

Menstrual Experiences of Adolescent Girls: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to explicate the psychological and socio-cultural realities coexisting with menstruation and its impacts on the performance, well-being and functioning of the adolescent girls of rural and urban areas. This study collected insight from experiences of adolescent girls in psychological and physical conditions and challenges which come out from social restriction, taboos, beliefs and practices related to menstruation. Fifty adolescent girls age ranging from 12 years to 19 years participated in this study. The qualitative research design was employed to find out basic themes regarding menstruation. Focused group discussion was used to collect data which was audio recorded followed by preparation of verbatim inscriptions. The findings of the study evinced that the adolescent girls reported many important facts affecting their well-being, identity and life outcomes. Five major themes emerged out of the data regarding the menstruation of adolescent girls. The first theme denoted that first menstruation follows bizarre experiences. The theme represented that the first menstrual experiences follow many bizarre and unusual reactions on the part of adolescent girls. The second theme was that menstruation is accompanied by many restrictions. Majority of the girl participants replied in their verbalizations that they have to face many restrictions in their social and religious lives. The third theme denoted that menstruation impacts well-being negatively. The fourth theme was that social awareness about menstruation may lessen the negative outcomes. The fifth theme denoted that a multitude of myths are associated with menstruation. Thus, the findings revealed that the adolescent girls exhibited little knowledge about menstruation before their menarche and internal physical process of menstruation as well as faced adverse psycho-social and physical problems. The negative feelings like panic experiences, inhibitions in social or day to day life, prohibition to take part in religious activities and cooking food were also reported. The findings of the study may help to develop coping strategies and benefit the prevention or

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psycho-social support programmes to assist adolescent girls holistically. The findings have important implications for health professionals and policy makers.

Keywords: *Menstruation, Adolescent Girls, Qualitative Study, Thematic Analysis.*

Adolescence is a crucial stage for the development of a girl during which she experiences many personal challenges impacting her mental health and personal well-being. There are individual differences in psychological and physical well-being of the adolescent girls; there exists a lot of similarity in facing a negative cycle of pain relieving thoughts and high risk behaviours. For Adolescent girls and women in India, menstruation remains shrouded in acute shame, embarrassment and misconception, stemming primarily from deep-rooted belief that is a dirty and impure process. Negligible and incorrect information about physiology of menstruation and socio-cultural restrictions together feed into a vicious intergenerational cycle of shame, silence and misinformation causing psychological problems. Adolescent girls constitute about one fifth of total female population in the world. Adolescence in girls has been recognized as a special period in their life cycle that requires special attention (Bharathalakshmi, Govindarajan, Ethirajan, & Felix, 2014). Menarche, or first menstruation, is one of the last pubertal changes, occurring after breast bud and pubic hair development. Menarche can occur as early as age 8 and as late as 17 (Hilliard, 2002). It is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. This transition phase makes them vulnerable to a number of problems which include psycho-social problems, general and reproductive health problems and sexuality related problems (Hockenberry & Wilson, 2007). In essence, the adolescence is a crucial stage for girl's development and they can experience personal challenges that impact their mental health and personal well-being (Call et al., 2002; Tolman, Impett, Tracy & Michael, 2006). Light (2000) has revealed that there are individual differences in girls' psychological and physical well-being, yet interrelated in a negative cycle of pain relieving thoughts and high risk behaviors. During adolescence, girls require emotional support from their mothers and need to be educated regarding sexual development and hygienic practices. Contrarily, menstruation is culturally linked to several taboos, myths, and restrictions in India. Taboos surrounding menstruation exclude women and girls from many aspects of social and cultural life.

Due to restrictions imposed during menstruation along with the negative attitude of parents in discussing menstruation-related issues with girls has led to poor awareness regarding menstruation and menstrual hygiene among adolescent girls. Hence, girls grow up with limited knowledge of menstruation. Menstruation has been stigmatized in our society. This stigma built up due to traditional beliefs in impurity of menstruating women and our unwillingness to discuss it normally. Bhartiya (2013) has mentioned in her research that all religions of the world have placed restrictions on menstruating women. Be it Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism. Sikhism is the only religion where the scriptures condemn sexism and don't impose any restriction on menstruating women. Scrutiny of the above literature exhibited that although, menstruation is a biological phenomenon, but there are many socio-cultural beliefs, restrictions and psychological dynamics that regulate its

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impacts. The present study aims to explore the major themes regarding menstruation of the adolescent girls employing thematic analysis methods.

Objectives

The present study was carried out with the following objectives:

1. To explore the themes regarding menstruation of adolescent girls,
2. To explore the major concerns and realities of menstrual experience among adolescent girls.

METHODS AND PROCEDURE

The data were collected adopting focused group discussion to explore the myths and realities regarding menstruation of adolescent girls.

Sample

Fifty adolescent girls age ranging from 13 years to 19 years ($M = 15.72$, $SD = 1.79$) were chosen as the participants who took part in the focused group discussion pertaining to a set of issues related to their knowledge, experiences and outcomes of menstruation. All the participants were regular students ranging from 9th to 12th classes. Most of them belonged to rural area of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, India with different socioeconomic backgrounds predominantly lower middle class.

Tools

Following tools were employed to collect data for the study:

- 1. Focused Group Discussion (FGD):** Five groups were formed for focused group discussion from fifty participants. The researchers prepared a list of items for focused group discussion based on their insights after the review of literature. The interactions were audio recorded followed by preparation of verbatim inscriptions. Before starting the focus group discussion, consent was taken from the participants and their parents. Following were the items of focused group discussion:
 1. What was the status of your knowledge about menstruation before menarche?
 2. What are your feelings of pain during menstruation?
 3. What is the religious participation during menstruation?
 4. What are the impacts of menstruation on your social life?
 5. What others think about menstruation?
- 2. Audio Tape Recorder:** The verbatim contents of the focused group discussion of the participants were audio recorded with the help of recording device available in DSLR1100D. The verbatim inscriptions of the focused group discussion were recorded with comments, if any, to smooth the process of carrying out thematic analysis of the collected data by the judges/experts using thematic analysis. The data of all the participants were organized according to the order of the items of the interview followed by the analysis employing thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Procedure

After the sample, tools and procedure were decided; the plan of the study was put before the ethical committee of the department of Psychology for its approval and permission. The participants were debriefed about the basic goals of the study and submitted their written consent to participate in the study. It was told that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw themselves from the study at any point of time. The participants were made comfortable and the researchers established rapport with them followed by presentation of the items of the discussion. The data were collected and analyzed.

RESULTS

The Focus Group discussion was audio recorded and verbatim inscriptions were prepared to derive the major themes. The researchers independently gone through the inscriptions and came to their independent themes. Then, the themes so gathered were discussed in a conference of researchers to arrive at a consensus. After the thematic analysis, the major themes pertaining to the menstrual experiences of adolescent girls were emerged. They were as under:

i. First menstruation follows bizarre experiences.

The theme represented that the first menstrual experiences follow many bizarre and unusual reactions on the part of adolescent girls. One participant expressed herself as, *“I was afraid that I have developed some disease of unknown type.”* Another participant verbalized as, *“When I experienced the menstruation for the first time, I did not know it. I was very afraid and started weeping.”* The first experience also represents some misconceptions about menstruation. One participant expressed herself as, *“When I faced the menstruation for the first time, I was fearful and thought that this has happened due to my excess consumption of sour dishes which caused me to face this situation. Due to fear, I did not tell it to my Mom in anticipation that she will beat me. I did not communicate it to my mummy up to 2 to 3 years. I thought that I am going to die.”*

ii. Menstruation is accompanied by many restrictions.

Majority of the girl participants replied in their verbalizations that they have to face many restrictions on their social and religious lives. One participant replied as, *“I was prohibited to play, run and cycling. I was also asked not to touch pickles. The participation in religious activities was also forbidden for me during menstruation.”* Another girl replied as, *“Do not talk to boys and maintain a distance with them also!”* One participant verbalized as, *“Make a distance with well used for drinking water. You have not to attend school as you have become enough old”*. It led to restrict the interaction and play with boys. One female replied as, *“When menstruation comes, Mummy says that you have not to play with boys, remain stay at home and if you want to play, play with girls”*.

iii. Menstruation impacts well-being negatively.

The participants had reported that many restrictions during menstruation decrease the pleasure and happiness of their life. One adolescent replied as, *“Menstruation causes fear and shame and I used to think that other person may be watching from backside”*.

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Menstruation led to many restrictions which make them aggravated the girls. One adolescent verbalized as, *“My freedom was restricted in many spheres. For example, do not work, do not go to school, do not cook food, do not touch anything in the house, and do not go with boys. All these restrictions lead me to feel very bad. I also amazed of these restrictions”*. Menstruation also leads to cause apprehension, guilt and shame in adolescent girls. One girl replied as, *“I did not tell the happening of menstruation up to two years. I was leaving in great fear. I felt that I have become ill”*.

iv. Social awareness about menstruation may lessen the negative outcomes.

The participant girls unequivocally observed that the menace of menstruation may be decreased with increasing the awareness about menstruation among males and females in close relations. One girl replied as, *“If boys are introduced with the pervasiveness and basic facts about menstruation, then its negative outcomes can be lessened up to some extent. It will also lead to decreased shame and hesitation”*. Another girl verbalized as, *“If boys are known with the incident of menstruation then we can express our needs easily to them. An adolescent girl replied as, “If it is known to other people, we can seek medical and other types of help openly”*.

v. A multitude of myths are associated with menstruation.

There were many myths which were reported by the girl participants in their verbalizations. One participant expressed herself as, *“During menstruation, I was imposed many restrictions which are only myths and do not represent reality. For example, I was prohibited not to take bath and dry clothes in sun light. I could not understand why I am not allowed to do all these things”*. One girl replied as, *“I was strictly prohibited to carry out religious activities.”* Another participant verbalized as, *“Menstruation is a curse for women and denoted impurity”*.

Some quantitative inquiries were also carried out. It showed that only 26% adolescent girls had knowledge about menstruation before their menarche. The correct knowledge about internal physical process of menstruation is not reflecting by this data. It has been demonstrated that the knowledge about menstruation before having it is associated with the dealing of their first menarche. It has been found during focus group discussion that due to lack of knowledge about the process and age of menstruation, most of the adolescent girls faced adverse psycho-social and physical problems.

It was also observed that the adolescent girls who have no knowledge and scared were 43%. Twenty three percent of the girls showed very little awareness about the menstruation process. The impact of menstruation on social or day to day life of menstruation was also observed. These effects were recorded during the study. It has been found that 92% adolescent girls were prohibited from doing any kind of religious activities. Usually, they practiced the religious rituals in their daily life but due to several myths in society only 8% of those performed their religious rituals during their menstruations. It was also revealed that most of the girls who performed their religious rituals did not disclose their menstruation status between female members of family. About 82% of the adolescent girls responded that they cook food daily in their home. Out of these, 67% girls did not cook food during the

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period of menstruation. It was also shared by the adolescent girls that when menstruation days came they were even not allowed to enter in kitchen to serve the food to other family members.

The data showed that 87% respondents were faced worst feeling (scared, about to die etc.) and trauma after their first menstruation. Feeling of scare was more in those respondents who have some knowledge about menstruation rather than those who did not. It was also found that only 33% respondents cooked food during menstruation and 69% respondents did not attend their schools during menstruation. About 71% respondents affirmed that they did not live normal life during menstruation whereas 17% of them reported feeling of physical problems or pain making them upstate during menstruation. Approximately 74% respondents reported that unavailability of private space for changing the clothes in public places including schools made them uncomfortable and helpless.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study evinced that the adolescent girls reported many important facts affecting their well-being, identity and life outcomes. The qualitative analysis of the data exhibited that five major themes emerged out of the data regarding the menstruation of adolescent girls. The first theme denoted that first menstruation follows bizarre experiences. The theme represented that the first menstrual experiences follow many bizarre and unusual reactions of the part of adolescent girls. The first experiences also represent some misconceptions about menstruation. The second theme was that menstruation is accompanied by many restrictions. Majority of the girl participants replied in their verbalizations that they have to face many restrictions in their social and religious lives. The third theme denoted that menstruation impacts well-being negatively. The participants had reported that many restrictions during menstruation decrease the pleasure and happiness of their life. Menstruation also leads to cause apprehension, guilt and shame in adolescent girls. The fourth theme was that social awareness about menstruation may lessen the negative outcomes. The participant girls unequivocally observed that the menace of menstruation may be decreased with increasing the awareness about menstruation among males and females in close relations. The fifth theme denoted that a multitude of myths are associated with menstruation. There were many myths which were reported by the girl participants in their verbalizations.

The quantitative inquiries showed that adolescent girls exhibited little knowledge about menstruation before their menarche and internal physical process of menstruation as well as faced adverse psycho-social and physical problems. The adolescent girls reported many negative feelings like panic experiences, inhibitions in social or day to day life and prohibition to take part in the religious activities. Majority of the adolescent girls responded that they cook food daily in their home but two third of them did not cook food during this period. Most of them were not allowed to enter in kitchen to serve the food to other family members. Majority of the participants reported feeling of physical problems or pain making them upstate during menstruation whereas majority of them reported unavailability of private

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space for changing the clothes in public places including schools. Previous researchers have observed that menstruation is a natural phenomenon for women during their reproductive years. A qualitative study examined experiences of women between 18 and 48 years of age for menstruation across the lifespan. Adopting narrative approach, the researchers employed thematic analysis to develop basic themes for menstruation. They reported menstruation to be a complex phenomenon that binds women together. The menstruation is perceived as an intimate and private matter which significantly shapes gender identity (Brantelid, Nilver, & Alehagen, 2014). Thus, the findings of the study exhibited that menstruation had important implications in understanding the life outcomes of adolescent girls.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

Findings may support to make to plan future research projects to explore more social and psychological factors to work for community awareness on menstruation and its hygiene management. Large scale researches with specific objectives on its impact on self-identity, cognitive performance, stress and problem-solving of women during menstruation may be done. Recommendations may be shared with policy makers and development agency to design project on adolescent development programme for their empowerment and sensitization to community including male members. The menstrual experiences are rooted in psychological and socio-cultural realities of women and affect well-being, identity and life outcomes. The future researchers may cross examine these findings in different cultural settings. It is worth researching the feminine identity (Jain, Tiwari, Awasthi & Chaubey, in press), metacognitive representations of menstrual distress and their feminine identity (Jain, Tiwari & Awasthi, 2017; Jain, Tiwari & Awasthi, in press; Jain, Tiwari & Awasthi, communicated), health outcomes and spiritual connectedness (Sharma, Tiwari, & Rai, 2017; Sharma, Tiwari, & Rai, in press; Sharma, Tiwari, & Rai, communicated), self-compassion (Verma & Tiwari, 2017a), personality attributes (Verma & Tiwari, 2017b), self-concept (Gujare & Tiwari, 2016b; Tiwari, 2011), mental health (Gujare & Tiwari, 2016a) and emotional competence (Tiwari, 2016a) that determine significantly their life outcomes. The role of positive behaviours (Tiwari, 2016c); yogic practices (Tiwari, 2016b) and positive body image (Jain, & Tiwari, 2016a; Jain, & Tiwari, 2016b; Tiwari, & Kumar, 2015; Tiwari, 2014), emotion regulation (Tiwari, 2015a), and forgiveness and life satisfaction (Mudgal, & Tiwari, 2015; Mudgal & Tiwari, 2017; Mudgal & Tiwari, communicated) may also be studied by future researchers to uncover the nature and dynamics of the impacts of menstruation of women. The application of mixed methods will help reveal the true nature of menstrual experiences and realities associated with them.

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