

While there is a large body of folklore about menarche and menstruation (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1977; Weideger, 1975), there is only a small research base of information about the psychological meaning of menstruation in the lives of girls and women. Since group differences in menstrual attitudes have been studied only infrequently, it is still unclear whether there are reliable group differences in attitudes toward menstruation among girls and women who vary, for example, in age, menstrual status, socioeconomic status and/or religion. This investigation seeks to clarify whether group differences associated with two developmental variables -- age and menarcheal status -- are related to differences in the attitudes toward menstruation held by early adolescent girls. The design of this investigation was informed by results from available empirical studies of adolescent and adult women's menstrual beliefs.

In general, available data suggest that individuals subscribe to specific beliefs about menstruation. Whether young or old, female or male, for most people there exists an association between menstruation and unpleasant physical symptoms, and/or emotional malaise, and/or generally debilitated performance. For instance, Clarke and Ruble (1978) found that early adolescent girls and boys shared negative expectations about menstruation. Among adults, women and men attributed negative but not positive moods to menstruation (Koeske & Koeske, 1975), women reported more negative moods premenstrually and during menstruation (Golub, 1976), and perceived their performance of certain tasks to be negatively influenced by menstruation (Golub, 1976; Sommer, 1972).

Studies of attitudes toward menarche and early menstrual experiences differ somewhat from the findings above regarding attitudes toward menstruation more broadly defined. In the menarche literature there seems to be some consensus that girls report not simply negative but mixed reactions to early menstrual experience (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1980a; Henton, 1961; Koff, Rierdan, & Jacobson, 1981; Petersen, 1983; Whisnant & Zegans, 1975). Girls who offered positive responses typically mentioned being excited about menstruation because it was a sign of growing up, while those who offered negative responses mentioned being scared, annoyed, upset, embarrassed or, worse, physically debilitated or incapacitated. Frequently, girls reported both positive and negative feelings and expectations (e.g., Woods, Dery, & Most, 1982).

Information about group differences, specifically between premenarcheal and postmenarcheal girls, in attitudes toward menarche and menstruation is inconsistent in the literature. Some studies have found group differences, with premenarcheal girls more positive about the "growing up" aspect of menstruation and postmenarcheal girls more negative, reporting reactions like feeling sick, disgusted or "grossed out," as well as expectations that menstruation will have a negative effect on moods and on performance of school tasks (Clarke & Ruble, 1978; Koff et al., 1981; Whisnant & Zegans, 1975).

Other research indicates no differences in the attitudes of pre- and postmenarcheal girls. Brooks-Gunn and Ruble (1980b) have reported no effect of menarcheal status on girls' ratings of menstruation as a natural event, a predictable event, a bothersome event, or a debilitating event, or on girls' tendency to deny the effects of menstruation. Clarke and Ruble (1978) reported no difference between pre- and postmenarcheal girls regarding the association of a set of negative symptoms with menstruation, though they did find group differences with respect to expectations of the negative impact of menstruation on school performance, as noted above.

Some of the confusion in the literature regarding menarcheal group differences in menstrual attitudes can be attributed to the fact that researchers have used a variety of instruments to assess menstrual attitudes, including some of questionable validity. Until recently, researchers have relied on the Moos (1968) Menstrual Distress Questionnaire (MDQ) to examine menstrual attitudes (cf., Parlee, 1973, 1974). When the MDQ is used in attitude studies, subjects are asked to indicate how many symptoms they believe are experienced during particular phases of the menstrual cycle. These beliefs are taken to reflect cultural attitudes about menstruation: the more negative symptoms expected, the more negative an attitude subjects are thought to have toward menstruation. Since the MDQ was designed to detect the prevalence of menstrual symptoms rather than to assess attitudes, the validity of this instrument as an attitude measure is clearly in question.

Additionally, the way subjects have been directed to respond to the MDQ, and the way items have been written in other instruments designed specifically to measure menstrual attitudes, has led to confusion in interpretation of results. At some times, girls are asked to indicate their own personal beliefs and/or symptom experience (e.g., Menke, 1983; Whisnant & Zegans, 1975); at other times, girls are asked to indicate their judgments about the beliefs and/or symptom experience of most girls and/or women (e.g., Clarke & Ruble, 1978). When responses to these four types of questions (beliefs and symptoms of self and others) are combined or intermingled (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1980b), the meaning of "menstrual attitudes" becomes increasingly unclear.

In addition to limitations in instruments used in research on menstrual attitudes, a broader methodological problem may have led to inconsistent findings in assessing group differences in attitudes toward menstruation. This problem consists of the naturally occurring confound of menstrual status and age. In an early adolescent sample, premenarcheal girls are likely to be younger than postmenarcheal girls, even within the same grade. While some studies of attitude differences between pre- and postmenarcheal girls have matched groups for age, or have tested for age differences (e.g., Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1982; Koff et al., 1981; Koff, Rierdan, & Silverstone, 1978), in other studies (e.g., Clarke & Ruble, 1978; Morse & Doan, 1987; Whisnant, Brett, & Zegans, 1975), the possible impact of age on results concerning differences between menarcheal status groups is not reported. Determining the particular effects of age and menstrual status on attitudes is especially important, given a theoretical perspective (e.g., Ross, 1977; Ruble & Brooks-Gunn, 1979) that attitudes are acquired not simply from personal biological