the taunts of male participants: *"We joked around and played a game called, 'Menstruation Virus.' When you touch a girl during her cycle and then touch a boy, you infect him with the dirty and untouchable menstrual blood. We think it's fun"* (M6, 11 years 11 months old and M9, 11 years 8 months old).

Both boys and girls use metaphors to refer to menstruation to make it seem less uncomfortable or disgusting: *"We used to say, 'that thing, good friend, or aunt' instead of using the term 'menstruation'"* (F10, 11 years 8 months old and F20, 12 years 2 months old). In reference to the metaphors, some boys said: *"...metaphors help us avoid uncomfortable feelings. If we say, 'menstruation,' a bloody picture can easily pop into our heads...so, saying, 'that thing' lets us have 'normal discussions' about menstruation more easily"* (M6, 11 years 11 months old and M8, 11 years 9 months old).

Personal

It was apparent during our focus group discussions that the participants had received limited information on the topic of menstruation. Adults generally regarded it as an unimportant topic, which runs counter to the natural curiosities of pubescent children. Without proper discussion and affirmation, pubescent children may feel it is their personal responsibility to resolve their questions on menstruation. Our data showed that participants learned to seek answers and help from alternative sources: *"We went on Yahoo, Google, and PC home to solve the puzzle of menstruation. Sometimes we searched through books, magazines, or even the news media. This information might be wrong or inappropriate (diffident smile)...but at least we get to know"* (M9, 11 years 8 months old and M13, 12 years 4 months old; F12, 11 years 9 months old).

One girl kept her menstrual onset a secret. She felt afraid to ask for help: *"My father and aunt still do not know I have periods. I would be looked at strangely if I discussed it with them...I always ask for help from a senior classmate at my elementary school"* (F3, 11 years 4 months old). A few girls learned how to manage menstruation on their own: *"My father is busy at work and I was brought up by my grandmother. They still do not know I menstruate...I learned a lot about it from close girl friends and sometimes teachers."* (F8, 12 years old).

Transitional

Participants considered menarche to be a "milestone" for a girl's development. Within the bio-psycho-social development of young women, menstrual onset was perceived

as a significant transitional event. Our focus group discussions showed that the transitional nature of menarche was seen with both positive excitement and negative apprehension toward sexual maturity. Positive feelings were associated with the ability to reproduce and the excitement of growing up: *"When I was in the fifth grade, my mom taught me about menstruation, so I was prepared when my first period came. My mom told me that I was growing up, so I was happy and felt different"* (F3, 11 years 4 months old and F14, 10 years 8 months old). *"After my first period came, I felt that childhood had passed and that I had attained maturity and should no longer be childish"* (F15, 11 years old). Although the boys were not as excited as the girls, they displayed similar positive attitudes toward maturity and menstruation: *"We feel that (menstrual onset) is key to a girl's development and it means she is becoming a lady"* (M7, 11 years 10 months old and M10, 11 years 8 months old).

The results showed anxiety toward reproduction and ambivalence toward sexuality in conjunction with excitement about maturing. Female participants now felt that they were responsible for protecting themselves: *"My mom told me to behave sedately and asked me to come home as soon as possible after class. It seems like we need to protect ourselves more now that we menstruate"* (F8, 12 years old). Most female participants felt they were being restrained and had lost autonomy after menarche: *"Sometimes I feel overprotected and not trusted by my parents. They often remind me that I menstruate and am growing up so I need to be more careful and not do anything dangerous...if I ask them what 'dangerous' means, they just respond with, 'Just come home earlier'"* (F6, 12 years old and F14, 10 years 8 months old).

Boys also sensed that female peers were somehow different after menarche and that they should be aware of these changes: *"We could feel the girls in our class start keeping their distance and interacting less with us"* (M5, 12 years 2 months old and M12, 12 years 6 months old). *"We used to play together from first to fourth grade. Since girls started having periods, I've lost my playmates... Sometimes I wonder what it means. Maybe it has to do with sexuality or something else"* (M18, 11 years 8 months old).

Regarding menstrual health and making a successful transition into womanhood, girls tended to listen to the advice of adults on dietary habits, personal care, and medicinal care. Some of this advice stemmed from traditional Chinese medicine, which often lacks scientific support and may present health risks: *"My grandmother taught me that the uterus is debilitated by the menstrual cycle. Also, I need to avoid cold drinks during my cycle because it is poison to my body"* (F10, 11 years 8 months old). *"I am not allowed to drink cold drinks or eat spicy food during my period... my mom prepares special food mixed with Chinese medicine for me...or she buys me products good for menstrual health. I also can't wash my hair on the first day of my period"* (F8, 12 years old). Boys also displayed their

knowledge on menstrual health: *"They (girls) can't take cold foods or beverages because that might cause abdominal pain...and girls have to eat something special like Chinese medicine"* (M1, 12 years 8 months old and M6, 11 years 11 months old).

The association between menstruation and weakness and emotionality was commonly confirmed during the boys' conversations: *"They (girls) can't do anything too exciting and need to rest more because they are weak during their periods...we are just boys all the time"* (M5, 12 years 2 months old and M12, 12 years 6 months old). On the subject of emotional irritability, the boys said: *"I don't know why...maybe they (girls) were on their periods...I assumed. I was just walking by and wasn't doing anything but they hit me and stared at me hostilely and said that I was rude to them...but I swear I didn't mean it"* (M2, 12 years 7 months old and M7, 11 years 10 months old). *"...You're better off keeping your distance and not approaching girls on purpose because they are strange and change a lot, especially during their period..."* (M6, 11 years 11 months old).

In contrast, the girls felt disrespected by the boys' exaggerations of menstruation-related behavior: *"Sometimes we try to discuss problems seriously but the boys just make fun of us for being on our periods and being emotional. This distracts them from focusing on the real problems and that frustrates me a lot. Sometimes I dream of being a boy in my next life, and I dream of them being girls, so I can laugh at them"* (F10, 11 years 8 months old).

Discussion and Implications

The healthiest and most beneficial way for all parties involved to address menstrual issues is to adopt positive and open attitudes. This study showed that the sociocultural environment in Taiwan leads to inconsistent, ambiguous, and ambivalent attitudes toward menstruation. Pubescent children are highly susceptible to sociocultural influences. The complex and ambiguous approach to menstruation that they find in adults may result in inadequate knowledge and negative attitudes toward reproductive health (Chang, 2010; Chang et al., 2012).

The influence of Confucian teachings, passed from generation to generation, continues to pervade Taiwanese culture, customs, and society in the area of menstruation. According to the Confucian tenet, "See no evil, speak no evil," discussing menstruation in public may be impolite or rude (Wang, 2000) and, as a result, there is a prejudice against speaking about menstruation. Folk beliefs and popular Taoist teachings also discourage discussion of menstruation. In these belief systems, menstrual blood is seen as "dirty" and women are required to stay home and not join in certain religious activities during their periods (Garg et al., 2001; Wang, 2000).

Sociocultural influences and religious ideas strongly affect community attitudes toward menstruation. Inconsistency,

ambiguity, and ambivalence displayed toward menstruation may be a sign of a traditional male-dominated society with a tendency to oppress and subjugate women (Wang, 2000). This must be gradually challenged and subverted. Having an open and positive attitude in society toward menstruation is essential for allowing pubescent children to participate in meaningful dialogue on their bodily development without shame or stigma.

In the self-described experiences of participants, both boys and girls used metaphors to describe menarcheal and menstrual experience as exhibited in people's daily conversations. Such usage may also be referred to as type of alternative menstrual culture that involves using traditional messages to discuss the topic in social settings (Chang et al., 2012). Therefore, personal understanding of a particular topic such as menstruation is apparently subject to social power and cultural influence. Such subtle cognitive effects on an individual are difficult to discern; hence, addressing menstruation in the healthcare education system requires considerable caution.

Improper or inadequate education on menstruation within families and schools remains a major problem. Puberty is associated with "first time" experiences that may lead to confusion in youths (Chang et al., 2009). Taiwanese culture considers menstruation to be a secret event (Cheng et al., 2007). Our data analysis shows a general lack of menstrual consultation and assistance for pubescent students in eastern Taiwan. Male participants tended to search the Internet for information, and their female peers tended to ask for help from female friends. Parents, teachers, and school nurses should be aware of this and assume responsibility for teaching the topic of menstruation to pubescent children.

On the basis of our results, boys tend to have a more distorted view of menstruation than girls, which has relatively more severe adverse consequences in gender interactions under certain sociocultural influences. In addressing these concerns, schools are formal places for menstrual education, where school nurses should play a key role in mitigating improper education and misunderstandings about menstruation by providing young people with accurate information, empathetic care, guidance, and support, especially to male adolescents (Chang et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2012; Jou, Chen, Lee, & Yin, 2003). School nurses must provide more opportunities and space to facilitate the discussion and clarification of menstruation knowledge and monitor relevant dialogue among boy groups. In addition, school nurses should be invited to participate in the design of class curricula that cover menstruation. According to our study, pubescent students rarely seek help from school nurses. This important issue should be considered in the practical implementation and planning of sex education programs.

An additional problem exists regarding the medical myths associated with menstruation. Similar to other studies, data gathered for this research showed that menstruation is associated with "debilitation" and is seen as a type of "women's disease" (Yeung et al., 2005). Chinese medicinal teachings

state that menstruation causes the health problems of “Chi and blood deficiency,” which require medicinal and nutritional supplements. Women must also refrain from eating certain foods. However, these medical teachings on menstrual health have not been studied or supported with scientific evidence.

Furthermore, participants were familiar with the idea that menstruation is associated with irritability and instability in women, an association that is exaggerated by males (Diorio & Munro, 2000). This may lead to severe conflicts in communication and interaction between genders (Crouch & McKenzie, 1999). Gender-based biases regarding menstruation may cause pubescent girls to reach a harshly “fatalistic” view toward their own bodily development. In this study, one female participant dreamed of being a boy in her next life so she could take revenge on the boys who mocked her. This type of “fatalism” is planted at puberty and should receive more attention from scholars and sex education experts.

This study placed a strong emphasis on gender differences in pubescent students. On the experience of menstruation, girls tended to share and discuss, whereas boys almost never spoke seriously of the subject, choosing instead to make fun of it (Chang et al., 2012; Diorio & Munro, 2000). This difference in attitudes toward menstruation between genders may directly disrupt normal social interactions and result in negative outcomes in the sexual development for these pubescent students. Providing proper guidance and education on the subject of menstruation is an important issue that must be addressed.

In summary, sociocultural influences have created a complex and contradictory experience for pubescent students dealing with menstruation. When the attitude of adults toward menarche and menstruation is ambiguous and contradictory, pubescent children may have difficulties establishing gender identity, self-esteem, self-concept, sense of responsibility, and positive attitudes and values toward sex (Burrows & Johnson, 2005). Comprehensive and meaningful education on menstruation is now especially important for pubescent children. Education on menstruation and gender differences within the family and at school is crucial for achieving gradual change. School nurses, in particular, must shoulder the burden of helping to plan menstrual education and provide menstruation-related care, as well as address gender differences in students (Chang et al., 2012).

Misunderstandings and common stereotypes regarding menstruation must be clarified and corrected in the field of medicine. Scientific research should be conducted on traditional Chinese medicine’s treatment of menstruation. Pubescent students should be made to feel accepted and supported on the topic of menstruation and be treated positively with an open mind by the adults around them.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study expected to elucidate the gender-based perspectives of adolescents regarding menstrual experiences with

in the context of contemporary eastern Taiwanese society. However, this study’s simple qualitative design may not be an adequately clear, in-depth, or rigorous methodology to achieve such a result. Conducting a phenomenological study in the future is suggested to initiate conceptual, methodological schema and to generate appropriate results.

The family backgrounds of study participants were indigenous Malayo-Polynesian and traditional nuclear. Participants’ parents were mostly working class, paid little attention to sexual health education, and showed little interest in discussing menstrual experiences. Moreover, these families’ attitudes toward menstrual experiences are strongly associated with environmental circumstances in which such expressions are traditionally considered private and dirty and should, therefore, be kept secret. This likely resulted in the negative exposure experience of focus group participants. Hence, results should not be extrapolated or used to reflect the opinions about or experiences of menarche for teenagers living in Taiwan’s other regions.

Finally, all female participants included in this study already had menstrual experiences to provide authentic information during interviews. Also, some parents refused to allow their children to join the focus group. Both factors may limit the comprehensiveness of study results. Therefore, future studies should address these limitations to more fully consider the diverse range of menstrual experiences.

Conclusions

The central theme that emerged from the attitudes of pubescent students in eastern Taiwan toward menstruation was “Struggling to grow up amidst contradictions.” This attitude was a product of sociocultural factors and gender differences. Positive views of menstruation reflected its representation as a transition into maturity. Negative views reflected its association with “ambiguity” and being “disregarded, personal, and dirty.” This study highlighted the serious problems and challenges pubescent students face when they lack effective assistance, counseling, guidance, and support. These environmental shortcomings may lead to unhealthy sexual development. Immediate and effective intervention is required to help these pubescent students. Health policy and healthcare should be reevaluated to address the onset of menstruation properly for both male and female students. The attitudes of scholars, education experts, parents, and the general public must change to effectively manage the potentially unhealthy experience of menstruation for pubescent students.

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台灣東部青春學生之初經與月經觀點—社會文化與性別觀點

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- 背 景** 月經相關文獻指出，月經涵蓋生理發展、心理變化、性別差異及社會文化內涵等多層面的概念。
- 目 的** 本研究目的在瞭解在台灣東部的社會文化脈絡下，青春學生如何建構個人之月經觀點。
- 方 法** 本研究為質性設計，以焦點團體訪談進行資料收集。以花蓮地區二所國小高年級學生為對象，共20位女生與27位男生參與訪談，組成9個焦點團體，總計進行19次焦點團體討論。訪談過程經錄音與觀察紀錄後，以質性分析軟體Atlas V 5.0 版進行編碼、分類和歸納分析。
- 結 果** 本研究顯示，在台灣東部地區之社會文化架構影響下，青春學生對月經之詮釋雖呈現明顯性別差異，卻建構出「在矛盾中努力成長」之主題。初經與月經觀點於社會、學校和家庭氛圍中，被青少年(女)解釋為「含糊不清的」、「被忽略的」、「骯髒的」、「私人的」和「成長的」事件。
- 結 論／實務應用** 本研究結果具體呈現在台灣東部的社會文化影響下，青春學生面對月經事件的矛盾與掙扎。建議未來在月經教育針對不同性別，擬定有效之月經諮詢、學校性教育以及健康促進策略。

關鍵詞：月經、青春期、質性研究、社會文化觀點、性別差異。

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