


Period Stain and Social Evaluation. The Performance of Shame

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Abstract

The “period stain” could be considered as a symbolic and material object with strong moral overtones. In this article, I propose to analyze it from the research program of gossip and reputation (Giardini & Wittek, 2019a) in dialogue with the intersection between Simmel’s and Goffman’s relational sociology on one side, and feminists’ theories from the other. I will give an account of the meanings attributed to body information, such as the staining of clothes with menstrual blood and the impact on the social evaluation of bodies from a woman’s point of view. To achieve this, I analyze the results of an instrument applied in March 2021 entitled Virtual survey on the experience of menstruation in the context of the pandemic caused by Covid-19. Although women do not share the gender stereotypes associated with menstruation, they reveal the negative impact these stereotypes had on the social evaluation of this bodily experience. Women are concerned about the negative evaluation that others have of the experience of the period stain. I will show how the performance of shame associated with period stain is narrated; and, how mockery is an affective device of reputation. However, there are also ways to re-signify the experience based on solidarity among friends.

Keywords: Body; emotions; shame; menstruation; gender.

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1 Introduction

As I write this article, two memories have come to my mind insistently. The first one goes back to the elementary school where I studied, private, mixed, and catholic. In the mid-eighties, I enter the “women’s bathroom” with my best friend, who steps forward when one of the cubicles is vacated. Suddenly, I realize that the other girls look with distaste towards the floor where my friend is; she has dropped the sanitary pad out of the bucket, so it is not within reach of her. They whisper among themselves and exchange knowing glances. One of the girls says, “Oh gross!” And another “Guácala!”¹. I reach to kick the compress to where my friend is so that she can pick it up. I only manage to say to the others with a broken voice, “What’s wrong?” I am angry at my peers, but I also feel ashamed of myself and my friend. The second memory goes back to 2011, and I was appointed representative on the Academic Council of my University. We are in a long session, and I have been sitting for more than three hours. I get up to go to the bathroom and feel a trickle of warm liquid slide down my leg. My period has come. I ran to the bathroom, not even asking if someone had seen me, it would increase my discomfort. I am very ashamed, and I feel guilty. “How did I not come prepared? How did I not realize?” I reproach myself.

The bodily experience of menstruation is clothed with gender stereotypes (Young, 2005, p. 118) and despite cultural variations, as McHugh (2020) points out: “the silence, secrecy, and negativity toward menstruation” are found repeatedly in the literature (p. 409). The role of the secret is of great relevance to understanding how gender stereotypes demand that the body’s information on menstruation be kept out of sight and even the nose of others. We expect a woman, even a young girl, to learn to keep the management of menstruation a secret. Otherwise, the period stain receives a negative evaluation that impacts the bodily experience of menstruation from women’s point of view. These stereotypes negatively mark the emotions associated with the bodily experience of menstruation. Menstruation is considered abject² (Young, 2005), so public exposure of period stain creates shame for those who suffer from it (de Beauvoir, 2010; McHugh, 2020; Fingerson, 2006) and, in extreme cases, disgust for those who perceive it (Young, 2005, p. 98; Tarzibachi, 2017; Miller, 1997). These emotions arise even with intimate people such as the couple (Sabido Ramos & García, 2017; Sabido Ramos & García, 2018).

Several studies have shown that bodily menstruation’s experience is strongly related to negative social evaluations (de Beauvoir, 2010; Young, 2005; Fingerson, 2006; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Tarzibachi, 2017; McHugh, 2020). Specifically, the ‘period stain’ could be considered as a symbolic and material object with strong moral overtones. In this article, I propose to analyze the ‘period stain’ from the research program of gossip and reputation (Giardini & Wittek, 2019a) in dialogue with the intersection between Simmel’s and Goffman’s relational sociology on one side, and feminists’ theories from the other. I analyze the results of an instrument applied in March 2021 entitled Virtual survey on the experience of menstruation in the context of the pandemic caused by Covid-19. Although women do not share the gender stereotypes associated with menstruation, they reveal the negative impact these stereotypes had on this bodily experience. Women are concerned about the negative evaluation that others have of the period stain. I will show how the performance of shame associated with period stain is

1. Guácala is a Spanish expression common in Mexico used to express extreme disgust.

2. For Young (2005), the use of “abject” is related with Kristeva’s reflexion: “abjection is the fear of losing the border between self and other [...] Menstrual blood is a fluid and olfactory substance that itself defies boundaries and fixity.” (p. 110)

narrated; and, how mockery is an affective device of reputation. However, there are also ways to re-signify the experience of menstruation based on solidarity between friends.

To achieve this, the text is divided into four parts. In the first part, I present the analytical horizon to understand the role of shame in staining clothes with menstrual blood. Following the research program on gossip and reputation, it is important to note that gossip is a form of social information exchange, and reputation is associated with values and meanings that define what is appropriate or not. In this sense, it is not fortuitous to remember that for Simmel and Goffman, the information we give to others is essential in any type of relationship. For both authors, the information that does not coincide with the image that the *self* wants to project, causes shame. Both authors gave all kinds of examples, from nudity in public spaces, stuttering, flatulencies, torn or dirty clothes, but neither referred to a fact that happens to almost half of the population of childbearing age, that is staining clothes with menstrual blood. At this point, feminists' theories enrich the interaction order analyses. In the second part, I present a brief methodological note of the applied survey. The use of two images commissioned from an illustrator to elicit respondents' thoughts and emotions about the period stain is explained. The use of these images allowed knowing how the respondents narrate the performance of shame caused by the period stain. In the fourth part, I propose the role of mockery as an affective device and a mechanism for controlling reputation. Furthermore, some resistance strategies by women to avoid this negative social evaluation. Finally, the conclusions are presented.

2 Gossip, Reputation and Shame

To understand the role of shame in staining clothes with menstrual blood is necessary to take into account the role of social information in the social bond. Gossip is a form of social information exchange, (Davis et al., 2019, p. 302), and it has an impact on people's reputation (Giardini & Wittek, 2019b). For Simmel (2009), all social bonds are based "on their knowing something about one another" (p. 307). This mutual knowledge is a condition of possibility to establish a social relationship. When we meet another person, we are guided by an image or "generalized idea" that does not encompass the totality of their personality, but that gives us a general idea of how to behave and what we expect from them: "In order to take cognizance of people, we view them not according to their pure individuality but framed, highlighted, or even reduced by means of a general type by which we recognize them" (p. 44). The first *a priori* of social life is the idea that one person is formed of another from certain shared information. The relevance of this *a priori* allows us to understand why gossip, as a social information exchange (Davis et al., 2019) about a person, has relevance in the image we make of this person.

The other side of the first *a priori* that Simmel raises, is that in addition to having some knowledge of a person, at the same time, we have some ignorance of that person; that is, there is a lack of knowledge of certain information. Simmel (2009) points out that there is a part of non-knowledge necessary for every social bond: "Our knowledge of the whole being on which our actions are grounded is marked by characteristic limitations and diversions" (p. 309). This *a priori* or condition of possibility of the social encounter, acquires greater notoriety in modern society. This is to the extent that only a part of the personality is involved in the social circle in which an individual operates; therefore, it is possible and necessary to maintain a piece of reserved information. As part of the individualization process, people share different social circles where only one part is involved while another is unknown. Sometimes certain information could break the image you want to project in a social circle and affect your reputation.

This line of argument bears a significant relationship with the argument of Erving Goffman³, for whom in modern societies it is necessary to maintain a distance from a “territory of the *self*” that is not only symbolic, but also material and spatial. Goffman also argued that when a person meets another, they try to acquire information about them or put into play what they already have. Goffman (1956a) argues that a characteristic of all face-to-face encounters is the control and management of impressions: “When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed.” (p. 1). This information contributes to the definition of the situation and the orientation of expectations between two or more people who are *in situ*. As for Simmel, for Goffman much of that information is intentionally kept hidden in the interaction. For Goffman, when a performance is offered, many elements are hidden, especially those that have to do with bodily information such as tics, certain tones of voice, stutter, blush, tremor or some bodily fluids, such as mucus, saliva or sweat.

Now, for Simmel, any intentional action to hide something from another or others, be it information, ideas, activities, or feelings, generates secrets. The secret is understood as a social form, to the extent that regardless of the content that characterizes it (that is, what is hidden), the secret always links us with others. Those who know the secret constitute a world apart “second world” from those who do not. (Simmel, 2019, p. 325). In the case of the individual, there is information that must be kept hidden in the performance from others. Especially what has to do with what society defines as dirty or dirty work. Goffman (1956a) writes: “We find that there are many performances which could not have been given had not tasks been done which were physically unclean, semi-illegal, cruel, and degrading in other ways; but these disturbing facts are seldom expressed during a performance.” (p. 28).

For Goffman (1956a), “a single note off-key can disrupt the tone of an entire performance” (p. 33). For the *self*, it is convenient to hide certain information that may take us away from the behavioral expectation that we want to project. Therefore, any information that deviates from the ideal image of the *self* is subjected to concealment or cover-up. Otherwise, embarrassment may arise: “It occurs whenever an individual is felt to have project incompatible definitions of himself before those present” (Goffman, 1956b, p. 264). Goffman (1956a) points out how various unintended gestures ruin the performance and the performer’s impression on the interaction. One of these is a lack of body control, such as slipping, tripping, falling, belching, yawning, scratching, or flatulence (p. 34). The necessary coherence between what you want to project and control of the body is essential to achieve a successful performance. Thus, Goffman (1956a) explains: “In other words, we must be prepared to see that the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps” (p. 36). It is curious that Goffman does not emphasize the meaning of staining clothes, much less staining with menstrual blood.⁴ That little accident destroys the impression of the *self* that wants to be fostered in any interaction and even leaves an affective mark, as we will show later.

The secret and the corporeal-affective states that this way of being with others generates is a matter of great relevance for this proposal. We all have secrets; the fact that these are discovered or revealed can generate various bodily-affective states. The secret is related to gossip, while gossip “requires the absence of the third party, that is, secrecy at the moment of transmission.”

3. According to Jaworski (2020), the impact of the chapter on Simmel’s secret will be of great relevance to Goffman. Jaworski reminds us how in the chapter ‘Discrepant Roles,’ Goffman states: “a team must be able to keep its secrets and have its secrets kept” (p. 375).

4. However, the scope of Goffman’s legacy for the analysis of menstruation has been highlighted by Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan Chrisler (2011) who interpret menstruation as a typical case of social stigma.

(Giardini & Wittek, 2019a, p. 2). Gossip and its impact on people's reputation are related to the emergence of emotions, both for those who spread gossip and those who receive it and whoever finds out about it (senders, receivers, and targets) (Martinescu et al., 2019, p. 153). Shame is one of the emotions associated with these mechanisms. As Besnier (2019) points out: "Shame can emerge in a number of ways, including the shame of being gossiped about or of suspecting that one is target of gossip, or the shame of being caught gossiping in societies that deem the activity reprehensible" (p. 112).

In 'On the Psychology of Shame', Simmel (2000) points out that shame can have different origins and depend on different cultural codes and the evaluation we make of the gaze of others. Simmel points out that women are prone to experiencing shame, but this depends on the context and their relationship with the male gaze. Simmel launches a relational perspective that is possible to recover. In other words, for Simmel shame is not explained in terms of an individual but in terms of relationships that make it possible. Shame is an emotion that is experienced as there is an accentuation of the other's gaze towards oneself (Simmel, 2000). That gaze is linked to a degrading judgment for transgressing a norm or convention. According to Simmel, shame appears when we deviate from an idealized image of the self-according to the gaze of the other and are aware of that deviation. In that sense, shame is a moral emotion because it refers to the disapproval of the other and the conviction that the other is right in his negative judgment of ourselves.

In our society, some of the bodily expressions of shame are related to hiding the face from the gaze of the other: "Hence it becomes really quite understandable why shame leads us to look to the ground to avoid the gaze of the other" (Simmel, 2009, p. 571). According to Simmel (2000), face is the manifestation and expression of individuality, with its concealment the *ego* disappears and, with it, the point of origin of the feeling of shame. Simmel (2009) calls it 'ostrich-like attitude' (p. 572), although various forms of concealment can also be used (e.g., covering oneself with clothing). In other words, there is a performance of shame (Ahmed, 2014, p. 109) expressed in verbal and non-verbal cues (Scheff, 1990, pp. 84–86). The performance of shame generates concealment or reduction of the body before others gaze. Ahmed (2014) explains it clearly: "In other words, shame feels like an exposure – another sees what I have done that is bad and hence shameful – but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject turn away from the other and towards itself." (p. 103) Shame is an emotion that also affects the body and its postures, even its movements (Sabido Ramos, 2019, p. 7).

Likewise, for authors such as Scheff (1990, 2000) and Barbalet (2004) for Simmel, shame contributes to the maintenance of specific asymmetries since it is a feeling that places the norm and its idealization to the detriment of the person and indicates the breach of it. In Simmel's (2018) words: "The accentuation of the self and the respective reduction of it exists due to the distance between an imperfect reality and an idealized one, a normalized totality" (p. 71). Shame makes us feel that someone is judging us negatively and that we are convinced that they are correct, and therefore we feel wrong with ourselves. Like Ahmed (2014) pointed out: "When shamed, one's body seems to burn up with the negation that is perceived (self-negation); and shame impresses upon the skin, as an intense feeling of the subject 'being against itself.'" (p. 103). Therefore, we try to avoid shame by adjusting to the idealized norm. As we have seen, Simmel and Goffman give us many examples of what can cause embarrassment and shame in the interaction order, but neither referred to the staining clothes with menstrual blood. It is relevant to note that, like Fingerson (2006) points out: "Concealing menstruation is a masculinist-based notion of the body because, for women, menstruating is ordinary [...]. Yet the dominant view of what the body is and how it should act and look is that of the male body" (pp. 15–16).

At this point, a feminist revisitation could enrich the interaction order analyses.⁵

Gender stereotypes define what is expected of femininity and masculinity in a particular cultural context. On the interaction order we could observe gender displays in Goffman's sense, that is, behavioral styles that distinguish the way men and woman participate in social situations (1987, p. 3). But what happens when an accident like a period stain breaks the interaction order? Following Simone de Beauvoir, for Iris Marion Young (2005, p. 98), shame is that emotion that forces girls, adolescents, and women to keep menstruation secret from the gaze of others in the public space, both in schools, on the street or in the workplace.

In *The Second Sex. Lived Experience* (2010) Simone de Beauvoir points out how a halo of secrecy surrounds the experience of menstruation in the West. The first menstruation or menarche translates into ignorance and is marked by the experience of shame and humiliation: "Her first period exposes this meaning, and feelings of shame appear. If they existed already, they are confirmed and magnified from this moment on. All the accounts agree: whether or not the child has been warned, the event always appears repugnant and humiliating" (p. 372).

Silences regarding the experiences of the female body and menstruation have been present in various cultures (MacHugh, 2020, p. 409; Fingerson, 2006, p. 40). In interactional order girls must learn to manage menstruation and to keep it secret. We could say that manage menstruation is essential to a successful gender display in the interaction order. When concealment techniques fail, shame is one of the experiences that marks the gender from the early socialization processes. Young argues that popular media, schools and medical pamphlets: "tend to send them mixed messages about menstruation. On the one hand, girls should take pride in becoming women, with the sexual and reproductive powers that this entails. On the other hand, they must take care to hide evidence of their bleeding from family members, schoolmates, and even strangers on the street" (2005, p. 101). As we demonstrated in other research, shame is not only experienced with anonymous and strangers but even with intimate people: "In the case of menstruation, the responses reflect the demands associated with the female body, including how it should look and even how it should smell" (Sabido Ramos & García Andrade, 2018, p. 148). Fingerson (2006) asserts that: "Not only is menstruation a secret, but it is a dirty, unsanitary secret" (p. 15).

Various feminist contributions have shown how hegemonic ideals of femininity are associated with a notion of reputation that runs through bodies. Like Beverly Skeggs (2002) pointed out: "Producing oneself as respectable becomes the means by which internal regulation and the specific policing of bodies occurs." (p. 130).⁶ Thus, as Shefer and Munt (2019) point out: "shame serving as a mechanism of surveillance and policing of gender binarisms in maintaining idealized 'respectable' femininity" (p. 146). This varies historically and culturally, however, shame appears when feeling an inadequacy in front of the hegemonic normative ideals of gendered bodies (Tarzibachi, 2017, p. 69). Women fear becoming third party of others by failing to keep body information associated with menstruation hidden. Since gossip affects the reputation, there is a constant fear of being affected as targets in a negative sense. In this sense, the experience of shame by period stain and all the techniques to avoid it, is a control and self-monitoring mechanism for women.

Thus, menstruation is a subject that is kept secret and that links women, but that sometimes prevents them from knowing themselves and their bodily experiences. As Young points out,

5. Fingerson (2006) notes: "Other bodily functions must also be managed, such as defecation or farting, but they are not embedded in the tricky realms of gender and puberty as menstruation is" (p. 18).

6. Although the reputation is not only sustained by holding hegemonic gender expectations, but also of class and race (Skeggs, 2002).

girls and young women demand the type of knowledge that is not biomedical but practical. The questions of concern are: “What’s the difference between maxi and minipads, how do I insert tampons, how often should I change? How do I keep from staining my clothes, sheets, or the chairs I sit on?” (Young, 2005, p. 103). There is a constant fear that the period stain, as a type of body information, will be exposed to others and negatively evaluate the body. When the body blemish appears, various techniques are activated to avoid embarrassment. That is to say, is a double direction of the secret. First, the need for concealment is imposed on the menstrual experience. Women learn to keep it a secret. Second, women fear that others will talk about them secretly and will cause gossip and negative evaluation that will affect their reputation.⁷ For all the above, it is that we can sustain that ‘period stain’ could be considered as a symbolic and material object with strong moral overtones.

3 Methodological Note

Before contextualizing the research, I am interested in positioning myself in a feminist epistemology (Skeggs, 2002). In Mexico, a phenomenon links the body and violence against women: femicide. A characteristic of these crimes is that the corpses of women or feminized bodies show signs of extreme violence. In other words, femicide is a type of “expressive violence” (Segato, 2013, p. 31) in that bodies a symbolic brutally material message is used to leave. According to estimates by non-governmental organizations, academic research, and government databases, 10 women are believed to be murdered every day in Mexico. For any social scientist with a feminist approach, the women’s bodies, and blood matter. In some protest banners we could read: “That the only blood spilled is menstrual blood.” The interest in dismantling mechanisms that help maintain violence against women is of both academic and political interest. That is why I have been interested in turning the analysis of an “innocuous phenomenon” (compared with femicide) such as menstrual blood into an object of study. Around the period stain, moral and affective mechanisms are activated that are worthy of consideration. Although the hurts left by emotions are not as decisive as physical hurts, they also affect people’s lives and leave scars.

In Mexico, Women represent 51.4% of the population. Of these, about 62% are of menstruating age (UNICEF, 2021). During pandemic times, the issue of menstruation has become a political issue based on a bill presented in June 2020, which demands a reform of article 115 of the General Law of Education on menstrual hygiene. The discussion about period poverty has an important role in these debates (Serendipia, 2021). In a movement that some media have called the “red wave”, various political initiatives have also emerged to exempt feminine menstrual hygiene products from taxes. Feminist organizations like the collective group *Menstruación Digna México* (2022) have led the demands (Figure 4). In October 2021 the Mexican Congress approve the law to make female sanitary products free takes. In other words, menstruation has been made visible through various initiatives even menstrual activism in digital platforms (Ramírez, 2019) that have brought it to the public agenda. Strategies have been carried out from various forums (governmental, legal, parliamentary, media), self-management spaces, and feminist collectives, to put menstruation on the table for discussion. In that sense, the issue is present in the public and virtual discussions.

7. Like Giardini and Wittek (2019a) pointed out: “In the case of gossip, an additional condition is that it requires the absence of the third party, that is, secrecy at the moment of transmission” (p. p.2)

In this social context, I applied a survey⁸ entitled *Virtual survey on the experience of menstruation in the context of the pandemic caused by Covid-19*, which aimed to explore the meaning that people attribute to menstruation in general and in the context of confinement caused by the particular pandemic.⁹ The survey was released from 22 February, 2021 to 01 March, 2021.¹⁰ The questionnaire was divided into four sections, and a total of 42 questions were listed. The first section collected general data such as place of residence, age, gender, sexual orientation, occupation, marital status, and education. The social perception of menstruation was the subject of the second section. Two images were used as elicitation resources associated with the experience of staining clothes and a chair (Figure 1 and 2). The two images were requested from a designer. The third section was related to the experience of menstruation and the affective states associated with it. Finally, the fourth section collected the experience of menstruation during confinement. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice questions (a single option and more than one option) and open questions.

The number of questionnaires that obtained responses was one thousand one hundred sixty four ($n = 1164$). People from different States of the Mexican Republic and countries such as Argentina, Colombia, Spain, Ecuador and Peru participated. The intentional sample was limited to the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico, which is made up of Mexico City and neighboring municipalities of the State of Mexico and Hidalgo.¹¹ This area concentrated the highest number of responses ($n = 841$). Thus, the sample I considered registered a subset of 841 cases, that is, 72.2% of the responses. Almost the total 98.9% ($n = 832$) identified with the female gender. 80.6% declared themselves heterosexual ($n = 678$), 11.7% bisexual ($n = 99$), 3% lesbian ($n = 29$), others 4.1% ($n = 35$). Most responses were concentrated in the age ranges of 19 to 29 years 50% ($n = 426$) and 30 to 39 years 36% ($n = 304$). (See Table 1). The level of education of the respondents was concentrated in Bachelor's degree $n = 490$, followed by Preparatory/Baccalaureate $n = 141$, Master's degree $n = 134$, Doctorate $n = 45$ and Secondary $n = 27$. In other words, most of the respondents have a high degree of education. At the time of answering the survey, 528 of them were working, and 50.1% ($n = 430$) had had financial difficulties during the pandemic.

8. In times of the pandemic caused by SARS-Cov2 that causes the Covid19 disease, one possibility of investigation has been through the Webs Survey in various disciplines, including sociology. The advantages of this way of applying a survey are its low cost; the speed with which the data can be collected, both for the person who answers the survey and for the researcher who receives the data in electronic format, which allows the information to be easier to process (Fripiat & Marquis, 2010). In addition, the webs surveys or online surveys allow access and virtual contact with people who, given the current confinement policies, would be inaccessible.
9. I considered some general data monitored by the query "Let's talk about menstrual hygiene," launched in conjunction with UNICEF's Report and Mexican government institutions and civil society organizations (Serendipia, 2021). I also considered the results of other recent investigations (Sosa-Sánchez et al., 2014; Sabido Ramos & García Andrade, 2018; Ramírez, 2019; Álvarez & Loeza, 2021) that have investigated a diverse and heterogeneous public in Mexico to speak of menstruation.
10. The invitation to answer it was circulated through various contact lists in email, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter
11. The Valley of Mexico continues to be the metropolitan area with the largest number of demarcations and municipalities, in total 76, 16 in Mexico City, 59 in the State of Mexico and 1 in Hidalgo.

Table 1. Source: Own elaboration.

Ages		
Age ranges	No.	%
13 – 18 years	26	3%
19 – 29 years	426	50.6%
30 – 39 years	304	36.1%
40– 49 years	77	9.1%
50 – 69 years	8	0.9%
TOTAL	841	100%

A characteristic of the survey was the use of the elicitation technique from two images (Figures 1 and 2). The use of images is very useful when trying to record the meaning that is attributed to emotions and even sensory meanings. For Sarah Pink (2015), the use of images can invoke memories and sensory knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible (p. 88). Even its use in tools such as surveys can trigger somatic work¹² for the participants and provide relevant sensory information (Sabido Ramos & García Andrade, 2018, p. 145). In this case, I asked an illustrator to create two images associated with the analytical ideas that I have developed. The first image is related to the experience of staining menstruation clothes and the body technique associated with hiding the face from the gaze of the other, what Simmel calls ‘ostrich-like attitude’. This first image served to identify what the respondents believe this image means for society.

The second image is related to the experience of menstruating a piece of furniture, associated with the idea of transcending the “territory of the *self*” both in a symbolic and spatial sense, in the sense of Goffman. This first image served to detect if the respondents identify with that image and why. Open responses were coded and word frequency analysis was performed in the cases indicated.

4 Shame Narratives and Period Stain

As I have pointed out, according to Simmel, those who share secrets form a world apart from those who do not. Some researchers find that women use “code words” to maintain the concealment of menstruation (Fingerson, 2006, p. 32). Tarzibachi raises how the euphemisms that are used to name it and that depend on each cultural context, refer to “a kind of secret key” and “own code that connects women with other women from a bodily experience” (2017, p. 63). This is reflected in some of the survey findings. The respondents indicated that the first people to find out about their first menstruation were mothers, sisters and grandmothers in 91% ($n = 766$). Although more than half of the respondents, 58% ($n = 491$) indicated that talking about menstruation is normal at home, they recognize that this is due to a change in mentalities. A 29-year-old employee comments: “Now we talk, before it was something that is only spoken between (older) women and in code” (ID0227)¹³. Another 38-year-old employee also comments

12. According to Vannini et al. (2012): “somatic work refers to the range of linguistic and alinguistic reflexive experiences and activities by which individuals interpret create, extinguish, maintain, interrupt, and/or communicate somatic sensations that are congruent with personal, interpersonal, and/or cultural notions of moral, aesthetic, and/or logical desirability.” (p. 19).

13. ID means identifier, and the number corresponds to the respondent number in the table.



Figure 1 – Author: Celeste Alcocer

that: “Now it is normal, not before, it was taboo.” (ID409). A 27-year-old university professor points out: “It has changed over time, before it was only spoken between women, today it is spoken between all members of the family” (ID0371). Almost all of the people ($n = 837$) who responded to the survey, that is, 99.5% do not consider that menstruation has to be a secret. 80% ($n = 671$) do not believe that menstruation is an issue that concerns only women, even one respondent pointed out that it is also a matter of “trans men”.

Despite the above, when the question was asked about the meaning of menstruation in our society, some responses alluded to the secrecy that continues to prevail, as well as its relationship with shame. A respondent shares: “It is seen as something shameful and secret, being that it is something natural” (ID0218). In the use of the first elicitation image, the respondents were asked “What do you think this image could mean in our society?” (Figure 1). Regarding a general meaning of the image, when analyzing the qualitative responses and coding according to the stated emotions, the prevalence of shame stands out, according to the frequency of words. So, the words shame-shame-modesty had 455 mentions. It is not by chance that, without suggesting it in the question, shame is the emotion most mentioned in the answers.

Figure 1 shows the image of what is probably a girl or adolescent from the back, that is, the face is not visible, and her hands try to hide the stain on her skirt. On the other hand, the color combination of the blouse and skirt is associated with school uniforms in Mexico. In that sense, for a young employee the image means: “The shame that they teach us to have of our menstruation, that men cannot see and, if we can hide it from women too, the better. Who did not ever get dirty at school? It was the most embarrassing thing and it had to be a secret” (ID0820). Even though the respondents do not share the stereotyped images associated with gender and the menstrual experience, they highlight how this idea circulates in the imagination.



Figure 2 – Author: Celeste Alcocer

In this regard, a young student of 23 comment: “I consider that it reflects menstruation as if it were a secret as if it were not natural or something that men should not find out about because it is associated with dirt when it really should be the opposite” (ID262). For another 24-year-old the image means: “That menstruation should be a secret, and only women should talk about it” (ID0839). A 26-year-old government worker also comments in the same vein: “That they have taught us that menstruation is a secret and a shame if you stain” (ID07733). As can be seen, the secret as a way of being with others is part of the bodily experience of menstruation that must be kept hidden from the eyes of others, otherwise the experience of shame appears as a constant. As stated by one respondent: “Having to be ashamed when we get stained and that if you are menstruating is something that no one should know” (ID0807).

The period stain is associated with a type of body information, in the Goffmanian sense, to which a negative meaning is attributed because it is associated with dirt. In this sense, there also appears an attribution for lack of hygiene to those who let the period stain see, as another 37-year-old unemployed respondent points out, for whom the image means: “That staining is wrong. It’s dirty like it’s totally forbidden” (ID0135). The social evaluation of the period stain supposes a judgment towards who let it see, even by accident. Thus, for a 30-year-old public servant, a meaning attributable to the image is: “A woman who stains herself is careless and even dirty... It is not correct for a young lady to show that she is in her days” (ID0176). In a similar vein, a 25-year-old preschool teacher comments: “Many times a woman is pointed out, if she does not take care of herself when she has menstruation, since she is pointed out as dirty, as irresponsibility of not having cleanliness” (ID0224).

For women, the maintenance of expressive control referred to by Goffman, involves keeping any menstrual sign hidden from both the eyes and the nose of the other, since the period stain is associated with dirt. A 41-year-old academic woman points out how the meaning of the image is associated with the idea of: “Menstruation as something shameful, dirty, to be hidden” (ID0018). For another young 22-year-old student the image means “Hiding menstruation as if it were something dirty or embarrassing” (ID0067). A 31-year-old master’s student expresses: “This is what we have been taught since we were little. To bleed is shameful is to be exposed to the insidious gaze, mockery, laughter. The stain is the visible (and “smellable”) part of something that should be hidden” (ID0044). The olfactory impression and the meaning attributed to it is part of the social evaluation we make of the bodies of others. Women try to hide menstrual odor to avoid negative judgment. As another respondent points out, for her the image means: “Well, she should be more careful about her hygiene because it can lead to being bothered by bad smells and things like that”.

5 The Mockery behind the Shame and Humiliation

The experience of menstruation remains an experience to which ambiguous evaluations are attributed. When asked “When did you start menstruating, what emotions did you experience?” 11% ($n = 98$) marked astonishment; 8% ($n = 72$) fear and more than half 58% ($n = 490$) of the respondents marked a combination of emotions. Regarding this last percentage, in an analysis of the frequency of words, the first 10 emotions stood out (Figure 3). That is, most emotions are associated with negative affective states from the point of view of women or ambiguous combinations. For example, one respondent noted: “Joy but shame and sadness. I felt like I had lost something” (ID0027). Another respondent noted: “On the one hand, concern about the changes that were coming in the body, and therefore in how society would read me. And on the other hand, excitement and curiosity for the new stage” (ID0380).

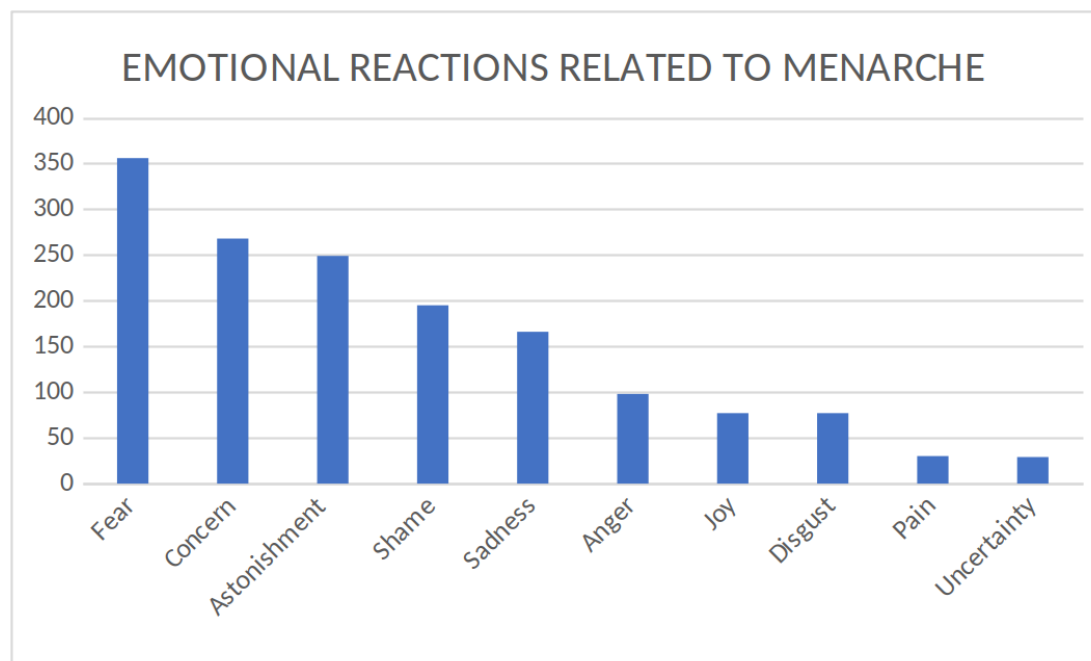


Figure 3 – Source: Own elaboration.

A relational and processual view of emotions allows us to appreciate that these are not fixed states and that they coexist intertwined, depending on the situation. In this sense, for Gaulejac (2008), shame is a “meta-feeling” as it is combined with various affective states. Shame is a conglomeration of emotions where fear, amazement, worry, anger, etc., appear intertwined (p. 122), as seen in the combination of emotions to which the respondents refer. As I have pointed out, Simmel argues that shame appears when we are aware that we have deviated from an idealized image. The other’s gaze triggers shame. However, the affective state of the other party may be contempt, disgust or mockery. From the mockery and gestures that each society associates with this affective state, the affected person may experience states of shame and even humiliation. In the case of the menstrual experience: “The jokes and judgments of disgust associated with menstruation are a stronger manifestation of abjection than are many other such expressions” (Young, 2005, p. 113). A 24-year-old employee pointed out that the first image (Figure 1) means “For some people something normal, but for most something that causes women to be pointed out, a source of ridicule or disgust. Which should not happen” (ID0494).

Also, for de Beauvoir (2010): “The greater the young girl’s feeling of revulsion toward this feminine defect, the greater her obligation to pay careful attention to it so as not to expose herself to the awful humiliation of an accident or a little word of warning” (p. 376). A 39-year-old employee agrees with these observations, for her the first image (Figure 1) means: “The pain and derision and ridicule that girls or young women are subjected to when there is an ‘accident’” (ID183). Another 35-year-old employee agrees with this opinion, since for her the image means: “Focus of mockery, signaling, surprise or alarm, and even annoying or ‘disgusting’ for people who are not sensitive, including women” (ID202). Another 33-year-old merchant respondent notes: “I didn’t know anything, when it happened to me, my mother only gave me a sanitary pad and I felt happy, but later in high school they made fun of because accidents of staining

used to happen and that damaged your self-esteem, the worst thing is that even women themselves made fun of you” (ID0382). The threat of ridicule requires constant self-monitoring and the adaptation of the body to the use of devices such as sanitary napkins, tampons or menstrual cups.

In the second elicitation image, a girl is presented who has stained a chair and turns with a gesture of astonishment towards her, the respondents were asked “Do you identify with the following image? Yes/No Why?” (Figure 2) 81% ($n = 688$) answered yes. A 27-year-old female employee responds: “Yes, because of the shame related to the world knowing that you are menstruating and the concealment with which you must live” (ID0008). One of the affective mechanisms that triggers shame is precisely the mockery emitted by other people’s glances. The respondents alluded to the experience of mockery, when on some occasion they experienced staining their clothes or some furniture. A 41-year-old civil servant points out: “Yes, because in adolescence, mainly the fact that they see you stained by menstruation was a source of ridicule from others” (ID0771). A 37-year-old teacher replied: “Yes, because the classmates who happened to them at school were made fun of” (ID0032). A 24-year-old student also identifies with the image: “Yes, it is a thought that I had when I was younger, and one of the situations that worried me the most, as it is not a subject free of taboos, there is fear of mockery or humiliation” (ID0671).

Following Simmel’s thoughts on shame, Artavia (2020) shows that humiliation is a composite emotional state (mixture of shame, wrath, and sadness) and has moral effects. This is important because humiliation plays a vital role in the mockery scars and the fear that reputation will be affected.

The person is affected not only by what happened, but also by its moral implications. He/she can imagine what others think of him/her, and he feels oppressed about not being able to do something to change it. Head down, the person feels that he/she is breaking apart inside. Humiliation hurts in a way that mere shame hardly could. It produces a deep suffering that left marks on the aggrieved soul. One can remember an embarrassing episode with some humor, but all smile will erase as soon as humiliation comes to mind. (Artavia, 2020, p.99).

Faced with the question “Have you ever stained your menstruation clothes?” 95% of the respondents ($n = 804$) answered yes. The places where it has happened are school (45%), home (24%), the public space (11%), work (6%) and the car (2%). Some of the testimonies regarding the school highlight mockery and shame. A 25-year-old professional woman commented: “At school, I felt very sorry especially that my fellow men made fun of me” (ID0676). Another 24-year-old student also referred: “In high school, I was very embarrassed because it smelled bad and my skirt was dirty. I had to cover it with my sweater and clean myself with paper because they didn’t sell towels at school and I was sad embarrassed to ask someone else” (ID0683). Another 31-year-old unemployed woman wrote: “I was at school and in order not to lose the thread of the class, I did not go to the bathroom, when I left class I felt the ‘drop’ and I got a lot of stains, the good thing was that I was wearing black pants and it was not seen so much. I felt very embarrassed and dirty, and worried that someone would notice it” (ID0698). Another young 22-year-old student shared: “The first time my menstruation came down, third grade, with the white Monday uniform; I was very scared because I didn’t know what was happening and the children made fun of me”(ID359). A 36-year-old employee also shared: “I don’t remember very well all the occasions that I stained my clothes, but I do remember one occasion when a clean sanitary pad fell in front of my colleagues and they made fun of me” (ID0705).

The mockery of others can negatively affect and increase the emotional tone that ranges from shame to humiliation. As Artavia (2020) argues, humiliation has a public character, that is:

It usually involves the participation of a third party that witnesses the demeaning action. The minimum nucleus of the social constellation is completed with that spectator, whose mere presence, physical or virtual, transforms the dynamic between the humiliator and the humiliated. The person may be limited only to observe, but that is enough. His/her look is enough to boost the entire negative burden of the situation. [...] By being observed, the humiliated will suffer the denigration even more. The individual wishes the ignominy was between two, in private, but he/she will have to deal now with the conscience of a witness. (p. 105)

The effects of humiliation or fear of suffering are seen even in a private space such as home. The home is the second place with the most recurrences, associated with staining clothes or furniture. Despite the fact that it is a private space, the respondents report discomfort when washing clothes, sheets or furniture, and feelings of shame or worry do not disappear. A 27-year-old girl shares with us: "I was ashamed because I didn't want to tell anyone, not even my mother. I hid the panties and threw them away" (ID0025). Another young 16-year-old student: "The chair in my house, I felt worried about cleaning it" (ID0369). A 26-year-old government worker shared: "At an aunt's house I stained my pants and they hid me, threw away my pants and gave me a new one. But more than feeling calm that they helped me, I was ashamed because of how they made me feel" (ID0773).

The public space is another of the places with the most recurrences associated with staining clothes or furniture. There is a concern about removing the period stain from the sight and even the nose of others. These others are not necessarily anonymous people, they can also be close people. This is how a 29-year-old student shares it: "Many times. The last one I was doing a physical activity in a manifestation, because I was wearing black clothes it did not matter much to me, but as time went by I worried that the smell of menstruation would be perceived. I felt very uncomfortable" (ID0637). A 34-year-old therapist: "We were in church and I had a pink skirt, I got stained and stained the chair and my mother scolded me a lot and had to cover me all the time, she made me feel ashamed and frustrated" (ID0495). A 26-year-old student also recalled: "I was with my boyfriend in a public place, it was very embarrassing and I didn't tell him. I took care of hiding it" (ID0495). Another of the public spaces where this experience has been lived is in public transport. A 23-year-old worker shared: "I was on the subway... I was alone, and everyone saw me as ugly, they judged me without knowing anything" (ID0558).

Work is the fourth most recurrent place associated with staining clothing or furniture. Women worry about the image they can provoke in others and even feel dirty. A 47-year-old writer shared: "I have stained countless times: my clothes, the bed, the furniture. Before I was worried, now I just clean discreetly. I once stained a chair in an office because I was in a meeting surrounded by men and I couldn't stop to clean myself. I had to let everyone go to get up and clean the chair" (ID0027). A 27-year-old employee: "At a party with colleagues from work, super bad, uncomfortable, I was afraid of what they were going to think or say" (ID0679). A 28-year-old employee also noted: "I had come to work early, I noticed that I had stained myself and I spoke crying to my mother to come back for me. I was 17 years old. My boss was horrible to me because of that" (ID0046). A young 27-year-old student also shared with us: "I was at work and as I am very irregular, I stained my pants horrible, I felt sorry and disgusted. I felt like I smelled miles away (I don't know exactly what, but I felt like I smelled

something) and I asked a friend who had a car for help to take me home to change. I felt very dirty” (ID0473).

It is interesting to highlight the reduction in shame generated by sharing the experience with friends. As Simmel well points out, collective action reduces shame conditions. The close membership of a group as well as the ties of solidarity and mass participation, diminish the conditions for the emergence of shame. From the Simmelian perspective, it is plausible to think about how, when referring in a group way to the motives or causes that produce shame, the thresholds of this decrease and the possibilities of resignification of the feeling are expanded (Simmel, 1905). As Goffman also points out, it is possible for friends to act as a team, to keep the secret safe. A 23-year-old practicing psychologist shared: “I vaguely remember what happened to me at school, I just tied the sweater around my waist and it was settled. We support each other among friends” (ID0828). Also, a 42-year-old high school teacher shared this team act with her friends: “There have been several times. The first few times in high school, I was with my friends. If any of us were menstruating, it was customary to ask someone in the group, ‘Did I get stained?’ Or ‘Am I stained?’” Every time we got up from a place. Even among my friends from college, this ritual continued” (ID0141). A 24-year-old student recalls: “In the school bus with my friends. I felt ashamed, but they (were older) made me feel calm and safe, because they lent me a sweater to cover me” (ID0339). Similarly, a young 21-year-old student recounted how she experienced when staining her clothes: “In high school, one of my friends noticed it because she was sitting behind me and she immediately told me; she was a person I trusted a lot, so I think that greatly reduced the emotional burden of the situation, even though I spent the rest of the day very worried and sad” (ID0097). Fear of embarrassment and negative evaluation encourages cooperation among friends. We could find the possibility of cooperation even between couples, a PhD student shared with us “My boyfriend gave me his sweater to cover me up and helped me wash the pants that I had stained” (ID076).

However, it is a fact that the respondents consider that the issue of menstruation should not be secret and that “the perception that people have of a woman should not be altered just because she is already menstruating” (ID0780) as pointed out by a student from 24-year-old undergraduate student. Also, a 19-year-old high school student who identifies with Figure 2 wrote: “Yes, because it has happened to me and it made feel mortified, which is ridiculous because it is something that happens to all women and should not embarrass us just because the men told us we should be ashamed” (ID0788). Regarding Figure 1, a 31-year-old researcher comments: “For society, it can mean shame or ‘accident’. It should not be like that” (ID0050). Also, for a 24-year-old employee: “For some people is normal, but for the majority is something that causes women to be pointed out, a source of ridicule or disgust. Which shouldn’t happen.” (ID0493).

It is also true that women do somatic work to rework the experience of staining at work, as noted by a 27-year-old public servant: “I once got stained at the office. I had already normalized and learned to love my period, so I just told my boss and went home to change. I was proud that I was not sorry” (ID0437). Likewise, new menstrual hygiene practices appear that redefine the experience of staining clothes. A 38-year-old lawyer shares: “It has happened to me at home, not in public places. From a very young age I started using tampons, which makes the possibility of spotting during menstruation more difficult. It was already after my 30s that I started trying free bleeding when I am at home and have sometimes stained my clothes. The great thing is that I don’t feel shame, disgust, or adverse feeling about what happened, I feel good, I feel that it is something normal” (ID0045).

6 Final Remarks

According to Simmel, the social bond rests on the exchange of information that we have about people. This is one of the first conditions of possibility that explains how the social is possible. The exchange of information makes it possible to get a general idea of the other, hence the concern for gossip, as it has relevance in the image we make of someone. Hand in hand with the information that we offer to the other, there is the one that we also hide. However, the information that is kept secret according to Simmel, or that which is hidden in the *performance* according to Goffman, is not just information, but is information that is gendered, as can be seen in the period stain as a type of body information. Unlike a yawn, sweat, or snot, the period stain has moral overtones that negatively affect women's reputations. Not in a sexual sense, but in terms of breaking with the ideals of cleanliness, neatness, and even beauty.

In many societies, a policy of secrecy is imposed on menstruation. In particular, the period stain is considered a deviation from the expectations of femininity that underlie gender stereotypes, as it indicates carelessness, dirtiness, and even irresponsibility. The period stain is considered to be something inappropriate on a woman's body and grooming. In addition, it is something that should not be seen; even smelled of menstruation has been meant as something unpleasant and even disgusting. From a relational perspective, we can say that period stain causes shame for those who suffer from it and disgust and contempt for those who perceive it. In the survey, we can see that women show concern about the negative evaluation that others may have of the fact of staining their clothes or furniture. Although menstrual blood is not gross for women, there is always the threat of what others may think and say about them. That is one of the reasons why fear, worry, amazement, and shame are affective states that are associated with the first menstruation.

If shame contributes to the maintenance of gender asymmetries and stereotypes to the detriment of women, on the other hand, teasing that unleashes shame is an affective reputation control device. Teasing exacerbates the fear of experiencing shame and disciplines bodies to keep the menstrual experience hidden and thereby keep gender stereotypes intact. Although women question gender stereotypes and point out that there have been transformations regarding the taboo and stigma of menstruation, they also express the fear of becoming the target of others. In sum, the fear of ridicule and humiliation leads women to discipline their bodies and prevent the body information of menstruation from being visible or "smellable", as one respondent said.

But, even when the shame about the period stain is still present in menstruation's experience, we could appreciate substantive changes. Almost all the respondents do not consider that menstruation must be a secret. And even more important, they do not believe that menstruation is an issue that concerns only women. Even one respondent pointed out that it is also a matter of "trans-men". This tells us about a significant change in semantics because menstruation is not a topic only women should discuss. Still, it is also recognized that there may be men who menstruate. With this, a significant gender binary associated with menstruation is dismantled. Further, indirectly this fear of being the target of gossip leads women to cooperate with each other. Thus, conditions for dis-shame are also generated (Simmel, 1905). Women act as a team, and with this, they experience menstruation collectively and create conditions to re-signify menstruation. Likewise, it is appreciated that the resignification of menstruation is possible through somatic work that casts doubt on gender stereotypes. Of equal importance are the new menstrual hygiene practices and the use of devices that allow another type of contact with the menstrual blood itself. Thus, the adverse effects that gossip can have on women's

reputations also contribute to possibilities of cooperation and solidarity between them, an essential aspect to question the secrecy surrounding menstruation.

Some limitations of this study force us to continue delving into the subject and refining methodological strategies. The web surveys or online surveys allow access and virtual contact with people inaccessible given the current confinement policies. However, this option restricts the sample regarding the type of population that can access online surveys: people with internet access and a specific educational level. Even though the use of illustrated images to elicit reaction is commendable, as it allows good feedback even with the more impersonal method of a survey, it is necessary to delve into the narratives from other qualitative methods such as the interview and focal groups (Fingerson, 2006). It would also be important to incorporate the work of menstrual activism to account for other non-hegemonic ways of attributing meaning to menstruation. Currently I work on the experience of menstruation with trans men, and it has been shocking to discover how the fear persists as one informant shared with me: “I am afraid they will do something to me in a men’s room if they find out I am menstruating.”

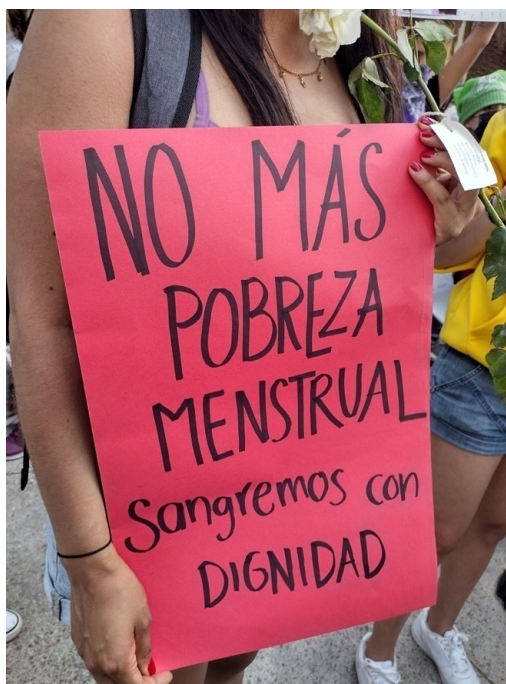


Figure 4 – Source: Olga Sabido Ramos (No More Period Poverty. Bleed with Dignity). 8 March 2022, Mexico, City.

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