



4-1981

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Christina J. "Teaching More Than Facts of Menstruation: Exercises to Stimulate Dialogue About a Taboo Topic." *Teaching of Psychology* 8.2 (1981): 105-106.

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FACULTY FORUM

Teaching More Than the Facts of Menstruation: Exercises to Stimulate Dialogue About a Taboo Topic

Menstruation has long been a neglected topic in both psychology courses and psychological research. Psychology is not alone, of course, in its omission of this unique female phenomenon from public discussion. The menstrual taboos practiced in many cultures have often involved physically isolating and hiding menstruating woman from public view (Stephens, 1961; Weideger, 1975). The taboo in our culture is not so different in its exclusion of the topic of menstruation from *polite* social discourse. Unfortunately, this taboo has also been extended to the classroom.

In what follows I will discuss some of the reasons it is important to open up a dialogue about menstruation which goes beyond elemental physiological facts. I will also present the set of exercises which I developed to accomplish this. I have used these "Menstrual Awareness Exercises" very successfully with students in my Psychology of Woman classes over the last several years. They are also appropriate for use in other psychology courses where menstruation would (and should) be studied, such as Child and Adolescent Psychology, Human Sexuality, Sex Roles, and Personality Adjustment courses.

Enveloping menstruation in silence and secrecy serves to perpetuate the ignorance and misconceptions which fostered the silence in the first place. One study revealed, for example, that *40 percent* of a sample of college women *did not* know the basic facts of menstruation (McCreary-Juhasz, 1967). As one woman reported:

I first mentioned the fact that I was bleeding from "you know where" one night at the dinner table. I was sent to my room without supper and never mentioned it again until I went to college and found out that everyone menstruated . . . I still can't talk about it without blushing. (Maddux, 1975, pp. 25-26)

Men's lack of understanding about menstruation may have similar undesirable effects. They may come to regard the whole process as foreign or odd, and as something which cuts them off from women in a critical way. For example, men who were asked whether their attitude toward girls changed when they found out that girls menstruated reported that they "felt sorry for women," that "it seemed strange . . . (and) dirty," and that "it merely confirmed . . . that girls were different and 'mysterious'" (Weideger, 1975, p. 164). Teaching men and women the facts of menstruation is clearly the first step toward the normalization of everyone's reactions.

The second step, and a far more difficult one, must be directed toward changing the attitudes which underlie the silence about menstruation. Improving our attitudes is important for at least three reasons. First, our attitudes are responsible for making it an ongoing source of shame and embarrassment for both women and men. Indeed, women reported using menstrual euphemisms ("lady troubles," "falling of the roof," etc.) precisely because they are too

embarrassed to talk more openly about the topic (Ernster, 1975, p. 6). Second, there is psychological research which indicates that culturally transmitted negative attitudes, such as the belief that women are moody and irritable prior to and during menstruation, may actually contribute to the psychological and physical distress women report experiencing (Paige, 1973). Third, the suggestion has also been made that negative attitudes toward menstruation may generalize to women themselves (Ernster, 1975).

The following exercises are therefore designed to help students and teachers alike become more aware of their attitudes about menstruation, and in doing so to move beyond the realm of mystery, ignorance, and taboos.

Menstrual Awareness Exercises

1. Ask yourself (and then a few male and female friends or relatives) to make a list of all the feelings, symptoms and behaviors they think are associated with menstruation. When they finish writing their list, ask them to indicate next to each item whether it has a physical or psychological cause (or both). What, if any, sex or age differences appear in the responses you obtain? How do your findings compare with the published research findings?
2. Make a list of all the expressions (words or phrases) you use to refer to menstruation. Note when, where and from whom you learned them. Label each item according to whether you believe it connotes a positive or negative view on menstruation. Ask some friends (relatives, etc.) these questions. Do you find any sex or age differences in your results? What impact do you think these expressions have on men's and women's behaviors and attitudes toward women?
3. Try to remember when you first learned about menstruation. From whom did you learn about it? How much were you told? How did you feel? Did you talk about it with anyone else? How did learning about menstruation compare with learning about sexual intercourse? Ask some female and male friends these questions. How do your experiences compare with those of your friends?
4. If you have (or were to have) a child, how did (or would) you explain the facts of menstruation to him/her? Try role playing this scene with a friend. Take turns assuming the roles of the parent and child and role play children of both sexes. Take note of the nonverbal behavior of your "teacher/parent" as well as what they say. Does the child's sex seem to generate any differences in the kinds of explanation the "teacher/parent" gives?
5. What (if any) was your most pleasant experience associated with menstruation? What (if any) was your most unpleasant experience associated with menstruation? Ask male and female friends these questions. Are there any frequently occurring responses? How do responses differ according to sex?
6. (a) For women: Have you ever used menstruation as an excuse for not participating in an activity? For not going to work? How did you feel about it? Was it legitimate or not? (b) For women and men: Has a woman ever used menstruation as an excuse for not participating in an activity with you?

How did you feel? Did you accept the excuse as legitimate? Why? Why not? (c) Ask some male and female friends these questions. How do your findings relate to some people's belief that women are unfit to assume leadership positions because of their "raging hormones"?

7. Could you comfortably bring up menstruation as a topic of conversation in a same sex group? A mixed sex group (e.g., at a cocktail party or at the dinner table)? Would you be more comfortable talking about sex? Why? Why not? Bring it up if you can and note your own reactions and reactions of others. Ask some friends to do the same and to report their findings.

8. Recall any discussion (films, etc.) of menstruation in school. How was the situation handled and by whom? What was your response and the response of your friends?

9. Have you, would you, or would you not have sexual intercourse during menstruation (yours or your partner's that is)? Why? Why not? How did you and your partner respond? Have you ever been told not to have sex during menstruation? Ask some male and female friends these questions.

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The Statistics Course as a Departmental Offering and Major Requirement

As the instructor of our department's statistics course, I was curious to see how a course in statistics, as an offering and major requirement, was handled at other schools.

A random sample of 152 four-year colleges and universities was chosen from a popular directory of schools ("The College Blue Book," 1979). Current catalogs for these institutions were obtained and five were eliminated because those institutions did not offer a psychology major. The remaining 147 included schools from the District of Columbia and 49 of the 50 states. Only Alaska was not represented in the sample. There were 81 four-year, undergraduate colleges and 66 universities.

The catalogs for the 147 schools were first examined to determine if a statistics course was required for the psychology major, and the results of this tabulation are

shown as the first item in Table 1. As can be seen, 72 percent of the psychology departments required at least one statistics course for the psychology major.

Table 1. Responses by Category

Question	Answer	N	%
1. Stat. course required?	yes	106	72
	no	41	28
	total	147	100
2. Stat. course in what department?	psychology	82	77
	mathematics	17	16
	social science	4	4
	statistics	3	3
	total	106	100
3. If req. or prereq., what dept?	psychology	103	70
	mathematics	22	15
	social science	6	4
	statistics	4	3
	none listed	12	8
	total	147	100

The next tabulation identified which department offered the required statistics course, and the results are shown in item 2 in Table 1. The great majority (77%) of psychology departments offered their own required course, but a substantial number (16%) was offered by mathematics departments.

In examining the department descriptions in the catalogs, I noted that there was a substantial number of psychology departments that offered one or more statistics courses but did not require a statistics course for the major. In addition, a few psychology departments that did not have their own statistics course had one or more courses for which a statistics course outside of the department was a prerequisite or "highly recommended." In order to get an overview of the place of statistics as either a major requirement, or as a prerequisite or recommendation for another psychology course, it was necessary to examine the entire sample of 147 for the departmental identification of such a statistics course. The results are shown in item 3 of Table 1.

It is interesting to note that 70% of the psychology departments offered one or more statistics courses. This was somewhat greater than the 63% reported for universities and four-year colleges in a 1975 survey (Lux & Daniel, 1978), and it is not clear if the difference represents sampling error or a meaningful increase over the last 4 or 5 years. Of greater interest to statistics enthusiasts everywhere is the fact that only 12 schools or a meager 8% did not require or offer a statistics course in their own department or require or suggest a statistics course in another department. Clearly, it is not just an idle claim that psychology is a quantitative discipline—our curricula reflect our priorities.

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