

## Empowerment or Embarrassment? Two Views of Menstruation

**Capitalizing on the Curse: The Business of Menstruation.** By Elizabeth Arveda Kissling, Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienne, 2006. 155 pp. \$79.95 (hardcover) ISBN:158826310X.

**Girls in Power: Gender, Body, and Menstruation in Adolescence.** By Laura Fingerson, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 2006. 190 pp. \$21.95 (paperback) ISBN: 079146900X.

Joan C. Chrisler

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Books about menstruation are few and far between. Thus, it was exciting to find two new volumes, with very different approaches to the topic, published in the same year. Both are relatively short and accessible treatments of different aspects of menstruation, as a business and industry in the case of Kissling's *Capitalizing on the Curse*, and as a lived experience in the case of Fingerson's *Girls in Power*, and both books will be of interest to scholars of the menstrual cycle as well as to those with a more general interest in the psychology or sociology of gender.

Kissling's (1996a, b) field is communication studies, and she is best known for two studies of the ways that women and girls talk to each other about menstruation. Her book is focused, not on private communication, but on public communication, that is, cultural messages about menstruation. Menstruation remains a taboo topic outside the private realm, and thus most public communication consists of making fun of menstrual or premenstrual women, suggesting treatments for menstrual or premenstrual symptoms, or selling or critiquing products designed to assist women and girls with the management of menstruation, which is typically portrayed in cultural messages as a hygiene crisis.

*Capitalizing on the Curse* is written in a lively and accessible style, with short chapters that can easily be used in women's studies classes and many interesting images

and internet resources. The book covers ground both familiar (i.e., previously studied areas such as product advertisements and the rise of Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder) and unfamiliar (e.g., internet sources, new and unusual consumer products). There is a chapter on each of the following topics: advertising of menstrual hygiene products, scenes about menstruation on television and in the movies (much of this chapter is based on the article by Kissling (2002) in *Sex Roles*, which, curiously, is not cited), the development of the psychiatric diagnosis PMDD and the marketing of Sarafem as its treatment, menstrual suppression and the marketing of Seasonale, debates about tampon safety and the marketing of alternative products, and the menstrual counterculture, as exhibited in zines, museums of menstruation, and activism that stresses the positive aspects of the menstrual cycle. The book ends with Kissling's reflections on the commercial exploitation of menstruation and some suggestions about how to improve these largely negative cultural messages. The only topic that seemed to be missing from her otherwise comprehensive coverage is an analysis of the educational materials (e.g., films, booklets, guides for parents and teachers) that are produced by the manufacturers of tampons and pads to teach girls about menstruation. These products are briefly mentioned as an important step in branding, that is, the encouragement of menarcheal girls to select a particular type and brand of product that they will use as loyal customers for the rest of their menstrual lives. This omission is disappointing because previous researchers (e.g., Erchull et al. 2002) have suggested that the contents of these educational materials may be related to women's poor

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J. C. Chrisler (✉)  
Professor of Psychology, Connecticut College,  
Campus Box 5578, 270 Mohegan Avenue,  
New London, CT 06320-4196, USA  
e-mail: jchr@conncoll.edu

knowledge of the menstrual cycle, which Kissling discusses on pages 73–74.

I found the chapter on the menstrual counterculture to be of the greatest interest. The material is timely, as opposed to historic as many other approaches to cultural aspects of menstruation have been, and Kissling is among the few (see also Bobel 2006) researchers studying web-sites, zines, and other new media. Among the interesting topics discussed in this chapter is the legitimacy of the role of men, such as Harry Finlay, the “curator” of the Museum of Menstruation (known as MUM), and Vinnie D’Angelo, designer and marketer of Vinnie’s tampon case and other cycle-related products, all of which are festooned with cartoons of Vinnie himself. Both men are well-intentioned: They see themselves as filling a need (e.g., preserving the cultural history of menstrual hygiene products and related artifacts, providing a useful product) and as working to reduce the taboo of menstruation (e.g., by showing it worthy of a museum, by making products fun). Kissling can see the benefits of the involvement of men with positive views of menstruation in the movement to change the public’s attitudes, yet she also resents the fact that they have made money and reputations from a process they cannot experience themselves, a process that has historically been a central part of women’s culture. She covers the rivalry between Finlay and Geneva Kachman (artist, poet, student of cultural anthropology, and creator of the holiday Menstrual Monday), who debated each other a few years ago on the television show *Moral Court*. Kachman has developed her own virtual museum, which she calls the Museum of the Menovulatory Lifetime (known as MOLT). Readers are invited to visit Finlay’s ([www.mum.org](http://www.mum.org)), D’Angelo’s ([www.knowyourflow.com](http://www.knowyourflow.com)), and Kachman’s ([www.moltx.org](http://www.moltx.org)) web-sites to draw their own conclusions.

Fingerson is a sociologist, and her book *Girls in Power* is based on her dissertation research, a qualitative study of 26 girls and 11 boys, most of whom are White and all of whom live in Indiana. The participants were 13–19 years old at the time the data were collected, and they participated in both individual and group interviews. Fingerson conducted the interviews with the girls, and she recruited a fellow graduate student (a man) to interview the boys. Chapter 1 and two appendices contain a great deal of detail about the study’s methodology and theoretical underpinnings, which will be helpful to researchers who would like to build on it in future work. The book begins with an anecdote that explains how Fingerson became interested in this topic. She was doing some volunteer work at a girls’ club, and she was surprised one day to hear one of the girls indicate her postmenarcheal status by referring to “when I became a woman.” Fingerson was surprised both that the girl would “out” herself in this way and that she would use that particular linguistic convention to do so. Fingerson is

only about 10 years older than the adolescents with whom she worked and whom she studied, yet she could not imagine herself or her friends speaking about menstruation either forthrightly or obliquely at that age. She suspected that cultural and attitudinal changes were underway, perhaps due to Third Wave feminism and menstrual counterculture activism, and she decided to investigate.

Like most qualitative studies, this one is an interesting read. The book contains many quotes from the individual interviews and a number of excerpts from the transcripts of the group discussions. The participants’ voices, as well as the researcher’s, come through strongly and clearly, and I underlined many a clever or otherwise striking comment that made me think. I will undoubtedly cite some of them in my own future work. I did not necessarily agree with the conclusions Fingerson drew from her interviewees’ comments, but that disagreement is part of the fun of reading reports of qualitative studies, and I can imagine interesting class discussions in which my own and Fingerson’s interpretations are contrasted with those of my students, who are much closer in age to the interviewees than Fingerson and I are.

Although she found considerable evidence of negative attitudes toward menstruation among the adolescents in her study, Fingerson concludes that a positive aspect of the menstrual cycle is that it allows girls to use their knowledge and experience of menstruation as a source of embodied power. That is, because girls and women, but not boys and men, experience menstrual cycles, their special knowledge allows them to assert informational and expert power. She illustrates this with, for example, comments from the girls about the fun of embarrassing boys and male teachers by referring to menstrual symptoms or hygiene products (e.g., by telling a male teacher “I need a bathroom pass right now!”) and with comments from the boys about how they change the subject whenever girls talk about menstruation, which Fingerson attributes not only to embarrassment but also to disempowerment because the boys cannot dominate the conversation. Furthermore, girls’ ability to manage menstruation effectively increases their self-confidence in their ability to negotiate and manage other difficult or complex phenomena. In one humorous exchange during a group discussion, the girls decide that it’s a good thing that boys don’t menstruate because they wouldn’t be able to handle it.

The main problem I have with this work is that, although Fingerson admits in Chapter 1 that readers should not generalize beyond the data from a small and heterogeneous sample, she later proceeds to do just that herself. She concludes from her data that adolescents are less embarrassed about menstruation than they used to be and that the menstrual cycle is a source of empowerment for girls and women (despite all of the negative and disempowering

sociocultural messages documented by Kissling and others). Yet, how do we know that her sample is representative of the views of other North American girls in this age group? Moreover, is there any basis for the assumption that the girls and boys she studied speak as openly about menstruation outside the research setting, where they were encouraged to talk about it in small same-sex groups, or that they feel as empowered by the menstrual cycle as Fingerson thinks they do? The answers to these questions can only come from future work on this topic, work that I look forward to reading.

Fingerson also seems to be dismissive of work by previous researchers, especially work by psychologists, and she cites little of it, which made me wonder how aware she is of the literature in this area. Furthermore, she relies a great deal on secondary sources, such as journalist Natalie Angiers' (1999) book, rather than reading and analyzing the original sources for herself. A minor complaint is that I found the book repetitious; some sentences were used repeatedly, in one case twice on the same page. Her editor may have encouraged her to write this way, especially if the publisher is hoping to sell the book to the general public, as editors seem to think that most readers cannot remember what they read without frequent reminders. The repetition does make it possible for readers to dip into parts of the book, rather than reading it straight through as I did.

In conclusion, both books are interesting and accessible to readers with varied familiarity with the topics. Their accessibility and short length means that they can easily be added to women's studies syllabi. Instructors may also find one or both of interest to students in courses in psychology, sociology, communication studies, human development, and health. The books can be used in class in whole or in part, and both are guaranteed to provoke interesting discussions.

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