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Period Sex for Queer Cis Women and Queer Individuals Assigned Female at Birth: Navigating Gender, Power, and Heteronormativity in Sex During Menstruation

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ABSTRACT

While some research has focused on menstrual sex, little work has centered the menstrual sex experiences of queer women and queer individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) who do not identify as women. This study drew from qualitative data collected in 2019–2020 from 26 women and AFAB individuals (mean age = 30.2 years) throughout the U.S. Midwest to explore how queer women and queer AFAB individuals who do not identify as women talked about their experiences with having sex during their periods (“period sex”). Using feminist phenomenological thematic analysis, we identified six themes for how participants discussed period sex: (1) entitlement to and enjoyment about period sex; (2) period sex feels different physically; (3) efforts to minimize shame and discomfort with period sex; (4) looking for partner cues to determine feelings about period sex; (5) period sex as messy and “unsexy”; and (6) embracing vaginal sex but not cunnilingus while menstruating. Implications for understanding intrapsychic, relational, and sociocultural aspects of menstrual sex were explored, as were patterns of accommodating stigma compared to resisting stigma when reflecting on meanings of menstruation, sexuality, eroticism, queer identity, and relationships. Tensions between enacting resistance during period sex, and subscribing to heteronormative and patriarchal notions of period sex as “gross” were explored.

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Introduction

Feminists have long argued that ideas about gender and sexuality emerge through cultural and social processes of learning and that these processes often work to create hierarchies between advantaged and disadvantaged groups; consequently, beliefs about bodies and sexualities often reflect these hierarchies and further replicate experiences of marginalization (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). Feminists have aimed to both understand these experiences and reshape and recenter the experiences of those on the margins. In this study, we look both at groups on the margins, their subjective narratives of their bodies, and their experiences with sex during menstruation, an experience often marked by cultural norms as “abject” (Fahs, 2011). Menstruation remains a fraught and

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complex topic both within and outside of feminist analysis and research. While interest in menstruation has been growing rapidly in recent years (Bobel et al., 2020), links between menstruation and sexuality are often missed or minimized, in part because of its taboo status (DeMaria et al., 2020; Ussher & Perz, 2020). Though research surrounding menstruation and sexual behavior has been slowly growing, menstruation remains a process that can be further stigmatized when compounded with the complexities associated with women's sexuality (Fahs, 2014; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Rubinsky et al., 2020). The convergence of these two topics—menstruation and women's sexuality—has created yet another “missing discourse” (Fine & McClelland, 2006) in the context of understanding embodiment.

While some research has focused on menstrual sex (Allen & Goldberg, 2009; Hensel et al., 2004; Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003; Schooler et al., 2005; Tanfer & Aral, 1996), little work has centered the menstrual sex experiences of queer women and queer AFAB individuals. In particular, no previous research has looked at both queer women and queer AFAB individuals who do not identify as women to understand their experiences of having sex while menstruating, a gap this study seeks to fill.

Menstruation

Menstruation has long been depicted as a taboo, shameful process to “manage” and hide from others (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Delaney et al., 1988; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Tiggemann & Lewis, 2004). (Note that throughout this manuscript we use “menstruation” and “periods” interchangeably and with intention.) Alongside the stigma attached to periods, menstruators themselves are perceived as hysterical, unlikely, distracted, and unable to make important decisions (Roberts et al., 2002). Within films, advertisements, and television shows, menstruation continues to be portrayed as dirty, revolting, disgusting, and in need of controlling for the sake of others (Briefel, 2005; Chrisler, 2002; Coutts & Berg, 1993; Kissling, 2002, 2006; Rosewarne, 2012). Period stigma has become normalized, including prioritizing secretiveness, discreetness, and a central concern around potential embarrassment (Erchull et al., 2002; Hoerster et al., 2003). This menstrual stigma permeates perceptions of women's bodies, sexual behavior, and health and is continually replicated throughout popular culture via jokes, insults, and caricatures of menstruating bodies (Chrisler, 2011; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Rosewarne, 2012).

Menstrual stigma also underlies the foundations of how menstruation is perceived and described and often creates a disconnect between menstruators and their “leaky” bodies (Stubbs & Costos, 2004). This internalization of negative attitudes toward menstruation can be seen in studies such as Burrows and Johnson (2005), where young girls (ages 12–15) in school express feelings of shame, embarrassment, a desire to hide their period, as well as defining menstruation as an illness. Further, menstrual stigma has been so normalized that period products themselves often accommodate stigma (“nothing will show!”) rather than challenge it; thus, narratives of menstrual empowerment often over-rely on stories about hiding periods, keeping them concealed and, in some cases, “helping” girls from the Global South to better hide and conceal their menstrual periods as well (Bobel, 2019).

Period Sex

Period sex has been associated with shame and stigma for many people who menstruate (Fahs, 2011; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Rubinsky et al., 2020; Van Lonkhuijzen et al., 2022). Despite this, studies show that a majority of women have engaged in menstrual sex, particularly women in committed relationships (Allen & Goldberg, 2009; Fahs, 2011), though many women are reluctant to do so (Van Lonkhuijzen et al., 2022). Researchers in a recent study reiterated that interest in sex is relatively consistent across the menstrual cycle, so having sex during one's period occurs more for social than biological reasons (Macbeth et al., 2021). Although period sex appears to be a common experience, research indicates that there are mixed perceptions and opinions on period sex, ranging from finding the behavior dirty, gross, and overly messy to finding it affirming and empowering (Fahs, 2011). In particular, women often felt saddled with doing the physical labor of cleaning up after having menstrual sex, again pointing to the gender dynamics of both sexuality and domestic labor involved in menstrual sex (Fahs, 2011).

Among sexually active adolescent women, research shows that absence of bleeding was associated with increased likelihood of having penile-vaginal intercourse, independent of age, race, and usual coital frequency (Hensel et al., 2004). Also, more than a quarter of women in another study reported that they commonly engaged in coitus during their period, with 16% reporting having engaged in coitus during their most recent period (Tanfer & Aral, 1996). Thus, studies conflict about whether women had sex less commonly during their periods than during other times of their monthly cycles.

For many menstruators, the shame and stigma of menstruation were directly associated with their concern over their partner's perception of period sex (Fahs, 2011). Partner communication influenced perceptions of period sex and feelings about their menstrual bodies (Gunning et al., 2020). More broadly, conversations around sex with partners predicted sexual satisfaction, as sexual communication (discussing one's sexual preferences, desires, needs, dislikes) led to instrumental changes in sexual behavior that helped to co-create sexual interactions more in line with people's sexual preferences (Byers, 2011; Faulkner & Lannutti, 2010; Jones et al., 2018; MacNeil & Byers, 2005; 2009). Still, despite its importance, many sexual partners struggle to talk candidly and transparently about their sexual activity (Byers, 2011; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Noland, 2010). Additionally, traditional gendered stereotypes surrounding sex have often created sexual double standards that constrain women's sexual behavior, consequently limiting women's ability to communicate their desires and preferences (Fahs, 2011; Muehlenhard & Shippee, 2010). In a study by Allen and Goldberg (2009), cisgender men and women who engaged in period sex felt more positively about period sex if they communicated and conversed with their partners about the topic. Thus, communication with sexual partners about period sex requires grappling with stigma, shame, and discomfort (Anderson et al., 2011; Noland, 2010).

Genital Panics and Perception of the Body

The stigma surrounding period sex may also be tied to anxieties related to the perception of people's genitals, or "genital panics," as women in one study described anxiety,

need for control, and internalized sexism when imagining their relationship to their genitals (FaHS, 2014). Women in three other studies consistently perceived their vaginas in a negative light or in need of constant “maintenance” (Berman & Windecker, 2008; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Crann et al., 2017). This poor genital self-image has been shown to influence sexual interactions as well as mental and sexual health (Berman & Windecker, 2008; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; FaHS, 2014). The prevailing internalized stigma surrounding women’s perceptions of their genitals and menstruation had negative implications for women’s sexual health (e.g., seeking preventative care) (Holland et al., 2020).

More broadly, a study discovered that women who were more comfortable with their bodies and sexuality were more likely to be comfortable with their period and period sex (Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003). Women who reported feeling more comfortable about menstruation also reported more body comfort, more sexual assertiveness, more sexual experience, and less sexual risk (Schooler et al., 2005). Another study found that women who measured higher on self-objectification (body shame, self-surveillance, etc.) had significantly more shame toward menstruation than women with lower scores of self-objectification (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007). Women’s perception of their bodies, particularly their genitals, as “unfresh” or “unclean” was an internalized by-product of the objectification of women (Roberts & Waters, 2004).

An association exists between perceptions of period sex and how people navigation their gender roles and their sexual behavior. More specifically, body image was related to sexual satisfaction, in that healthy body image correlated to having more sex and feeling more satisfied with sex (Sanchez & Kiefer, 2007; Træen et al., 2016; Woertman & van den Brink, 2012). This relationship between sexual satisfaction and body image is experienced throughout the spectrum of genders studied (in this case, men, women, and gender-fluid people), though it appears most often within women (Satinsky et al., 2012; Træen et al., 2016). With regard to periods, one study found that although 43% of participants disliked their bodies, this dislike was most pronounced when they were menstruating (Rembeck et al., 2006).

Queering Period Sex

The vast majority of studies on menstrual sex have researched heterosexual cis women, mostly leaving out queer women as well as gender-nonconforming participants. Further, “period sex” has most often meant penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse and has mostly excluded a broader definition of sex (Hensel et al., 2004; Tanfer & Aral, 1996). Oral sex, fingering, anal sex, and other kinds of sexual encounters have not been explicitly asked about in existing period sex studies. The exclusion of oral sex, in particular, has been largely out of view to researchers, perhaps because of its taboo or abject status (Hensel et al., 2004; Tanfer & Aral, 1996).

Two studies have directly addressed period sex among women of varying sexual orientations. FaHS (2011) found that heterosexual women had more negative feelings about period sex than did lesbian or bisexual women, even compared to bisexual women who had sex with men. Women within this study that described negativity and discomfort around period sex discussed their partners’ discomfort with menstrual blood, the labor

in cleaning “messes,” negative self-perception of menstrual sex, and the overall emotional labor required to manage their partner’s disgust (Fahs, 2011). However, participants with more positive feelings around period sex discussed their physical and emotional pleasure, their partners’ support for menstrual sex, and active resistance to anti-menstrual attitudes (Fahs, 2011). A more recent study found that participants felt generally positive or neutral toward menstrual sexual activity and were comfortable and content with their interpersonal conversations pertaining to the topic (Rubinsky et al., 2021). Additionally, participants who were transgender or gender-nonconforming noted that feelings of gender dysphoria sometimes constrained desire for menstrual sex if they were personally menstruating, but they were happy to participate in menstrual sex if a partner was menstruating (Rubinsky et al., 2021).

Research Questions

Given the complicated ways that menstrual stigma may interact with sexual relationships, this study began with several research questions to guide its analysis: First, given that heterosexual women have often had particularly ambivalent and negative experiences with menstrual sex, how might queer women and AFAB people align with or reject these frameworks of menstrual negativity? Second, how does period sex reflect the interplay among gender, sexual identity, and stigma?

Method

Recruitment

This study collected qualitative data from a sample of 26 adult women and AFAB individuals (mean age = 30.2, $SD = 5.78$) who were recruited in 2019 and 2020 throughout the Midwest of the United States. No other studies have been published with this data (this recruitment of participants from the Midwest did not occur intentionally, but was the byproduct of the first author’s geographic location). Participants were recruited through social media, predominantly through “women/femme” Facebook support groups. The recruitment inquiry asked for women aged 18 years and older to participate in a study that aimed to collect stories and experiences of women’s sexual lives and pleasures. Because this study was examining sexual behavior as it relates to vaginal stigma and menstruation, having a vagina was a prerequisite for participation (though we recognize that not all women have vaginas and not all people with vaginas are women).

Sample

The age of participants ranged from 23 to 49 years. The sample included 61% ($n = 16$) participants aged 18 to 31; 35% ($n = 9$) participants aged 32 to 45; and 4% ($n = 1$) participant aged 46 to 59. For self-identified race and ethnicity, 73% ($n = 19$) of participants were white, 3.33% ($n = 1$) were Chinese/Taiwanese American, 3.33% ($n = 1$) were Syrian American, 10% ($n = 3$) were Black, 3.33% ($n = 1$) were Latinx, and 3.33% ($n = 1$) were Vietnamese.

For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included participants who identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. This included 46% ($n = 12$) bisexual participants, 8% ($n = 2$) pansexual participants, and a variety of other descriptors (e.g., bi-light, homoromantic). Participants reported a wide range of occupations, familial statuses, educational backgrounds, and religious affiliations.

For gender identity, all participants in this study were AFAB in that all were assigned female at birth, though 19 (73%) participants *currently* identify as women and 7 (27%) do not identify as women (for more on gender identity issues, see Geller, 2009). More specifically, our sample included 19 cisgender women participants, 4 questioning participants, 2 nonbinary participants, and 1 agender participant. All genderqueer/gender-nonconforming participants felt comfortable participating in the study based on their experiences of growing up labeled as a girl and based on their experiences having a vagina. The first author asked every participant during the interview process how they would like to be referred to in future analysis and writing. Throughout the rest of this study, analysis will refer to participants as “women and AFAB individuals,” as this was the agreed-upon terminology among the participants (Table 1).

Procedure

All interviews were conducted by the first author; each participant was interviewed once. Prior to the interview, the first author sent an information sheet that detailed the topic and content of the study, as well as the consent form via email. At the interview, the first author read through the documents out loud. Per the ethics board review, all participants provided verbal and written informed consent to have their interviews recorded and fully transcribed. Importantly, the participants were assured that they may stop the interview at any point and choose to skip any questions they may not want to answer. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the first author carried a list of resources such as mental health services or local LGBT centers for respondents to access. Identifiable information was removed and all participants received a pseudonym to maintain anonymity. Interviews in person and on Zoom ranged from approximately 1 to 2.5 hours, where respondents responded to guided interview prompts that pertained to their sexual history, sexual pleasure and practices, and feelings and attitudes about their sexuality and their body. This study and protocol were approved by the institutional review board.

We asked two questions in this study about participants' experiences with menstrual sex: “(1) Have you ever experienced having sexual interactions on your period? If so, explain?” and, “(2) What are your thoughts or feelings about sexual interactions on your period?” Following these questions, there were prompts asking about participants' feelings and thoughts about their body, vagina, and body hair. Although the interview prompts were prescribed and guided, the interviews were conducted in such a manner that encouraged conversation, probes, follow-up questions and clarifications, and dialogue that transitioned into other areas of interest. More specifically, the life stories method was utilized, which highlighted participants' voices and used stories to draw out the social processes being discussed (Erdmans, 2007); this method allows for

participants to guide the conversation and allows participants to represent themselves and co-construct knowledge (Geiger, 1986).

Data Analysis

Responses in this study were analyzed qualitatively using a queer, feminist phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis called reflexive thematic analysis (Ahmed, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This form of thematic analysis makes room for the interface between the researcher's interpretive analysis of the data, the uniqueness of each researcher's perspective, and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process of looking at participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). This method also encourages reflexivity of the researchers alongside and the drawing in of multiple theoretical perspectives without being overly reductionistic, which we felt was ideally suited to these data (Terry & Hayfield, 2020). To familiarize ourselves with the transcripts, we read the transcripts thoroughly and identified patterns for common themes discussed by participants. We looked for patterns for how participants constructed themselves in relation to their bodies, menstruation, and their partners. We worked through these patterns, discussing perceptions of how narratives cohered (or did not cohere), until we agreed on a set of six themes and their associated subthemes. We did not note any serious disagreements about the creation of themes and subthemes, though both of our perspectives helped to create the patterns of results we noted below.

Results

All participants had something to say in reaction to the questions about having sex during menstrual periods. In this study, we identified six themes for how participants discussed period sex: (1) entitlement to and enjoyment about period sex; (2) period sex feels different physically; (3) efforts to minimize shame and discomfort with period sex; (4) looking for partner cues to determine feelings about period sex; (5) period sex as messy and "unsexy"; and (6) embracing vaginal sex but not cunnilingus while menstruating. As evident in the descriptions below, some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that one participant's entire response could be split apart to fit into multiple themes.

Theme 1: Entitlement to and Enjoyment About Period Sex

Several participants wholeheartedly endorsed period sex as enjoyable, no big deal, or something they engaged in without restraint. Some expressed that menstrual period was a non-issue, while others saw it as a way to be defiant against period stigma. Gina (30/white/cisgender/bisexual) described a nonchalant embrace of period sex as a normal and routine part of her sexual repertoire that she easily adjusted to: "We just lay a towel down normally and if it's towards the last days of my flow, like when it's not as heavy, we might be able to just get away with it or get into the shower, like the shower is always easiest." Similarly, Charlie (32/white/cisgendered/bisexual) embraced period sex as a way to satisfy her increased sexual desire during menstruation: "If it's like on a

lighter day, I literally don't care at all, and I find myself like being—I know it's like hormone-wise but I am always way hornier on my period than off of my period ... I'm like, 'I am hornier than I will ever be the rest of the month. Let's go.'" A few participants had narratives about period sex that were explicitly defiant of period stigma and endorsed period sex as normal and natural. Riley (25/Vietnamese-American/nonbinary/pansexual/polyamorous) expressed defiantly positive feelings about menstrual sex and thought it was a normal experience: "It should be normalized all over ... it's a human function ... I just think disclose so it's not a surprise once it gets there." These discussions of normalizing and enjoying period sex, or seeing it as a way to satisfy lusty feelings, speak to a diverse array of reasons why women might see period sex as a positive experience.

Theme 2: Period Sex Feels Different Physically

Some participants described menstrual sex by highlighting the ways that it felt different to them physically when compared to sex while not menstruating. This framing focused on their ambivalence toward period sex connected to the altered physical sensations they had during sex. Cam (41/white/cisgender/bisexual) described changes in her wetness that affected her experiences with period sex: "It didn't bother me either way. I mean, sometimes you know it'd be too wet and then it would be like loss of sensation in the vaginal area, so um, but yeah, but overall like I had a good experience with it. I don't menstruate at all now." Felix (24/Chinese-Taiwanese-American/nonbinary/bisexual) noted their lack of lubrication during menstrual sex: "I've had sex on my period. It was all right. It's not very lubricated so I wasn't like a huge fan, but I'm also like, 'If I want to, I will.'" Describing her uncertainty about whether period sex is a viable activity, Aiden (33/white/cisgender/bisexual) identified period sex as a gamble: "I kind of have mixed feelings about that. I don't mind it. ... But it's one of those things where I don't know if it's going to work until I try it, and it's like, roll the dice and maybe I'll get lucky and it doesn't, and maybe it does and we'll find out." These narratives pointed to how changes in the body during period sex led to more ambivalent feelings about it.

Theme 3: Efforts to Minimize Shame and Discomfort With Period Sex

A substantial number of participants described various efforts to minimize the shame and discomfort of period sex. A few did this by concealing their periods either during or after sex. For example, Liz (32/white/cisgender/bisexual) used her menstrual cup during sex to avoid disclosing her menstrual status to her male partner: "I now use a menstrual cup and like soft disks so last night I had sex and didn't tell him that I was on my period, because I'm not going to limit my experience just because there's some blood going on." Phoebe (49/white/cisgender/bi-light) described her pride and guilt about not telling a partner about her period in order to avoid stigma or shame: "On a super heavy flow day I'm not about it because then it looks like a murder happened, but when it's a light day I'm completely fine with it. ... Sometimes I've not told a guy that I've got my period, just had sex with him, because some guys have some hang-ups

about it, or sometimes I'll act like my period must have just started while we were having sex. 'I'm so sorry.' I feel like I'm kind of a horrible person." In contrast, Westley (30/African American/cisgender/bisexual) once started her period heavily, had sex in the dark, and did not notice the blood until the next morning: "I think we were just really drunk. ... The lights were off. We were in the dorm, but when we woke up the next day, there's just blood everywhere. I was like, 'Oh my God.' It was on the walls. It was on the floor." These narratives suggest that concealment, actual lack of knowledge about starting a period, or pretending to have just started a period all work to minimize the shame connected with menstrual sex.

Some participants also worked to minimize perceived stigma by immediately cleaning themselves off afterward or managing the "mess" of period sex. Quinn (26/white/questioning/bisexual-demisexual) reflected on the hassle of making a mess and the necessity of having period sex in the shower: "I'm not super fond of it just because I don't feel clean and I feel like it's making a mess everywhere, but like I don't really have a problem with it here or there. Usually if I am going to have sex on my period it has to be in the shower because otherwise I feel like I'm bleeding everywhere and it totally gets me out of my head space. Like for me, feeling clean while I'm having sex is a very important aspect to me to be able to be in the mindset of it." The notions of menstrual blood as "unclean" and the practical aspects of needing to clean up messes (often gendered as their responsibility) permeated these narratives, revealing the way that stigma wove itself into narratives of period sex.

Theme 4: Looking for Partner Cues to Determine Feelings About Period Sex

Many participants said that they looked for their partner's cues about whether to engage in period sex, prioritizing partners' feelings and attitudes over their own when making decisions about whether to have period sex. Fin (30/white/questioning/queer-homoromantic) reported having three different partners with three different attitudes about period sex: "My kid's dad was like, 'Eww, that's gross,' so we clearly never did anything while I was on my period, but the first guy I slept with, my friend, he didn't have a problem with that so we did that pretty much right away. And then my last partner who was nonbinary and then my long-term partner after my kid's dad, we always—it wasn't a thing that anyone was to worry about." Emily (32/white/cisgender/homoromantic-bisexual) also prioritized her partner's feelings about period sex: "I planned to meet a guy several years ago and when it came like the morning of I was like, 'Shit, I started my period,' and so I told him and he's like, 'I don't really care.' He's like, 'If you don't care, I don't care.' I was like, 'Oh why not, you know?' And I don't know. It was whatever." These varying experiences with partner openness or reluctance impacted and shaped how participants experienced their own reactions to period sex.

A few participants had initially liked period sex but discovered that their partners did not so they stopped requesting it. Morgan (33/white/cisgender/ambiguous sexuality) said that she liked period sex but that some partners have rejected it so she has not always pursued it: "He and I have now been together for a year and it's like the sex just keeps getting better. We have so much of it. For me it's like nothing has fizzled,

nothing like that. The only thing about him is he does not like the period sex, which is fine. Some guys just don't. He gets queasy from the sight of blood." Mack (28/Syrian-American/cisgender/bisexual) similarly described that she liked period sex and had had quite a bit of it but stopped after a "traumatic" incident with her partner: "There was an incident ... I was riding him and I bled a lot. I had clots. Clots came out while we were having sex to the point where there was so much blood that he was traumatized and we never had sex on my period again." The notion of period sex as gross, traumatic, and disarming also seemed to shape participants' own experiences with it, such that they worried about partners' reactions and at times reacted to a negative experience by shutting down period sex altogether.

Theme 5: Period Sex as Messy and "Unsexy"

A handful of participants openly disliked period sex and said that it made them feel unpleasant emotions. Sawyer (30/white/cisgender/bisexual) tried period sex once but ultimately did not feel sexy during it: "There was one time that we actually had vaginal sex and I was on it, and I didn't really like it ... I just don't feel sexy, so I'm like, 'Fine, I'll try it. We'll do it.' Just didn't like it so I was like, 'No, not for me.'" The sense of incompatibility between sexuality and menstruation seemed vivid in Sawyer's response. Kai (33/white/cisgender/bisexual-pansexual) described period sex as uncomfortable and did not connect with women who said it felt good to them: "I know some women absolutely love it. They think it feels better. You're more sensitive. For me I never really had that experience. I just always felt kind of uncomfortable. Things felt a little different. They even, like, smelled a little different ... I usually felt bloated, or like my boobs were sore and things, like I had a hard time feeling sexy so I couldn't really enjoy it." The lack of feeling attractive combined with the hassles of cleanup led some participants to avoid period sex.

Theme 6: Embracing Vaginal Sex But Not Cunnilingus While Menstruating

Many participants described feeling differently about vaginal sex during their periods compared to receiving oral sex during menstruation, particularly when having sex with men. Emory (25/white/cisgender/queer-bisexual-gay) said that having oral sex during her period felt uncomfortable even while vaginal sex felt okay: "Penetrative sex with a man is like the only thing I'm sort of comfortable with as period sex. I will never be comfortable having someone go down on me while I'm on my period. That just does not seem like a great thing for me." Jamie (27/white/cisgender/bisexual), too, described oral sex as less desirable than vaginal sex: "I have never been eaten out on my period. Maybe if it was toward the end of it and I showered. But intercourse, I have had intercourse plenty of times on my period, usually not the first day when I'm in a lot of pain because it just gets worse."

The length of the relationship also mattered when thinking about the meaning of period sex, though some participants had different feelings and approaches to oral versus vaginal sex. Parker (35/Latinx/questioning/pansexual-polyamorous) felt reluctant about all period sex but eventually tried vaginal sex but never oral sex with a longer-

term partner: “I honestly had to be talked into it. I was not on board. ... It wasn’t my favorite thing but it wasn’t horrible. I do not allow him to go down on me. I was not interested in that at all. I really like kissing somebody following oral sex like if I go down on somebody, but I did not want to reciprocate that if he went down on me while I was on my period.” The perceived intimacy of period sex, and the proximity to period blood while having oral sex versus vaginal sex, speaks to how participants may have internalized the stigma of period sex differently for different actions.

Discussion

Although menstrual sex is a fairly common experience (Allen & Goldberg, 2009), this study suggests that women and AFAB people within the queer community navigate their sexual behavior with underlying anxiety surrounding the taboo or stigma attached to menstrual sex. These narratives speak to the fluid, multifaceted qualities of resistance as they interact with efforts to trouble traditional gender and sexual scripts. Queer women and AFAB people did not describe menstrual sex as wholly “agentic,” “liberating,” or as a form of “resistance,” but often felt saddled by stories of shame, ambivalence, and worry about their partners’ reactions. These narratives provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which women and AFAB people navigated their sexual lives in ways that both accommodated and resisted gender stereotypes surrounding period sex.

We read these narratives as embedded with the scaffolding of the intrapsychic (how people feel in their own brains about an experience), the relational (how people interact with others to form meaning about their experiences), the social (how people draw from existing social scripts to describe and understand their experiences), and the cultural (how people reflect and shape broader cultural stories). Qualitative narratives like these reveal the movement between each of these layers of meaning-making and how they interact with, and reflect on, each other. For example, some women and AFAB folk may personally like or embrace period sex, but then find reluctant or disparaging partners. Others may feel hesitant about the stigma attached to it, but then choose to use menstrual sex as a form of rebellion against traditional gendered scripts. We were impressed at the way that menstrual sex seems to both reflect contemporary norms of gender and sexuality while also at times evading those same norms.

Compared to previous studies of menstrual sex, women and AFAB people felt far more positively toward menstrual sex as a whole, seeing it as something they often found appealing or “no big deal.” Compared to previous research (Allen & Goldberg, 2009; Fahs, 2011), participants in this study felt more open to menstrual sex and were able to discuss and negotiate this with their partners more freely. This is more in line with a study by Rubinsky et al. (2021), which suggested that queer people may be more likely to perceive their (and others’) menstruation as normal and natural. In our study, comfort around menstrual sex appeared frequently. Whether queer identities and gender-nonconforming identities contributed to this is an open question, as these results may also reflect trends in today’s cohort or particular qualities about this sample. That said, we have at least laid the groundwork for imagining that openness to period sex



Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Age	Race/ethnicity	Gender orientation	Sexual orientation	Education	Occupation	Family status
Parker	35	Latinx	Questioning	Pansexual/polyamorous	Master's degree	Unemployed	Single, one child
Estelle	23	Black	Cisgender	Fluid sexuality/heteroromantic	Some college	Bartender	Single, no children
Olivia	25	Black	Cisgender	Pansexual	Some college	Nanny	Relationship, no children
Morgan	33	White	Cisgender	Ambiguous	Some college	Service Industry	Relationship, no children
Gail	23	White	Agender	Bisexual/queer/homoflexible	Master's degree	Hospice Social Worker	Relationship, no children
Phoebe	49	White	Cisgender	Bi-light	Bachelor's degree	Customer Service	Single, no children
Emily	32	White	Cisgender	Homoromantic/bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Administrative Assistant	Single, no children
Valerie	36	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Software Technician	Married, one child
Carn	41	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Master's degree	Health/Life Coach	Relationship, one child
Riley	25	Vietnamese	Nonbinary	Pansexual/polyamorous	Some college	Bartender	Relationship, no children
Liz	32	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Some college	Bartender	Relationship, no children
Brianna	27	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Behavioral Therapist/Technician	Single, no children
Taylor	27	White	Cisgender	Bisexual/queer	Some graduate school	Social Worker	Relationship, no children
Quinn	26	White	Questioning	Bisexual/demisexual	Some college	Real Estate Agent	Relationship, one child
Sawyer	30	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Some college	Unemployed	Married, no children
Emory	25	White	Cisgender	Queer/bisexual/ gay	Culinary certificate; no college	Service Industry	Single, no children
Fin	30	White	Questioning	Queer/homoromantic	Master's degree	Service Industry and Community Outreach	Single, two children
Pat	30	White	Questioning	Pansexual	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	Single, no children
Mack	28	Syrian	Cisgender	Bisexual	Some college	Service Industry	Single, no children
Westley	30	African American/ Black	Cisgender	Bisexual	Master's degree	Artist	Single, two children
Gina	30	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Some college	User Interface Designer	Engaged, no children
Jamie	27	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Some college	Service Industry	Relationship, no children
Felix	24	Chinese/ Taiwanese	Nonbinary	Bisexual	No college	Tech Company Worker	Relationship, no children
Kai	33	White	Cisgender	Bisexual/pansexual	Some college	Freelance Photographer	Divorced, no children
Aiden	33	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	Married, two children
Charlie	32	White	Cisgender	Bisexual	Some college	Payroll Coordinator	Married, no children

may be a quality that queer and AFAB people embrace more than heterosexual and cis women have.

Still, the task of destabilizing heteronormativity in the bedroom—even for queer or AFAB people—is still a formidable challenge, especially in interactions with cis straight men. Many participants had to work hard to *become* comfortable with menstrual sex, and some described this transformation as a years-long process to finally develop positive associations with period sex. Many participants described feeling uncomfortable and shameful about period sex in their younger years, but then began to embrace period sex. In this regard, navigating period sex may be understood as resistance work and perhaps a form of entitlement to pleasure, though these narratives are still quite muddled. More work around period-positive sex education, and explicitly feminist psychoeducation around menstruation (Mondragon & Txertudi, 2019), may help to lessen some of the internalized shame and stigma people feel about menstruation, though recognition that women and AFAB people live in a culture that largely shames and stigmatizes their bodies is still an ambition not yet fully achieved in today's period education models.

Our data suggest that gendered power relations are present for individuals of *all* sexual orientations and that heteronormativity is embedded within a patriarchal, hegemonic system; consequently, it is embodied and experienced in queer spaces and within queer bodies. The fear of menstrual blood as “gross” or “disgusting,” for example, reflects the gendering of AFAB people's bodies as more abject or denigrated than those assigned male at birth. The fear of oral sex during menstruation, but the embrace of penile-vaginal intercourse during menstruation, also speaks to heteronormative narratives creeping into queer sexual spaces. Patriarchy cannot be quarantined only to women's interactions with men, but it works as an omnipresent facet of social life (Brunskell-Evans, 2017). It is therefore not surprising that many women or AFAB people may feel anxious navigating sexual pleasure that centers around their own desire, especially for a historically stigmatized behavior such as period sex. Further, it was notable that many participants did not address the gender of their partners, but when they did mention feelings about period sex, they referenced *his* feelings (gendered as male). As to whether this was due to more anxiety about having period sex with men or internalizing heteronormativity in understanding what entails “period sex” in the first place, this remains an open question. The imprint of patriarchy on participants' understandings of menstrual sex was notable on many levels. Performances of gender—the trying on of certain actions, statuses, and practices—is a constant in sexual and social life. Gender is, after all, an achieved status, not an ascribed one (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, gender is inherently interactional, defined by our social relationships and the “accomplishment” of appropriate performances. In these data, women and AFAB people exhibited their performances of menstrual sex through multiple layers of social and relational cues. Many participants, in fact, found themselves displaying moments of enthusiasm for menstrual sex while also relying on partner cues. Others worked to minimize discomfort of menstrual sex by pretending not to be menstruating altogether. These stories serve as a reminder that deconstructing the shame, guilt, and stigma surrounding menstruation is necessary if women and AFAB people are to experience more pleasure during menstrual sex.

In the broadest sense, menstrual sex reveals a space where women and AFAB people feel there is much risk to their sense of traditional femininity (e.g., “clean” bodies, deference to partner needs, caretaking). They instead described violations to traditional gendered scripts via making a mess, imposing their own bloody bodies onto a partner’s space or body, and negotiating caretaking as reciprocal rather than one-sided. The freedom to do this may also represent an important aspect of queer sexuality as more flexible, or even confrontational, to traditional gendered scripts. The ability to take risks, but also the *costs* of taking risks, might be differently imagined for those already marginalized by their sexual identities and/or gender identities. This is certainly something we would hope future researchers would continue to explore, whether through the lens of menstrual sex or through a whole host of other social and sexual activities.

The narratives in this study also suggest that accommodating stigma and challenging stigma may co-occur, particularly when the ubiquity of menstrual stigma meets resistance to stigma. In other words, these are not stories of *either* accommodating stigma (that is, allowing stigma to drive decisions about menstrual sex) *or* challenging stigma (that is, revolting against existing norms of silence, secrecy, and shame surrounding menstruation). Rather, these stories reveal how stigma infects and infiltrates the most mundane of actions, from decision-making about what kind of sex to have, to ideas about what constitutes a “clean” body, to feelings about oral sex as “gross” but penile-vaginal sex as “sexy.” Looking at these stories as a whole, it is the recognition and perception of stigma that is most clearly articulated in women and AFAB people’s narratives of menstrual sex. They often see it, or sense it within themselves, but are not always sure how to respond or react or resist. This creates messy stories and complicated narratives worthy of making space for. Just because they felt discomfort did not mean that they *only* felt negatively toward menstrual sex. Just because they enjoyed menstrual sex in some contexts did not mean they liked it in all contexts. Just because it was great with some partners did not mean it was fabulous with all partners. The recognition of these contradictions, or the spectrum of experiences people had, allows for broader recognition of sex and menstruation as spaces of deep ambivalence where possibilities of constructing new realities abound. This complexity also reminds us as practitioners not to locate people’s sexual “issues” within the individual, but instead to look relationally to understand the interplay between self and other; this is especially important for discussions and diagnoses of so-called sexual dysfunction.

Limitations and Future Directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study’s results, as the choice for wording the interview questions may have captured some, but certainly not all, of the facets of how women and AFAB people understand their experiences with menstrual sex. For example, asking about fingering or anal sex during menstruation or talking about other forms of physical intimacy could have created new or different kinds of narratives about comfort (or discomfort) with menstruation. As with other stigmatized topics, some people may have felt uncomfortable talking about menstrual sex in a face-to-face context and may have preferred to write narratives about

it in order to minimize their discomfort (see Laumann et al., 2000). It may also be useful to ask more about a genealogy of people's relationships in future studies, as comfort with menstrual sex seemed to change drastically depending on the partner and the partner's feelings about menstrual embodiment. Further, each participant was only interviewed once; having more than one interview with each participant may have yielded different information and given participants time and space to reflect on the questions more thoroughly.

Additionally, the inclusion of trans men in future studies could also add another dimension to gender inclusivity of menstrual sex experiences. Although our data were inclusive of genderfluid and gender-nonconforming participants, future research could intentionally integrate narratives from the trans community to better understand the role of periods in sexual behavior as it pertains to gender. Future studies could also expand the age range of participants, particularly by adding more premenopausal or actively menopausal women and AFAB people (who often have disruptions to typical menstrual flow and who may experience their periods differently). Engaging with more body diversity in terms of ability, fatness, and diverse medical statuses could also expand the pool of subjects currently represented in existing studies.

Ultimately, we imagine this study as a call to center the embodied experiences of women, queer people, and gender-nonconforming people whenever possible and to complicate existing narratives about stigma and sexual embodiment. While the topic is quite specific and narrow, menstrual sex also ties into many broader stories about gender, power, and sexuality, and it foregrounds the ways that stigma is both internalized (sometimes quite deeply) and forcefully resisted. We consider the narratives in this study to be a hopeful reminder of the necessity of narrating embodied experiences and of the complex meaning-making possibilities of menstruation, sexuality, eroticism, queer identity, and social relationships.

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