

4

Raising Bloody Hell: Inciting Menstrual Panics through Campus and Community Activism

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Introduction

When I teach a course called “Gender, Bodies, and Health,” designed to explore topics that include everything from pregnancy and domestic violence to orgasm and food politics, nothing provokes more disgust, hostility, and discomfort than the week on menstruation. Male students have left the class on the first day when I merely mention that we will study menstruation in the second week; women often gaze uncomfortably down at the syllabus and have later characterized menstruation as a topic they *do not discuss*. Certainly, the panics that surround menstruation have long rendered the menstruating body shameful, taboo, silent, and even pathological. From the historic separation of women’s menstruating bodies into “menstrual huts” (Guterman, Mehta, and Gibbs 2008) to the pervasive insistence upon the (pre)menstruating body as disordered (for example, PMDD, accusations of women “on the rag” when they express anger, etc.), women have had to confront their internalized body shame and cultural expectations for the *absence* of menstruation for some time.

This chapter examines complex responses to a simple activism assignment given to my “Psychology of Gender” course in which I asked undergraduates to design a public intervention that would challenge negative attitudes about menstruation. By examining the history of menstrual shame and, conversely, menstrual *activism* to combat such shame, along with an account of the kinds of strategic interventions students created, I outline the relationship between gender, power, and the menstruating body. I then explore the potential volatility surrounding the moral panics of menstruation by reflecting on the unexpected moral panic that ensued following the completion of this assignment.

“Managing” menstrual shame

Women’s bodies in their “natural” state have long elicited particular disdain, as routine processes of the body—growing body hair, sweating during exercise, breast-feeding in public, having natural body odors, gaining weight, menstruating each month—have become more tightly controlled, monitored, and, in some cases, *eliminated* by the ever-narrowing cultural ideas of womanhood. Women routinely engage in a variety of normative body practices that manage and hide their “disgusting” bodies (Roberts and Goldenberg 2007), whether shaving or waxing their entire bodies (Fahs 2011a; Tiggemann and Lewis 2004), avoiding exercise altogether or wearing “sexy” exercise clothes, breast-feeding only in private and behind closed doors, using beauty products to mask their natural scents, or hiding tampons and pads. While women struggle in general with accepting their bodies as “leaky” and “viscous,” menstruation signifies a particularly painful union between cultural narratives of menstruation as shameful combined with women’s own experiences of menstruation as taboo (Mansfield and Stubbs 2007).

When women worry about revealing their “menstrual status,” they tap into a long history of panics surrounding menstruation. Historically, women learned to see menstruation as a taboo and as something in need of *management* (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth 1988), as menstrual blood implied disease, social violations, and spiritual corruption (Read 2008; Shuttle and Redgrove 1988). Western narratives of menstruation today treat it as failed reproduction (Kerkham 2003) in large part because the state treats women’s bodies as machines of reproduction (Martin 2001). Still, even though disdain permeates cultural and patriarchal attitudes toward menstruation, some cultures (particularly African tribes) value menstruation, sometimes even simulating it as a powerful and revered practice (Brain 1988).

Overwhelmingly, women (especially *young* women) face an onslaught of images and ideas that treat menstruation as disgusting, tainting, and even frankly disabling; such narratives promote the idea that a woman’s period could paralyze her from her participation in sports, a career, or family life. Negative rhetoric surrounding menstruation has also circulated as justification for preventing women from becoming President or holding serious positions of power. The surge in menstrual suppression products (for example, the oral contraceptive, Seasonale, which creates four periods a year, or Lybrel, which eliminates all periods) portray the *non-menstruating* body as ideal and of ultimate cultural value (Johnston-Robledo, Barnack, and Wares 2006; Rose, Chrisler, and Couture 2008).

Similarly, when selling disposable menstrual products, advertisers depict the menstruating female body as unclean, unfeminine, and dirty in order to effectively market panty liners, pads, and tampons (Berg and Coutts 1994; Kissling 2006). In these mainstream advertisements, little acknowledgment of the environmental consequences of disposable, one-time-use pads and tampons enter the equation, thus promoting hyper-consumerism and teaching women to see menstruation as taboo (Davidson 2012). The phrase *feminine hygiene*—a relic from the 1930s advertisements for birth control—still suggests the dirtiness of the natural female body and the relative “cleanliness” women can aspire to when using menstrual products (Fahs 2012b; Tone 1996). (Notably, alternative or eco-friendly products like Lunapads, GladRags, and the DivaCup avoid *feminine hygiene* references and instead use more straightforward terminology like *menstruation* and *cycle*; see <http://lunapads.com/>). Additionally, films that portray menstruation overwhelmingly depict the “horrors” of menstruation or, more narrowly, the basic coming-of-age moments girls experience with the onset of their first menstrual cycle (Briefel 2005; Kissling 2002; Rosewarne 2012), largely ignoring menstruation as a normative and *adult* process.

Girls face particularly negative messages about menstruation and learn early on to dislike their menstruating bodies, particularly older girls (Rembeck, Moller, and Gunnarsson 2006), those prone to self-objectification (Roberts and Waters 2004), those with more body shame and less sexual experience (Schooler et al. 2005), those with negativity toward breastfeeding (Johnston-Robledo et al. 2007), and those who communicated with their mothers less often about menstruation (Rembeck, Moller, and Gunnarsson 2006). In the lives of adults, the menstrual taboo often continues, particularly within women’s sexual relationships. Less than half the women in one study engaged in menstrual sex and over 30 percent of women said they would *never* have menstrual sex (Allen and Goldberg 2009). Further, heterosexual-identified women felt far more negatively toward menstrual sex than did lesbians or bisexual women (even if they had male partners) (Fahs 2011b).

“Smear it on your face”: Menstrual anarchy and embodied rebellion

Despite, or perhaps *because of*, the overwhelming negativity and disgust directed toward menstruation, feminists, environmentalists, and other activists have fought back. In Shannon Docherty’s (2010) aptly titled article, “Smear it on your face, rub it on your body, it’s time to start a

menstrual party," the direct confrontational tone of menstrual activism comes across clearly. Menstrual activists—first appearing in the second-wave and also known as "menarchists"—have responded to negative portrayals of menstruation by using media campaigns, consciousness-raising, educational campaigns, and assaults on mainstream representations of menstruation. In addition to depathologizing menstruation and fighting against PMS and PMDD (Chrisler 2007), they have fought against toxic menstrual products that use chemicals that harm the vaginal lining (Bobel 2006), brought a critical voice to the discussion of menstrual suppression products (Johnston-Robledo, Barnack, and Wares 2006), and encouraged women to develop more positive feelings about menstruation by seeing it as affirming womanhood, a sign of non-pregnancy, and a symbol of overall health and well-being (Bobel 2010; Kissling 2006; Stubbs and Costos 2004). Rather than seeing menstruation as something to keep hidden, menstrual activists advocate for more education about menses and more discussion and openness about menstruation in health settings, classrooms, and family life (Kissling 2006).

Most importantly, menstrual activists want both men and women to develop a stronger and more nuanced critical consciousness about the social context for menstruation, particularly the shame narratives directed at women's bodies (Bobel 2008; Bobel 2010). Menstrual activists strive for more positive representations of menstruation along with safer products and more comprehensive, honest, and forthcoming dialogue about women's menstruating bodies (Bobel 2010). From advocating herbal remedies for cramps (Blood Sisters 2010) to celebrating the power of the "cunt" (Carpenter 2009), to showcasing connections between the personal and the political (Society for Menstrual Cycle Research) to teaching women to track and understand their cycles in an irreverent and humorous way (Quint 2009), activists have made many meaningful and diverse interventions. As Chris Bobel (2010) wrote, "Menstrual activism rejects the construction of menstruation as a problem in need of a solution ... The study of menstrual activism yields important insights into the evolution of social movements and feminist epistemology, a system of knowledges in constant flux" (7). More specifically, menstrual activists question why many women hate their periods more than their other bodily processes, and they interrogate the ways that culture, gender ideology, and consumerism have shaped these reactions (Bobel 2010).

Menstrual activists also emphasize that everyday acts of deviance—resisting commercial pads and tampons, injecting menstruation into public discourse, consuming less television—have particular relevance for resisting mainstream ideologies of menstruation and patriarchy, as

“activists” need not form a singular, organized body (Bobel 2007). Thus, menstrual activism represents an ideal site of resistance for *new* activists, particularly undergraduate students, those consciously confronting sexism for the first time, and budding feminists.

Consciousness-raising in the classroom

Justice must always question itself, just as society can exist only by means of the work it does on itself and its institutions.

Michel Foucault, *Libération* (1983)

As most people adamantly claim (much to the chagrin of feminist critics) that they have complete control over the decisions they make with their body (Gill 2007), the task of motivating undergraduates to question the *agency* of their bodily choices provides a formidable challenge to women’s studies instructors. Teaching students to imagine their bodies as sites of political, social, gendered, and cultural conflicts—often waged *at their expense*—represents a central goal of a women’s studies education. As students sometimes dismiss women’s studies course content as irrelevant to their lives (Webber 2005) or become outright hostile and critical toward women’s studies instructors (Hartung 1990; Stake and Hoffman 2000), feminist educators must negotiate difficult and provocative classroom environments that yield diverse responses from students on a regular basis. That said, studies have shown that students also benefit greatly from taking women’s studies courses, reporting a more progressive gender role orientation, less prejudice toward women, more agency and control over their lives, more support for affirmative action, greater involvement in the women’s movement, more activism, and more identification with feminism compared to students who did not take such courses (Bryant 2003; Harris, Melaas, and Rodacker 1999; Henderson-King and Stewart 1999; Stake 2007; Stake et al. 1994).

As the feminist classroom serves as an ideal space for challenging power (Maher 1999), confronting sexist and racist institutions (Enns and Sinacore 2004), and helping students to develop a critical consciousness that links up with their personal experiences (Fahs 2011a; Stake and Hoffman 2000), activist interventions should form a central part of the women’s studies curriculum. Still, feminist professors often shy away from integrating experiential forms of activism directly into the course curriculum and far too rarely use consciousness-raising exercises and assignments (Enns and Sinacore 2004), even though students benefit

most from experiential assignments that prioritize reflection and “applied feminism” rather than cataloguing facts, engaging in passive learning, and working on less “hands on” assignments (Copp and Kleinman 2008).

Given the significance of menstrual activism, its relevance to *new* activists, and the importance of linking activism to the feminist classroom experience, I embarked upon a new assignment in the Fall 2011 semester at Arizona State University in my upper-division cross-listed psychology and women and gender studies course entitled, “Psychology of Gender.” The class of 40 students included mostly those under age 30, roughly 25 percent male students and 75 percent female students, and a vastly diverse range of races and sexual identities. This assignment, dubbed the “menstrual activism project,” asked students to form groups of five to seven students where they would: (1) Strategize and identify a priority area that they would like to see changed in contemporary attitudes toward menstruation (for example, availability of menstrual products, attitudes toward menstrual sex, men’s attitudes toward purchasing menstrual products, advertisements that construct the non-menstruating body as “normal,” and so on); (2) Devise an activist intervention that would combat this negative norm, though it had to be manageable in scope and potentially enacted either on campus or in the broader community; (3) Enact this intervention and record the results (for example, photos, videotaping, interviews); (4) Write a paper on the activist project using relevant research on menstruation; and (5) Present the activist project to the class and at the Moral Panics of Sexuality conference. I framed the assignment as an introduction to activism and encouraged students to think creatively and critically about how they would like to intervene about negative menstrual attitudes.

With this prompt, six student groups created activism projects that spanned a wide range of ideas and tactics. One group labeled hundreds of menstrual products with accurate information about the menstrual cycle and handed out the products all throughout campus to both male and female students. They also made posters, affixed tampons to the posters, and placed them in “high-density” areas like the student cafeteria and the main classroom buildings. A second group targeted the safety and toxicity of tampons and devised a campus intervention for raising awareness about the dangers of tampons by using posters, interviews, and fliers about REDSCAM. A third group created a Facebook page to measure people’s attitudes about buying menstrual products and then distributed buttons to men on campus and in the community that read, boldly, *Real Men Buy Tampons!* They filmed these reactions and documented people’s responses to men wearing the buttons.



Figure 4.1 “Bloody Pants”: Kenna King walks through an Arizona mall with a blatant menstrual stain on her white pants

A fourth group entered gas stations and set up a box of free tampons at each counter with a brightly colored Japanese anime character called “Period Girl” stuck to the top of the box. They then filmed people’s reactions—ranging from gratitude for the free supplies to outright hostility and outrage—at each gas station store. A fifth group made signs that said, “Honk if you ♥ sex during menstruation” and stood at three locations—the corner of campus, a mall, and near a community center—to assess differences in responses. Finally, a sixth group staged a scene where a woman actor, accompanied by a “friend,” wore white pants with a noticeable, realistic-looking menstrual stain on them,



Figure 4.2 “Real Men Buy Tampons”: Sean Knox gives a “thumbs up” to men who aren’t squeamish about menstrual products

walked through the mall, and another student clandestinely filmed people’s reactions. If anyone approached the actor to tell her about the leak, she handed them a flier and explained the intervention.

In student papers and class presentations after these interventions, students expressed a variety of reactions and emotions about their activist projects. Prior to starting the assignment, many students felt menstrual activism would be “no big deal” and would not generate much excitement or interest. After doing the assignment, nearly all students reported, in their papers and presentations, feeling shocked and outraged by the degree of negativity they encountered from others, particularly men and university officials, when engaging in the assignment. When being handed tampons, many men would not touch the products and some people labeled the group members as disgusting. One university administrator removed the tampon-decorated sign from the cafeteria, saying it was “inappropriate for an eating environment.” While people reacted less negatively to the group raising awareness about the potential toxicity of tampons, this group also encountered stares, avoidance, and anger that they had raised the issue publicly. The

group distributing the *Real Men Buy Tampons!* buttons also noticed a large range of responses: some men eagerly took the buttons and wore them proudly while most expressed disdain, denial, and hostility at the idea that they *should* feel comfortable buying tampons.

While the campus interventions certainly provoked a range of responses, including a variety of negative reactions, the community interventions provoked even more direct and aggressive responses from others. The gas station intervention offended many of the gas station attendants, who yelled at the women to “get out of here!” No box of free supplies lasted long and all were eventually removed. The menstrual sex intervention, as we later found out, provoked one of the harshest responses from the community. While some cars drove by and happily honked their horns, others rolled up their windows and refused to make eye contact, and still others believed the posters signified the “deviance” of the university itself. The final intervention, which featured an “unsuspecting” menstruating actor at the local mall, provoked a fascinating range of responses: only women approached the actor to warn her that she had “leaked,” and some approached the actor’s *friend* and expressed anger that her friend did not tell her about her stain. At one point, an entire group of teenage boys heckled the actor, laughing and snickering in disgust. As a measure of public attitudes about menstruation, the combination of horror, disgust, pity, and outrage the actor faced testifies directly to the moral panics of menstruation.

Inciting a moral panic

Assuming power is not a straightforward task of taking power from one place, transferring it intact, and then and there making it one’s own; the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that the power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made that assumption possible ... in fact, the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination.

Judith Butler, *The psychic life of power* (1997, 13)

One of the most intriguing (and confusing) aspects of activism—something the students experienced acutely during this menstrual activism assignment—is that activists can never fully assess the impact of their actions on the targeted problem. The students and I both intended this assignment as a relatively benign intervention that would introduce

students to activism and encourage them to move beyond merely studying cultural and societal problems by instead prioritizing *interventions*. At the completion of the project, I felt proud of the group, eager to have them present their work at the Moral Panics of Sexuality conference the following week, and more convinced than ever that experiential learning has value for feminist education. They had finished the assignment, I had graded it, and we certainly never collectively anticipated the social backlash that would soon target these students' work.

In retrospect, the events that ensued following the menstrual activism project—our conference losing all state funding, threats of cancelling our conference, panics about disciplinary action that could be taken against me or my students, confusion about the difference between menstruation and masturbation, conflicts between liberals and conservatives—should not have surprised me as much as they did. (Social movement scholars have long suggested that successful progressive activism often generates conservative counter-movements). After all, menstruation is a prime target for panicking. The students encountered this even in the most straightforward of activist interventions. In an all-too-poignant moment of making the Moral Panics of Sexuality conference *real*, these students had incited a moral panic at precisely the same time that they would join a group of scholars trying to understand, deconstruct, and challenge the power of moral panics. We had, in essence, created a moral panic *about* moral panics!

Apparently, the group who had held the signs about menstrual sex (“Honk if you ♥ sex during menstruation!”) had, on the day they stood on the corner of campus, been spotted by a staff member of Arizona State Representative, Linda Gray (R). This staff member, eager to criticize the university for its left-leaning politics, had called Representative Gray to inform her that students held signs “advertising masturbation” on the street corner (somehow *menstruation* and *masturbation* got mixed up). Gray then called the office of the President and Provost of the university and demanded the removal of state funding for the conference, citing that female students had worn “lewd” outfits to advertise the conference and that they had openly advertised masturbation on the street. The conference organizers then received an urgent phone call from another university official, asking one of the performance artists to sign a statement that she would not use nudity in her performance and notifying us that these students had engaged in “inappropriate” behavior. All state funding was removed, and, despite having three keynotes booked and a panel of over 30 papers ready to go, the conference organizers questioned whether the university might also cancel the conference entirely.

The fact that the group of students who the elected official had singled out wore jeans and t-shirts, and that the group included a male student, that they had discussed *menstruation* instead of *masturbation*, and that the intervention had nothing to do with advertising the conference had gotten lost amidst the collective panicking. As the domino effect of panics unfolded, the staff member passerby panicked. The Republican Congresswoman panicked and saw an opportunity to punish a left-leaning university. The media director of the university panicked while fearing bad publicity and reprimand from the president's office. The president and provost panicked, fearing that bad publicity could hurt the funding of the university. The Dean panicked, even when expressing political solidarity with the conference. We as conference organizers panicked. Students panicked. The entire scene—straight out of the very core of what our conference had sought to criticize—had unfolded mere days before the conference began.

Nevertheless, the conference proceeded amidst the panics with a plethora of panels that showcased the topic as important, complex, and diverse. Several university administrators spoke at the conference, showing support as allies with the ideas presented. Students masterfully presented their work, carrying a deep awareness of the potential impact of their seemingly simple interventions. The collective presence of serious work on moral panics managed to counter the panicking in a significant and memorable way—perhaps signaling a bigger lesson about the necessity of meeting moral panics head-on and with the full force of scholarly analysis and activism at our disposal.

Few pedagogical moments have taught me, or the students, more about the power of simple activist interventions about the body. I had originally learned this when I had assigned a small group of students an extra credit assignment that asked them to grow out their body hair for ten weeks and write about it. The results were staggering, repeated again and again over the next five years: students encountered their own, and others', homophobia and heterosexism; they questioned their agency and choice about the body; they confronted their internalized fears of being dirty and unclean; they encountered resistance when they rebelled in the smallest of ways against body norms and “traditional femininity”; and they reported profound changes in consciousness about feminism, the body, and the nature of resistance (Fahs 2011a; Fahs and Delgado 2011; Fahs 2012a).

The results for a simple assignment about menstruation seemed equally intense—a sort of “cousin” of the body hair assignment—as the project inspired not only critical thinking about menstruation, but also about *moral panics* themselves. Never have I seen students present

in a more polished and professional way at a conference, giving voice to their tactical interventions and calling out the audience on any negative menstrual attitudes they harbored. At the conference, one of the presenters, Lorianne Shepard, announced during her talk that she was *currently* menstruating, inspiring much discussion throughout the day about these actions as *brave* and *inspiring*. (Even the mere *mention* of menstruation can set off a firestorm of conversation.) The activist work these students undertook not only created consciousness-raising in the classroom, but also provoked deep thinking about the narratives of disgust, shame, and hostility that circulate around the menstruating body. (Since that time, two of these students—Jaqueline Gonzalez and Stephanie Robinson-Cestaro—have also gone on to develop workshops about menstrual activism and have presented this material around the country at various universities and professional conferences). Male students, who overwhelmingly committed themselves to the assignment, faced accusations that devalued their manhood. The female students, eager to “out” menstruation in the public sphere, questioned their own feelings about their bodies and asserted themselves on a seemingly small stage—the campus and community—only to find that they had entered a much larger game—the political battles of the state of Arizona.

As a contribution to the larger conversations about menstrual activism, these activist interventions—and the unexpected consequences of the assignment—suggest that activism must have a place within feminist education. Further, menstrual activism must move beyond its usual target of increasing awareness about the dangers of conventional menstrual products (and the viability of alternative menstrual products like sponges, cups, and make-your-own menstrual pads) by also challenging the *moral panics* of menstruation. It is a particular kind of body—gendered as *female* and *bloody*—that carries the weight of moral panics. The “direct action” tenor of activist work about the body can have significant consequences even when using seemingly small and benign interventions. For example, challenging men’s attitudes about menstruation and menstrual products, confronting people’s resistance to menstrual sex as “dirty” or “disgusting,” rebelling against the culture of secrecy and shame around menstruation, expanding the notion of *who menstruates* (via inclusion of transmen and non-menstruating women), fighting against both consumerism and the pharmaceutical industry, and adopting radical postures of “outing” oneself as menstruating women all symbolize viable strategies of social change for new generations of menstrual activists. By undermining, inciting, interrogating, and dismantling the processes of “menstrual panics”—within

or outside of the classroom—menstrual activists can transform small personal rebellions into a forceful call for social justice.

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