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## “It’s Normal . . . Mom Will Be Home in an Hour”: The Role of Fathers in Menstrual Education

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The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine fathers’ self-reports about their role in educating daughters and sons about menstruation. Through postings in online venues, 110 fathers were recruited. Fathers indicated that they were an important source of information for their children, particularly sons. Traditional beliefs about mothering, but not fathering, negatively predicted knowledge and comfort in talking about menstruation. Fathers reported that they would talk about it earlier to their daughters than to their sons, but conversation topics were generally similar for both sexes. Negative aspects of menstruation (e.g., mood swings) were more likely to be raised with sons, however.

**Keywords** *menstruation, fathers, daughters, sons, parent-child communication*

Although girls and boys learn about reproductive health and sexual development from a variety of sources (e.g., peers, school, media, internet), it is well documented that education about menstruation primarily occurs within the context of the family (Allen, Kaestle, & Goldberg, 2011; Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002; Dilorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999; Rembeck & Gunnarsson, 2004). Mothers are the main educators, and daughters, more so than sons, receive frequent and detailed discussions about all of sexual development, including menstruation (Beausang & Razor, 2000; Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Lee, 2008; Raffaelli, Bogenschneider, & Flood, 1998). The role of fathers in educating both boys and girls about menstruation is rarely discussed in the literature. In the few studies that explored their roles, fathers reported speaking only with their daughters, leaving sons in the precarious position of having to seek out less-than-adequate sources of information (Amann-Gainotti, 1986; Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Wilson, Dalberth, & Koo, 2010). This potential familial divide, clearly marked by gender, has important social and psychological implications for all members of the family.

The current study aims to fill a gap in the literature about fathers’ role in educating both their sons and daughters about menstruation. Of particular interest is how traditional beliefs about parenting may relate to fathers’ knowledge about menstruation, their comfort talking about menstruation, and what they would say to both their daughters and/or sons. Feminist scholars

believe that men's attitudes toward menstruation are a key factor in perpetuating menstruation myths (Fromme & Emihovich, 1998; King, Ussher, & Perz, 2014); thus, fathers are in a unique position to disrupt and challenge menstrual taboos. This study, therefore, was designed to identify any important variables that might be related to a greater likelihood of fathers talking either negatively or positively about menstruation with their children.

## MENSTRUATION EDUCATION

Accurate menstruation education is critical for encouraging healthy development among adolescent girls (Gallant & Derry, 1995). General information about the menstrual cycle and menstrual hygiene are available through educational booklets and social media outlets (Erchull, Chrisler, Gorman, & Johnston-Robledo, 2002; Thornton, 2013). Yet, such education appears to focus disproportionately on the negative aspects of menstruation (Erchull et al., 2002; Havens & Swenson, 1989; Rembeck & Gunnarsson, 2004; Thornton, 2013). Girls receive cautionary advice about cramps, moodiness, and accidents (Erchull et al., 2002). Historically, menstruation has been seen as a sign of women's inferiority and used to justify limiting women's participation in the public sphere, which was reserved for the more acceptable male body (Allen et al., 2011). Menstruation has been viewed as dangerous, dirty, and disgusting, and menstruating women have been considered a threat to all sorts of objects (e.g., plants, crops, food, wine) and activities (e.g., sex, prayer; Costos et al., 2002). The language used to describe menstruation, including "the curse," and "on the rag," further demonstrates the stigma associated with menstruation (Allen & Goldberg, 2009).

These problematic historical depictions of menstruation continue to emerge in contemporary education (Erchull et al., 2002). In the review of the literature that she used as a foundation for her work, White (2013) identified three specific menstrual taboos found in current U.S. culture. First, the *concealment taboo*, which encompasses aspects of the *hygiene crisis*, teaches girls how to hide and control their menstruating bodies more effectively (Laws, 1992, p. 118). The discourse of "freshness," in particular, has been cited as evidence of the implicit negative depictions of the female body, as well as the uniquely moral tone regarding the need for girls and women to cleanse themselves carefully (Luke, 1997, p. 28). Second, the *activity taboo*, closely tied to the concealment taboo, includes the expectation that menstruation should restrict girls and women from engaging in certain activities, such as wearing tight and/or white clothing or going swimming (Houppert, 1999; White, 2013). Such activities could risk exposing leaks, a fear reported by 75% of girls (Lee, 1994), and a fear rooted in reality given that onlookers are likely to attribute leaks to characterological flaws and to avoid or distance themselves from offending girls and women (Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Third, the *communication taboo* requires the silencing of open discussion with regard to menstruation, especially with boys and men. It is not unreasonable to assume that these taboos influence both the way menstruation is discussed and how comfortable girls and boys are in inquiring about menstruation.

### Girls and Menstruation

It is not surprising then that, in retrospective studies, women have characterized their experience of learning about menstruation as ambivalent (Cooper & Koch, 2007; Costos et al., 2002).

Discussions of menstruation are often taboo even among girls and women (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1988), with attitudes toward menstruation typically reflecting some degree of negativity (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1980; Marván, Ramirez-Esparza, Cortes-Iniestra, & Chrisler, 2006). Although girls may be informed that menstruation is something to celebrate, paradoxically, they are surrounded by messages that judge menstruating women negatively (Roberts et al., 2002). For example, the Tampax Report (1981) conveyed that Americans believed that women were more prone to stress and/or illness during menstruation and thought that premenstrual women were vindictive and unpredictable. Nearly all men and women reported that women are emotional before and during menstruation, and 39% of men and 25% of women responded that menstruation not only affected a woman's ability to think but also her ability to function at work. Although the Tampax Report was written over 30 years ago, many of the same sentiments are reflected in contemporary attitudes toward menstruation (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, White, & Holmgren, 2003; Marván, Cortes-Iniestra, Gonzalez, 2005; Marván & Trujillo, 2010).

Although mothers are reported to be the primary source of information about menstruation (Koff & Rierdan, 1995, Lee, 2008), girls often reported learning what they really wanted to know about menstruation from their same-sex peers (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). Mothers tended to focus on the biological and hygienic aspects of menstruation and often emphasized pain and messiness (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). Instead, adolescent girls reported wanting to know how menstruation would feel and wanted an opportunity to process their own subjective experience (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). In young adulthood, girls wanted to address more complex topics such as having sex during menstruation (Allen et al., 2011). Some girls' first exposure to menstruation is through "girls-only" health education programs in elementary school (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). These programs frequently include films and pamphlets and tend to have a negative tone and/or medicalized approach (Erchull et al., 2002; Havens & Swenson, 1989); although it has been noted that progress in the portrayal of menstruation is being made, as evidenced by changes in more recent educational materials (Erchull et al., 2002).

## Boys and Menstruation

Some feminist scholars have argued that men's attitudes are key factors in perpetuating stereotypes and myths about menstruation (Fromme & Emihovich, 1998), especially because boys and men tend to hold more negative attitudes toward menstruation than do women (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1986; Laws, 1992; Marván et al., 2006). Menstruation ideologies reflect the patriarchal social order. Subsequently, the event of menstruation provides adolescent boys an opportunity to exercise their power through teasing and embarrassing girls (Diorio & Munro, 2000). Indeed, girls report a high degree of motivation to keep menstruation hidden from their male peers because of the fear of being teased or embarrassed (Chang, Hayter, & Lin, 2012; Rembeck & Gunnarsson, 2004; Roberts et al., 2002; Uskul, 2004). Boys and men, however, do talk among themselves and in public about menstruation through the use of euphemisms and jokes (Laws, 1992). Scholars have also documented that boys and men post mean-spirited comments about menstruation online (King, Ussher, & Perz, 2014; Thornton, 2013). Although previous research showed that girls and women were not likely to discuss menstruation in public (Laws, 1992), newer work by Fingerson (2005, 2006) suggests that girls are beginning to develop their own

codes to talk about menstruation, in public and in front of boys. Further, conversations by girls on the Internet highlight another avenue for girl talk about periods (Polak, 2006).

Less is known about how boys learn about menstruation (Allen et al., 2011; Koff & Rierdan, 1995). In retrospective studies, men have reported learning about menstruation informally from sisters, female romantic partners, or female friends (Allen & Goldberg, 2009; Allen et al., 2011). Sex education programs are typically gender segregated, and teachers rarely cover menstruation in boys-only sex education curriculum (Chang et al., 2012; Lovering, 1995). Some boys learn about menstruation from their mothers; however, there is almost no evidence that boys learn about menstruation from their fathers (Allen et al., 2011; Lovering, 1995). Because they are deliberately kept out of formal educational discussions about menstruation within both familial and educational settings, boys and men hold less accurate information about menstruation and the menstrual cycle (Amann-Gainotti, 1986; Chang et al., 2012; Kalman, 2003; Laws, 1992; Marván & Bejarano, 2005; Marván et al., 2006). Chang et al. (2012) reported that when adolescent boys did ask their teachers and parents about menstruation, they rarely received clear and direct answers. Because of this, boys quickly learned that menstruation was a “girls-only” topic, and subsequently developed stereotypes (e.g., “girls are more moody” and “menstruation is disgusting”).

There appears, however, to be a developmental shift in attitudes with regard to menstruation among some young adult men (Allen et al., 2011). As they become older, some men develop a more positive and holistic attitude toward menstruation, particularly when they are able to have open conversations about menstruation with their female friends and/or romantic partners (Allen et al., 2011). Additional life experiences, such as the birth of a child or a marriage to a woman, also prompts changes in men’s attitudes toward menstruation. For example, men who reported discussing menstruation with their romantic partners perceived this talk as private and a sign of intimacy (Allen et al., 2011). In addition, men who reported engaging in sex during menstruation viewed shared experiences with menstruation as an aspect of being in a committed relationship (Allen & Goldberg, 2009).

## Fathers and Menstruation

Although some men appear to change their attitudes toward menstruation, it is unclear if these men convey affirming educational messages to their children (Allen et al., 2011). Father–daughter relationships exist within a larger cultural context, and many of the menstrual taboos no doubt influence role expectations (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013). Fathers might find themselves in a paradoxical position in that many girls report wanting support from their fathers but are highly uncomfortable about discussing menstruation with them (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). In a study that explored adolescent girls’ experiences, girls wanted their fathers to know that menstruation had occurred, but nearly all of them did not want their father to ask questions or provide advice (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). Of the adolescent girls, 33% reported that they would not discuss menstruation with their fathers (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). Consequently, all of the girls reported that fathers were not involved in helping them cope, and many girls reported that they withdrew entirely from their fathers during this time. Further, in an international sample, Chrisler and Zittel (1998) found that, when fathers made celebratory gestures about the onset of menarche, daughters reported embarrassment.

There is also mixed research in understanding the effect of a father's communication with a daughter about menstruation. Koff and Rierdan (1995) showed that girls who did not discuss menstruation with their fathers reported more severe menstrual symptoms, whereas in another study, girls who consulted with men for information reported that the experience was negative and also reported more severe menstrual symptoms (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1982). Yet, there is evidence that children of fathers who have more open and positive communication approaches about sexuality have more holistic understandings of sexuality, which suggests that fathers could play a positive role in educating their daughters about menstruation (Joffe & Franca-Koh, 2001). If fathers are able to communicate positively with their daughters, there is evidence that improved attitudes toward menstruation would result. Girls who have positive attitudes toward menstruation associate it with growing up and being normal (Golub, 1993), and girls who are able to communicate openly about menstruation report lower levels of anxiety and worry and are less likely to experience teenage pregnancy (Frank & Williams, 1999). In contrast, girls who learn that menstruation is negative expect negative menstrual experiences and report more severe symptoms (Frank & Williams, 1999). Further, girls without a female adult caregiver have greater difficulty communicating about menstruation (Kalman, 2003), which suggests that fathers could be more active in educating, supporting, and/or helping daughters find female adults for additional support. When a female adult provides a positive view about menstruation, girls are more likely to view these women as positive role models (Danza, 1983).

### Traditional Parenting and Menstruation

Because menstruation education is intertwined with gender, it is likely that traditional attitudes toward parenting roles might influence a father's decision to discuss menstruation with his children. Although, to our knowledge, no formal study has ever been conducted to examine whether traditional beliefs about parenting relate to fathers' likelihood to discuss menstruation with their children, there is evidence that a traditional fatherhood style decreases the likelihood that fathers would educate their children about reproductive health and sexuality (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Feldman, 2001). In particular, traditional fathers are more authoritarian with their children, a parental style associated with lower parent-child communication about sexuality (Askelson, Campo, & Smith, 2012). Further, men who adhere to more traditional fatherhood styles are more likely to discuss sex in humorous and/or impersonal ways (Kirkman et al., 2001). They are also likely to expect the child's mother to take the more active role in sex education (Hyde et al., 2013). Thus, it is likely that attitudes toward traditional parenting roles influence a father's knowledge about and comfort with discussion of menstruation, affecting the likelihood that they will discuss menstruation with their children.

### THE PRESENT STUDY

We had several goals for the present exploratory study. First, we examined how fathers initially learned about menstruation and how they believed girls and boys should learn about it. Second, we assessed fathers' knowledge of menstruation, their level of comfort discussing menstruation, and their attitudes toward parenting. Third, we evaluated the extent to which traditional attitudes

toward parenting could predict fathers' knowledge about menstruation as well as their comfort discussing menstruation with both daughters and sons. We hypothesized that fathers who have more traditional parenting attitudes would have less accurate knowledge about menstruation and would be less comfortable discussing menstruation with their children than would fathers who have more contemporary attitudes. Finally, we asked fathers to describe what they would say to their sons and daughters about menstruation and when these conversations would occur.

## METHOD

### Participants

We recruited 110 fathers between the ages of 18 and 74 ( $M = 44.85$ ,  $SD = 12.19$ ) to complete our survey. The majority of our participants self-identified as European American/White (79%), followed by African American/Black (14%), Latino (6%), and American Indian (1%). The majority also identified as heterosexual/straight (94%); 4% identified as bisexual, and 1% identified as homosexual/gay. In regard to socioeconomic status, the most common self-identification was as middle class (47%); 32% identified as upper-middle class, 17% identified as working class, and 4% identified as living in poverty. In general, participants in this study had some formal higher education; 69% reported having at least a college degree. More specifically, 35% had completed some high school, 8% were high school graduates, 20% had completed at least some college or earned an associate's degree, 31% were college graduates, 4% had completed some graduate school, 17% had earned a master's degree, and 17% had earned doctoral-level degrees. Of our participants, 24% were fathers of boys, 38% were fathers of girls, and 38% reported that they had children of both sexes. All participants had between one and seven children. The children of our participants ranged in age from 2 months to 43 years.

### Measures

#### *Sources of Information About Menstruation*

Participants were asked to rate the amount of information they had learned about menstruation from each of 20 sources on a 4-point scale that ranged from 1 (*learned nothing*) to 4 (*learned a lot*). This list was adapted from a 15-item list used by Brooks-Gunn and Ruble (1982) in a study of adolescent girls. Given the shift from adolescent girls to fathers, we changed "girlfriends" from the original measure to "female friends." We also changed "health education classes" to read as "health/sex education classes," and we split "television" into "television shows" and "television advertisements" and "magazines" into "magazine articles" and "magazine advertisements." Finally, we added "female romantic partner," "male romantic partner," "biology class," "the Internet," and "religious source" to the list. Participants were also asked to rate separately the amount of information about menstruation that girls and boys should learn from each of these 20 sources on a 4-point scale that ranged from 1 (*learn nothing*) to 4 (*learn a lot*).

### *Knowledge About Menstruation*

Participants responded to nine true/false questions about menstruation to assess their general knowledge about the menstrual cycle (Gorman, 1999). Items included “All women have menstrual cramps during their period” and “Menstruation cleans the body of dirty blood.” A percent correct score was calculated for all participants, with higher scores indicating more accurate knowledge.

### *Comfort Discussing Menstruation*

Participants were asked to rate their level of comfort talking about menstruation with both sons and daughters, separately, using a 7-point response scale that ranged from 1 (*very uncomfortable*) to 7 (*very comfortable*).

### *Traditional Attitudes About Parenting*

The 18-item Traditional Motherhood Scale (e.g., “The presence of the mother is vital to the child during the formative years”) and the 10-item Traditional Fatherhood Scale (e.g., “The father’s main contribution to his family is giving financially”) were used to assess attitudes toward traditional parenting (Whatley & Knox, 2005). Responses to both measures were made on a 7-point response scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating more traditional attitudes. Both measures had acceptable internal consistency reliability; Cronbach’s alphas were .95 and .92 for the motherhood and fatherhood scales, respectively, in the current study.

### *Talking About Menstruation*

Open-ended questions were asked in order to gather information from participants about how they would talk to both daughters and sons about menstruation. All participants were asked, separately, “If you have a [daughter/son] and you were describing *menstruation and the menstrual cycle* to [her/him], what would you say?” After responding to each of these questions, participants were asked “How old would [she/he] be when you had this conversation?”

## Procedure

Participants were recruited to complete a secure, anonymous, online survey using a variety of methods. Authors of many blogs about fathering were contacted and asked to post a request for participants on their blog or via other social media such as Twitter or Facebook pages. Potential blogs were identified from lists of top “daddy blogs” found through Google searches using the terms daddy blog, fathering blog, and father blog. More than 100 blog administrators were contacted with our request, but it was impossible to know which of these opted to share the link to our survey with readers/followers. Participants were also recruited via postings on Craigslist



TABLE 1  
Sources of Information about Menstruation

	<i>Self</i>		<i>Girls</i>		<i>Boys</i>		<i>t</i> -tests for Girl/Boy Ratings
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Female romantic partner	3.38	.94	2.44	1.13	3.12	.99	$t(72) = -4.78, p < .001, d = .56$
Female friend	2.62	1.10	2.88	.93	2.57	.96	$t(78) = 3.45, p = .001, d = .39$
Health/sex education class	2.51	.99	3.57	.78	3.44	.84	$t(78) = 1.58, p = .12, d = .18$
Books	2.33	1.06	2.98	.99	2.85	.94	$t(78) = 2.41, p = .02, d = .27$
Biology class	2.26	1.06	2.99	1.08	3.04	1.04	$t(77) = -.71, p = .48, d = .08$
Overheard conversations among women	2.07	.94	2.18	.97	1.99	.87	$t(77) = 3.37, p = .001, d = .39$
Mother	2.02	1.12	3.76	.71	3.21	.97	$t(78) = 5.17, p < .001, d = .60$
Internet	1.93	1.04	2.30	1.03	2.20	1.07	$t(77) = 1.85, p = .07, d = .21$
Television advertisements	1.87	.68	1.68	.72	1.62	.80	$t(77) = 1.69, p = .10, d = .19$
Magazine articles	1.86	.89	2.30	.83	2.16	.93	$t(76) = 2.02, p = .05, d = .23$
Television shows	1.77	.73	1.71	.78	1.65	.78	$t(76) = 1.22, p = .23, d = .14$
Nurse	1.73	.95	3.44	.77	2.79	1.11	$t(76) = 6.60, p < .001, d = .80$
Doctor	1.72	1.00	3.61	.77	3.03	1.09	$t(75) = 5.04, p < .001, d = .60$
Sisters	1.70	.99	3.30	.92	2.45	1.02	$t(74) = 7.89, p < .001, d = .92$
Magazine advertisements	1.59	.66	1.73	.77	1.65	.82	$t(77) = 2.09, p = .04, d = .24$
Male friend	1.46	.85	1.38	.73	1.69	.87	$t(77) = -2.91, p = .005, d = .33$
Father	1.36	.76	2.43	1.06	2.91	1.13	$t(78) = -3.74, p < .001, d = .42$
Religious source	1.24	.56	1.44	.77	1.41	.74	$t(77) = 1.40, p = .17, d = .16$
Brothers	1.22	.62	1.33	.69	1.69	.89	$t(75) = -4.24, p < .001, d = .50$
Male romantic partner	1.19	.58	1.54	.83	1.47	.83	$t(72) = 1.64, p = .11, d = .33$

*Note.* Scores for the amount of information learned (that should be learned) from each listed source could range from 1 (*learned nothing*) to 4 (*learned a lot*). An alpha level of .0025 or below was considered statistically significant.

under the volunteer opportunity category for many metropolitan areas throughout the United States. We also posted a brief description of the study as well as a link to the survey as status updates on our own Facebook accounts. All recruitment requests indicated that fathers were wanted to complete a brief survey about talking to their children about puberty. All recruitment messages also included a request to pass the link on to other fathers who might be interested; thus, a snowball sampling technique was also used. When participants clicked on the posted link to the survey, they were first taken to an online informed consent page. After clicking their consent, they completed the survey, which was pilot-tested to take approximately 15 minutes. The survey ended with a debriefing page. All participants were volunteers who received no incentives for their participation.

## Results

Fathers were asked to rate the amount they learned about menstruation from each of 20 different sources. Means and standard deviations for each source are provided in Table 1. The five most highly rated sources were (a) female romantic partners, (b) female friends, (c) health/sex education classes, (d) books, and (e) biology classes. The mean score for information learned from mothers

TABLE 2  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Knowledge About Menstruation, Comfort Discussing Menstruation, and Traditional Parenting Attitudes

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Knowledge	80.63	19.90	–			
2. Comfort talking with daughter(s)	5.15	1.75	.13	–		
3. Comfort talking with son(s)	5.08	1.62	.24	.56***	–	
4. Traditional mothering	3.73	1.38	–.39**	–.29*	–.33*	–
5. Traditional fathering	2.29	1.07	–.28*	–.12	–.17	.67***

Note.  $N = 60$ . \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Higher scores represent greater endorsement of the construct. Knowledge scores could range from 0 to 100%. Comfort discussing menstruation and traditional parenting attitude scores could range from 1 to 7.

resulted in this being the seventh rated source of information whereas fathers were the seventeenth source. Fathers were also asked to separately rate the amount of information about menstruation that should be learned from each of these sources for girls and boys (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). For girls, the five most highly endorsed sources were (a) mothers, (b) doctors, (c) health/sex education classes, (d) nurses, and (e) sisters. Fathers were the tenth most highly endorsed source. For boys, the five most highly endorsed sources were (a) health/sex education classes, (b) mothers, (c) female romantic partners, (d) biology classes, and (e) doctors. Fathers were the sixth most highly endorsed source of information about menstruation.

To understand the perceived differences in how boys and girls should learn about menstruation, we performed a series of paired samples  $t$ -tests to compare mean scores for each of the 20 sources of information (see Table 1). Because a large number of tests were used, a Bonferroni correction was employed, and an alpha level of .0025 was considered our standard for statistical significance.

There were significant differences in the ratings fathers gave for 9 of the 20 information sources. Three sources were rated higher for boys than girls: female romantic partners, fathers, and brothers. Six sources were rated higher for girls than boys: female friends, overheard conversations among women, mothers, nurses, doctors, and sisters. In sum, male sources of information (i.e., fathers and brothers) and female romantic partners were seen as more important sources of information about menstruation for boys than for girls, whereas female sources of information (i.e., mother, sisters, female friends, and overheard conversations among women) and medical sources of information (i.e., doctors and nurses) were seen as more important sources of information for girls than for boys.

We also assessed fathers' knowledge of menstruation, their level of comfort discussing menstruation, and their attitudes toward parenting (see Table 2 for means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations). On average, participants had reasonably accurate knowledge about menstruation; the average score on the menstrual knowledge quiz was 80%. That said, there was variability among scores, which ranged from a low of 11% to a high of 100%. Fathers said that they felt equally comfortable talking to both daughters and sons about menstruation,  $t(93) = .65$ ,  $p = .52$ ,  $d = .07$ , and their means scores fell above the midpoint of the scale, which suggests that they were, in fact, comfortable. Our participants did not, however, hold traditional views about parenting, because their scores on both the traditional motherhood and traditional fatherhood

scales were below the midpoints of those scales. It should be noted, however, that fathers were significantly more likely to endorse traditional attitudes toward mothering than toward fathering,  $t(69) = 11.31, p < .001, d = 1.40$ .

We next used linear regression analysis to assess the extent to which traditional attitudes toward parenting could predict knowledge about menstruation as well as comfort discussing menstruation with both daughters and sons. Analyses included collinearity diagnostics, and based on the standards of tolerance scores below .2 (Menard, 1995) and variance inflation factor (VIF) levels at or above 10 (Myers, 1990) as suggestive of multicollinearity, we did not violate collinearity assumptions in our analyses.

We found that traditional attitudes toward parenting did significantly predict knowledge about menstruation,  $F(2, 66) = 6.72, p = .002$ , and were able to explain 17% of the variance in knowledge scores (adjusted  $R^2 = .14$ ). Traditional mothering attitudes were a significant negative predictor of knowledge,  $\beta = -.38, p = .02$ , but traditional fathering attitudes did not significantly contribute to knowledge prediction,  $\beta = -.05, p = .73$ . Traditional mothering and fathering attitudes also significantly predicted degree of comfort discussing menstruation with both daughters,  $F(2, 65) = 3.14, p = .05$ , and sons,  $F(2, 60) = 3.55, p = .04$ , and these variables combined to predict 9% of the variance in comfort discussing menstruation with daughters (adjusted  $R^2 = .06$ ) and 11% of the variance in comfort discussing menstruation with sons (adjusted  $R^2 = .08$ ). Once again, traditional attitudes toward mothering was a significant negative predictor of comfort conversing about menstruation with both daughters,  $\beta = -.38, p = .02$ , and sons,  $\beta = -.36, p = .03$ . Traditional fathering attitudes, however, did not make a significant contribution to the equations:  $\beta = .15, p = .35$  for daughters and  $\beta = .06, p = .73$  for sons.

Finally, we explored the qualitative responses from fathers about what they would say to their sons and daughters about menstruation and when these conversations would occur. An iterative process was used for code development. Initially, we each read and discussed a small subset of randomly selected responses to the questions about talking to both daughters and sons, and these responses were not used in reliability calculations. From this discussion, an initial list of codes was developed. Each remaining response was coded independently by both of us. As new ideas were noted in responses, we added new codes. To assign final codes, we discussed each response and how it had been coded. Through discussion, we were able to come to complete agreement. Inter-rater reliability, calculated as percent agreement among the codes assigned prior to discussion, was 84.38% for conversations with sons and 87.79% for conversations with daughters.

The 16 most common themes are provided in Table 3. For conversations with daughters, the most frequently mentioned ideas were that menstruation is natural (25.5%), that the physiology of the menstrual cycle would be explained (21.8%), and that pregnancy/fertility would be discussed (16.4%). An example response is "*It is a natural part of a woman's life. Nothing to be ashamed about. No reason to be embarrassed.*" These same three themes were the most common for conversations with sons as well, although the order shifted such that physiological explanations were the most common (26.4%), followed by menstruation being natural (22.7%), and mentions of pregnancy/fertility (20%). An example response is

*It's a change that girls and women go through. That it's natural and normal and not dirty in any way. That he [the son] should be respectful of girls' privacy when it comes to their periods and recognize*

TABLE 3  
Common Themes from Qualitative Responses about Discussing Menstruation with Daughters and Sons

	Daughters			Sons		
	Rank	Frequency	%	Rank	Frequency	%
Answer their questions	12	4	3.6	8	6	5.5
Avoidance	5	12	10.9	–	–	–
Clean/Not dirty	11	5	4.5	13	4	3.6
Discussed pregnancy/fertility	3	18	16.4	3	22	20
Discussed sex	14	1	.9	11	5	4.5
How to cope with menstruators	–	–	–	11	5	4.5
Hygiene (e.g., pads, tampons)	8.5	8	7.3	14.5	3	2.7
It's natural	1	28	25.5	2	25	22.7
Mentioned blood	5	12	10.9	6	7	6.4
Mentioned body changes	10	6	5.5	8	6	5.5
Mentioned mood swings	13	3	2.7	5	9	8.2
Mentioned pain	8.5	8	7.3	11	5	4.5
No need for negative emotional responses	5	12	10.9	8	6	5.5
Physiological explanations	2	24	21.8	1	29	26.4
Positive framing	7	10	9.1	14.5	3	2.7
Talked about having empathy for girls/women	–	–	–	4	14	12.7

*Note.* In the cases of ties, a mean rank order was assigned to all responses sharing that rank.

*that they may be embarrassed about them, even though they needn't be. That this means that girls can get pregnant now and that he [the son] needs to avoid sex or use birth control.*

McNemar tests were run to determine whether there were different proportions of mentions of each of these themes for conversations with daughters and sons. Significant differences were found for only two themes. First, mentions of mood swings were more likely to be included in conversations with sons than with daughters,  $p = .03$ . An example response is “*If you are involved with someone, be aware that there is a possibility of seeming irrational behavior on a monthly basis. Good time to give space.*” Alternatively, positive framing of the menstrual cycle (e.g., it's exciting or special) was more likely to be used when talking to daughters than sons,  $p = .04$ . An example response is “*it's a blessing from God—being able to create life.*” It should also be noted that there were three themes only that emerged for either daughters or sons. Fathers brought up trying to avoid having conversations about menstruation only with their daughters (10.9%). For example, “*let's go ask your mother.*” With sons, they talked about the importance of having empathy for girls/women (12.7%) as well as giving advice for how to cope with menstruators (4.5%). An example response is “*girls/women often are different, sometimes emotional, when it happens, so be very patient and understanding during that time.*”

We also asked fathers how old sons and daughters would be when these conversations took place. The mean age at which fathers indicated they would talk to their daughters about menstruation was 10.77 ( $SD = 1.98$ ), and it was 11.91 ( $SD = 2.28$ ) for sons. When we examined the data from the fathers who provided this information about both sons and daughters, we found

that fathers said that they would talk to their daughters significantly earlier than to their sons,  $F(1, 29) = 5.89, p = .02, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .17$ .

## DISCUSSION

The goals of this exploratory study were to examine fathers' beliefs about their role in educating their children about menstruation. We investigated how fathers learned about menstruation, their beliefs about how both boys and girls should learn about menstruation, their knowledge about menstruation, their comfort talking about menstruation, and what they believed fathers should say to both daughters and/or sons. In addition, we examined how traditional attitudes toward parenting may relate to fathers' knowledge and comfort talking about menstruation.

Fathers had different expectations for how their children *should learn* about menstruation compared to how they *actually learned* about menstruation. Consistent with previous research (Allen & Goldberg, 2009; Allen et al., 2011), fathers reported learning the most about menstruation from their female romantic partners and their female friends. They also reported learning about menstruation through more formal educational experiences (health/sex education classes, books, and biology classes). Given that educational materials tend to emphasize hygiene, rely on colloquial terminology (e.g., "lining" instead of "endometrium"), underscore secrecy and concealment, contain anatomical inconsistencies, and focus more on the negative aspects of menstruation (Erchull et al., 2002; Havens & Swenson, 1989), it is likely that learning from educational texts provided a limited depiction of menstruation for the fathers in our sample. Thus, the combination of learning about menstruation from female friends/partners and educational texts possibly helped provide a more holistic depiction.

Notably, fathers, on average, rated learning about menstruation from their mothers as seventh and their fathers as seventeenth among the 20 sources. Although previous research has demonstrated that boys primarily learn about menstruation within the context of their families (Allen et al., 2011; Costos et al., 2002; Dilorio et al., 1999), the fathers in our sample rated learning from their parents lower than other sources. This is compelling because, in relation to their own children, they indicated that both girls and boys *should* learn about menstruation from their mothers (rated #1 for daughters and rated #2 for sons). Although this finding might reflect a generational shift, it is also likely that what fathers believe should happen is not what actually occurs. Although research has shown that mothers are the primary source of information about menstruation for girls (Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Lee, 2008), the research is mixed with regard to whether mothers do, in fact, educate boys about menstruation (Amann-Gainotti, 1986; Chang et al., 2011; Laws, 1992; Kalman, 2003; Koff & Rierdan, 1995; Marván & Bejarano, 2005; Marván et al., 2006). In some situations, mothers have been responsible for perpetuating menstrual secrecy and stigma by not discussing it with their sons (Cooper & Koch, 2007; Lee, 2008).

Male sources of information (fathers and brothers) and female romantic partners were seen as more important sources of information about menstruation for boys than girls, whereas female and medical sources of information were seen as more important sources of information for girls than boys. These results suggest that the fathers in our study, to some degree, believe that the information sources should fall along gendered lines. In other words, boys should learn from other boys/men (with the exception of learning about menstruation from a female romantic partner), and girls should learn from other girls/woman.

Although men varied in their knowledge about and comfort discussing menstruation, they ranked themselves as the tenth best source of information for their daughters' education about menstruation. This is consistent with other research showing that men perceived menstruation as a powerful signal of gender divide, particularly because they believed menstruation is an experience they could never truly understand (Allen et al., 2011; Laws, 1992). Daughters might also contribute to their fathers' ambivalence about discussing menstruation, because research indicates that daughters begin to withdraw from their fathers postmenarche (Allen et al., 2011; Koff & Rierdan, 1995). In their qualitative study of adolescent girls, Koff and Rierdan (1995) reported that girls found discussing menstruation with their fathers embarrassing and difficult. In an international sample, girls reported feeling embarrassed when their fathers acknowledged the onset of menstruation (Chrisler & Zittel, 1998). Thus, it is likely that both fathers and daughters contribute to the uneasiness of discussions about menstruation with one another.

It should be noted that fathers in our study had reasonably accurate knowledge about menstruation. Although the knowledge measure was somewhat limited in scope because it simply asked participants to evaluate true/false statements, there was variability among scores. In addition, fathers felt equally comfortable talking to both daughters and sons about menstruation. Although it is difficult to assess whether this is related to social desirability, it is promising that fathers in our study did report comfort in discussing menstruation with both their sons and daughters. Knowledge and comfort, however, were influenced by traditional parenting attitudes. In particular, traditional mothering attitudes were a significant negative predictor of both knowledge and comfort, whereas traditional fathering attitudes did not significantly contribute to prediction of either knowledge or comfort. These results must be held tentatively, because most of the fathers in our study did not hold traditional views about parenting, which limited our ability to evaluate the role of traditional fatherhood. Men with traditional fathering attitudes might not respond to a survey about discussing puberty. It is noteworthy, however, that fathers were significantly more likely to endorse traditional attitudes toward mothering than toward fathering. Despite contemporary shifts in parenting roles, the expectation for women to have primary responsibility for domestic life is still prevalent (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Even when parents want to have egalitarian parenting styles, many institutions, formal policies, and laws assume that women will take on most of the childrearing responsibilities, which inevitably shapes parental involvement (Zhou, 2006). Among our sample of fathers with largely nontraditional parenting attitudes, there was still an expectation that mothers would be more involved with their children, and, not surprising, this expectation influenced the fathers' knowledge about menstruation and their comfort discussing menstruation with their children.

In the open-ended responses to questions about what fathers believed should be said to their sons and daughters, the same three themes emerged, although the order shifted depending on the sex of the child. These themes were the idea that menstruation is natural (#1 most common response for daughters and #2 for sons), that the physiology would be explained (#2 most common response for daughters and #1 for sons), and that pregnancy and fertility would be discussed (#3 most common response for both daughters and sons). It is interesting that the top three messages did not differ, and fathers in our sample reported that they would convey similar messages to their daughters and sons. However, this could also be related to social desirability, because the fathers in our study might have been motivated to appear equitable toward their daughters and sons. The top three themes are also fairly standard information, without much focus on subjective experiences.

Fathers' reports of telling their daughters and sons that menstruation is natural is probably an attempt to normalize the experience; however, as other feminist scholars have pointed out, the idea that menstruation is natural could unintentionally make light of the more challenging aspects of menstruation (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). For daughters, it must seem paradoxical to be told that menstruation is natural while simultaneously being told how they should feel ("no need for negative emotions" was tied for #4 most common response) or having their fathers avoid them altogether (also tied for #4 most common response; Costos et al., 2002; Koff & Rierdan 1995). The "grin-and-bear-it" message is a common response from parents to their postmenarcheal daughters (Costos et al., 2002). The idea that a daughter should put on a happy face, even when she is feeling tired or crampy is deeply connected to the traditional feminine gender role (Costos et al., 2002). The lack of encouragement by fathers for daughters to talk openly and honestly about their experience is particularly striking because fathers reported that they would teach their sons to have empathy for menstruating girls/women (#4 most common response)—something they do not necessarily practice with their daughters.

Furthermore, fathers in our study indicated that the event of menstruation would be a time to discuss pregnancy/fertility with both their daughters and sons. It is important that the fathers reported that this conversation would start earlier for girls (age = 10.77) than for boys (age = 11.91). There is a tendency to associate menstruation with sex, yet many adolescent girls do not readily connect menstruation with sexual activity or pregnancy (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). Although it is critical that adolescents have good reproductive health education, the event of menstruation often becomes the marker where girls learn the "facts of life," but this is often done in ways that are vague and confusing (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 12). For example, Costas et al. (2002) reported that menstruation is a time for girls to be warned about boys by telling them to be careful; however, adolescent girls reported that they were not clear about the implied dangers. Indeed, Koff and Rierdan (1995) argued that it must be difficult for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders to connect menstruation with reproduction and femininity. Such messages restrict girls' freedom and teach them to self-police appropriate modes of femininity, particularly as it relates to sexuality (Foucault, 1979; Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996). In some situations, girls reported that their mothers restricted their use of tampons until marriage because it would undermine chastity (Costos et al., 2002). This subsequently restricted many activities, including dancing and swimming.

Finally, in the open-ended responses, fathers were more likely to report discussing the negative aspects of menstruation with their sons. They reported that they would talk with their sons, but not their daughters, about mood swings during menstruation, and that they would also teach their sons how to cope with menstruators. Such messaging disproportionately conveys a negative perspective and might help explain why boys and men report viewing menstruation as more distressing, stigmatizing, dangerous, and debilitating than do girls and women (Marván & Bejarano, 2005; Marván et al., 2006). With daughters, however, fathers reported being more likely to discuss positive/celebratory messages and to communicate that menstruation is a positive and/or special event, a message not provided to their sons.

## Limitations

Several limitations in this study suggest that these results must be held tentatively. First, the self-report nature of surveys always introduces the possibility of bias due to socially desirable responses. In addition, the knowledge assessment required participants to respond to nine true/false

questions about menstruation, which could not fully evaluate knowledge of menstruation. Future researchers could benefit from using a more detailed knowledge test. We also recruited participants through the Internet, which resulted in a relatively homogenous sample, which raises concerns about the generalizability of our findings. The majority of our participants self-identified as European American/White, heterosexual/straight, educated, and middle/upper class. The fathers in our study also reported relatively nontraditional attitudes toward parenting. Furthermore, they were recruited because of their willingness to discuss puberty. It is likely that fathers who were embarrassed about puberty or talking about it did not agree to participate or complete the online survey.

In addition, several limitations occurred in the challenge associated with recruiting fathers to complete the surveys. Although many different attempts were made to solicit fathers (through recruiting on multiple types of online social media outlets and through the use of the snowball technique), we recruited a relatively small sample. Because of the limited number of participants, we were unable to analyze several potentially interesting variables. For example, fathers reported having children of different ages, which resulted in some fathers looking ahead to conversations about menstruation and others reflecting on what they have done or are currently doing. Also, some fathers had only daughters, some had only sons, and others had both daughters and sons. It would be interesting to compare the data given by these subgroups. Future researchers should attempt to replicate the present findings with a larger and more diverse population.

### Future Directions

The results of this study highlight the need for additional information about other variables that might influence a father's knowledge about and comfort level with discussing menstruation. In particular, it would be interesting to consider whether the endorsement of traditional masculine norms are related to fathers' decisions to educate their children about menstruation. Further, as our research indicates, fathers do see a role for themselves in educating their children, but they perhaps lack the resources to support productive conversations. Future researchers should examine what type of information would help fathers engage more actively with their children about menstruation. It would also be beneficial to understand fathers' reports of the perceived barriers that prevent conversations from happening with both their daughters and sons.

### Implications for Fathers

In the United States, family structures are changing, and fathers are more actively engaged in parenting (McGill, 2014). As children approach adolescence, there is evidence that fathers want to talk with their sons and daughters about reproductive health (Hyde et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2010); they recognize that such discussions promote safe and healthy sexual development and strengthen their relationships with their children (Wilson et al., 2010). Nevertheless, powerful taboos and gender norms create barriers that disrupt fathers' open and honest dialogue with their children (White, 2013; Wilson et al., 2010). Specific to menstruation education, the belief that menstruation is something that should be concealed or avoided causes stigma and further reinforces the notion that menstruation devalues or limits women (Allen et al., 2011; Rembeck &



Gunnarsson, 2004). Fathers could weaken stigma if they had more positive/neutral information to share with their children (King et al., 2014). By teaching the cultural ideology of menstruation and by modeling how to deconstruct negative messages, fathers actively disrupt the sexist norms associated with menstruation. This type of communication is critical because it values girls' experience and promotes agency (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). Girls, in particular, understand that, like their mothers, they lack power, and what girls learn around the time of menarche influences them throughout the rest of their lives (Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Although there is evidence that girls are resisting dominant menstrual taboos, the support of fathers will further advance "menstrual justice" (Kissling, 2006, p. 126). However, in our sample, no father spontaneously offered that they would teach their daughters or sons how to disrupt menstrual taboos, which suggests that fathers might not have the tools they need to teach critical consciousness.

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