A contemporary phenomenology of menstruation: Understanding the body in situation and as situation in public health interventions to address menstruation-related challenges

Lindsay Kellanda, Sharli Paphitib, Catriona Macleodc

a Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics, Philosophy Department, Rhodes University, PO Box 94, Grahamstown 6140, South Africa
b Community Engagement Division, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa
c Critical Studies in Sexualities and Reproduction, Psychology Department, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Social science and public health research has pointed to, firstly, the challenges women face in terms of the management of menstruation and, secondly, to the negative symbolic associations made with the menstruating body. This research, however, seldom engages with philosophical issues relating to embodied subjectivity in order to explain and understand the trends noted. In this paper, we attempt to bridge the divide between feminist theory and current research on the menstruation-related challenges facing women today. We provide a feminist phenomenological account of menstruation in which women’s shared bodily lived experiences of menstruation—the body as situation—are set within contexts that enable and/or restrain freedom—the body in situation. This account allows us to understand the universal and differentiated aspects of menstruation and menstrual management, thereby providing a nuanced picture of the interplay between the physical occurrence of menstruation, the symbolic associations made with menstruation, and the socio-material, historical and political conditions within which women live. Such an account, we suggest, should inform advocacy around public policy and institutional civic society that promotes the freedom of women to engage in important life projects, and ground public health interventions around menstruation related challenges.

If feminism is to have a future, feminist theory—feminist thought, feminist writing—must be able to show that feminism has wise and useful things to say to women who struggle to cope with everyday problems…Beaupr̆e’s insights remain fundamental to contemporary feminism. But she analyzed the world she lived in. We need to analyze our own world.” — Toril Moi

A woman typically menstruates for a significant portion of her lifetime. As such, menstruation could be seen as a universal physiological phenomenon that women must manage, no matter their geographical, material or socio-political location. At the same time, however, differences in contemporary social, cultural and symbolic responses to menstruation, in access to menstrual products, and in the provision of public facilities, greatly affect women’s management of menstruation, as well as their ability to engage comfortably in various activities in both the private and public domains.

In this paper, we attempt to bridge the divide between feminist theory and current research from social science and public health on the menstruation-related challenges facing women in contemporary society. Bringing feminist theory together with current research in these fields provides us not only with a deeper understanding of the ‘problem’ of menstruation itself, but, further, with a more holistic view of the various material and symbolic factors associated with this ‘problem’, as well as an understanding of how the causes of this ‘problem’ give rise to various menstruation related challenges which interact with and affect one another. Furthermore, supplementing this current research with feminist phenomenological theory enables us to produce a grounded theoretical account of the issues that highlights both the universal and the differentiated aspects of menstruation. This, in turn, enables us to suggest certain crucial components which should, we argue, form the foundation of public health intervention strategies that...
will enable the development of more promising interventions with potentially greater impact in the future. That is, while we may grasp the fact that women experience various challenges relating to menstruation, and may even be able to identify some of the factors associated with these challenges, it is our contention that understanding these challenges from the perspective of feminist phenomenology, allows us to develop better grounded advocacy for sustainable and promising public health interventions in the future.

In what follows, we adopt an existential phenomenological approach—exemplified in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre (1956), Simone de Beauvoir (1949) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2004)—in which women’s shared bodily lived experiences of menstruation are set within contemporary contexts that enable and/or restrain freedom. Existential phenomenology, as the study of the constitution of meaning in experience, focuses on the self as embodied agent, the relationships between the embodied self and others, and the relationships between the embodied self and the shared world in which meaning is created. Such an approach accounts both for the universal or shared bodily occurrence of, and need to manage, menstruation, which we call menstruation as situation, as well as context-specific (social, cultural, symbolic, material and geographical) differences that impact on women’s lived experiences of menstruation, which we call menstruation in situation. In proposing this approach, we argue that the (universal) physical occurrence of menstruation and the practical daily requirement to manage menstruation—menstruation as situation—together form one of the aspects of female embodiment that inform women’s identities. We argue further that context-specific as well as persisting universal symbolic associations made with menstruation—menstruation in situation—play a significant role in women’s lived experiences of their bodies, of menstruation in particular, and of their place in the world. In particular, pervasive negative symbolic associations made with menstruation partly constitute the meaning of menstruation in the public realm (and subsequently inform the treatment of menstruating women), and directly impact upon women’s personal experiences of bodily alienation. We argue that menstruation both as and in situation informs the behaviour and actions that women are able, or are comfortable enough, to carry out on a daily basis, and, depending on public facilities, policies, and contextually-specific symbolic associations, limits the freedom of women to engage in various (often significant) life projects. We contend that a phenomenological understanding of both menstruation as situation and menstruation in situation not only provides us with a better understanding of the population-wide challenges that exist in relation to menstruation, but should also inform advocacy for the provision of socio-material conditions and symbolic associations that promote, rather than limit, the freedom of women.

Our aims in this paper are as follows: (1) to provide a feminist account of women’s lived experiences of menstruation, bringing existential phenomenology and social science/public-health research together in order to simultaneously account for the universal and differentiated aspects of experience, providing an understanding of menstruation as both a situation in its own right (and hence universal) and as placing menstruating women in situation (and hence differentiated); and (2) to provide recommendations which serve as a critical foundation for planned intervention strategies that aim to address menstruation-related challenges in the future. In what follows, then, we will first discuss the primary insights offered by existential phenomenology and, more pertinently, feminist existential phenomenology, which we will draw on in fulfilling the first aim of the paper. Second, we will explore some of the findings revealed by social science and public-health research on the menstruation-related challenges facing women in different parts of the globe. Finally, and on the basis of the foregoing, we will provide theoretically grounded recommendations for future planned public health interventions.

1. Existential phenomenology, embodiment and menstruation

Existential phenomenology—exemplified in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty—provides us with a number of crucial insights that enable us to provide a deeper and more holistic understanding of the impact of menstruation-related challenges on the freedom of women. Most crucial, for our purposes here, is the importance that existential phenomenologists place on embodiment—not only in relation to identity and self-constitution, but also in relation to our situation in the world and, ultimately, to our freedom. In breaking away from the traditional Cartesian picture, existential phenomenologists take embodiment to be central to our self-constitution, and the fact of our embodiment to be crucial for understanding our experience of ourselves as human agents as well as our unique situation in the world. Given that we live as embodied agents, our situation in the world is to some extent determined by our bodies, their functions, manifestations and limitations, the symbolic associations made with our bodies, and the socio-material conditions within which we live. On the phenomenological account that Beauvoir, for instance, puts forward, the body is both a situation in its own right and is always lived within a social, material and historical situation. Moreover, since the body as situation and the body in situation are inextricably linked, certain aspects of the body as situation and the body in situation relate to and compound one another. The material conditions within which our bodies exist—as situations in their own right—are themselves informed by and in turn inform the symbolic associations made with menstruation, thereby constituting the situation within which the body lives. Although the distinction between the body both as situation and in situation is important, it is similarly important to note that these two dimensions of our embodied situation are necessarily interrelated in such a way that they cannot finally be separated—all ‘matter’ is always already interpreted and meanings get materialised; both the body as and in situation, then, are lived constructions of meaningful matter.5

In this section, we highlight the following four crucial insights from existential phenomenology, which, when brought together with recent work in social science and public health on the impact of menstruation-related challenges on the freedom of women which we go on to discuss in section two, allow us to put forward a contemporary phenomenology of menstruation:

(1) Our embodiment enables freedom—it is only because we are embodied agents that we are able to translate our thoughts, values, desires and preferences into action;6
(2) Our embodiment limits freedom—(i) the socio-material conditions in which we find ourselves are able to restrict our movements in both the private and public domains,7 and (ii) negative symbolic (and sometimes cultural) associations are partly constitutive of our relationships with ourselves, others and the material world in which we live;8
(3) The menstruating body is a situation in its own right—the

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5 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their suggestion that this point be emphasised.
6 This, for example, is one of Sartre’s foundational premises in Being and Nothingness.
7 This claim is derived particularly from Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty who diverged radically from the early Sartre is arguing that situation could effectively diminish freedom—a claim that stood in direct opposition to Sartre’s account of radical freedom exemplified in his infamous claim that the slave in chains is as free as his master.
8 These insights run throughout the work of Sartre, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty insofar as our situation is partly constituted by what Sartre calls our being-for-others. For example, Sartre speaks about our coming to objectively embody for the other certain characteristics, which we do not choose because they are projected onto us from outside, and which lead to our alienation from ourselves. Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty take this thought further than Sartre in their examinations of the situations that women and the proletariat find themselves in.
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