

Imagined Femininity: Pain Over the Life Cycle

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Introduction

The link between women and pain has a long history in medical, Christian, and popular discourses (Fournier 2002). We see it in representations of motherhood as suffering—whether through childbirth (Imaz 2001) or the sacrifices of the Virgin Mary (Hagene 2008)—depictions of the hysterical woman (Foucault 1978), and portrayals of menopause, menstruation, and premenstrual syndrome (Fournier 2002). These images coexist with other imaginaries of femininity that represent young girls as sexually active, knowledgeable, autonomous (Gill 2008), and entitled to sexual pleasure (Allen 2011), as expressions of “agency” or “girl power” (Gonick et al. 2009).

Children participate in the construction of these representations through language and other symbolic systems (Hall 1997). Children’s representations of femininities reflect beliefs that must be interpreted in their context (Spyrou 2011) and that produce subjectivities (Althusser 1971; Butler 1990; Gramsci 1975). The production of femininities in childhood has been studied within the framework of sexuality (Blaise 2010), as mediated by heterosexuality (Renold 2006). Schools are a place of regulation and surveillance of girls’ bodies and sexual expression (Sur 2021), which turns them into “docile bodies” (Foucault 1977). However, about the place of pain in children’s conceptualizations of femininity has not been examined. Understanding whether and how children link pain to femininity can help us develop more equitable approaches to femininity and masculinity in education.

In research in primary schools in Barcelona province (Spain), we have shown that hegemonic representations of femininity shape the practices, narratives, and subjectivities of children (Malgosa et al. 2022, Malgosa et al. 2023). We analyze 24 focus groups conducted during the 2021-22 academic year with children in grades 4 and 5 (age 9 and 10) to explore how they think about femininity and pain.

Method

The children divided themselves into small groups to make a collective drawing about “changes to our bodies.” To trigger narratives (Eldén 2013), we joined the groups to create larger focus groups, in which the children explained their drawings to each other. During the focus groups, we asked about their bodies and their ideas about sexuality. The focus groups were a space for critical reflection and the deconstruction of hegemonic practices. For example, we asked why

some processes of the female body supposedly hurt and whether female bodies can experience sensations other than pain. In such discussions, children and researchers collectively produced knowledge (Clark 2005) about sexuality. Data were transcribed, anonymized, coded and analyzed thematically.¹

“What Women Have” Hurts

A group of 9-year-old girls presented a drawing of a girl with pimples on her face, tears in her eyes and blood coming out of her pants, with the label “I hate my period.” When we asked why the girl hated her period, they said:

Maria: Because she doesn’t like it.

Laura: We have to be in the bathroom all day.

Juana: Because it hurts when it comes out.



Drawing #1, girls, age 9

Although some of the girls had surely started menstruating, no girl revealed to us that she had.

The image of menstruation as painful emerged in all focus groups. Although Dusenbery (2018) has questioned whether menstrual pain is “normal,” its normalization remains frequent and contributes to the under-diagnosis of menstrual disorders such as endometriosis (Guidone 2020). Menstruation is a symbol of femininity (Herdt 1987) that participants associated with pain and other negative things. When we asked them what came to mind when they thought of menstruation, they told us sadness, blood, pain, shame, fear, being in a bad mood, eating chocolate, pimples, and disgust. When we asked if these things were positive or negative, they answered “negative.” And when we asked girls if they wanted to have their period, most said no. The arrival of menstruation is related to behavioral expectations that women should

follow—such as being in pain and navigating the world while they are sad, in pain, possibly feeling afraid, irritable, or shameful.

In another group of 9-year-old girls, the following exchange occurred:

Lola: It scares me. You're moving closer to an unknown place.

Lisa: We're scared because we have no idea what it is.

The lack of information that many 9- and 10-year-old girls have about menstruation generates fear, especially when the information available in hegemonic representations is associated with pain.

Other Pains of Femininity

Pain was not only present when children talked about menstruation, but also when they talked about other moments of the female life cycle, such as sexual intercourse and childbirth. Numerous girls asked if it hurt to have sexual intercourse. For example, 9-year-old Anna asked, "Does it hurt when someone puts his penis inside your vagina?" In a group of 9-year-old boys and girls, the following exchanged occurred:

Laia: That noise that they [women] make, is it real?

Pablo: Yes, because the semen goes inside of her, it hurts, and she says "aah" [imitates a moan]. That hurts mothers.

In the children's representations, moans were always made by a woman (although they disagreed as to whether the moans expressed pain or pleasure). When we asked why a woman would have sexual intercourse if it hurts, they responded, "to have children."

Childbirth was also represented as painful, as in this group of 9-year-olds:

Emma: All the movies have mothers [women in labor] who are screaming.

Pedro: Maybe it will be the worst day because it hurts, but the best because you'll have your baby.

That is, women accept pain—from menstruation to sexual intercourse to childbirth—so that they can have children. An infinite capacity for sacrifice (Stevens and Soler 1974) appears to be part of how these children represent femininity.

Representations of Femininity that Subvert and Resist

Some narratives did not include an association between periods and pain and/or showed a more varied and positive picture of menstruation. A group of 10-year-old girls presented a drawing of a girl with blood coming from her vulva and a spot of blood on the floor [drawing 2], accompanied by a sanitary napkin and a menstrual cup. Her face showed a placid smile. One participant explained that she knew about the menstrual cup because she often talked to her

mother about the female body. We noticed that girls who created more positive and/or varied images of menstruation tended to report talking with their families about menstruation and sexuality and/or having educational books about them.



Drawing #2, girls, age 10 years

Another group of 10-year-old boys and girls were asked what came to mind when they thought about menstruation. Their responses were hormones, pads, tampons, blood, menstrual cup, boys, girls, pregnant women, babies, sex, changes, smell, money, party, celebration, happiness, sadness, and feelings. This group described a wide range of concepts associated with menstruation and hence with femininity, which we attribute to the fact that these participants had attended several of our workshops on sexuality and relationships.

Conclusions

Participants tended to associate the processes of the female body with pain. However, some participants talked about sexuality with their families and/or had attended previous workshops with us, and these participants created alternative representations of femininity, acknowledging negative but also positive aspects of having a female body. This suggests that when children have information about changes in the body and about sexuality, they are more likely to resist hegemonic representations of femininity.

Endnotes

¹ All the names are pseudonyms.

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Author Biographies

Estel Malgosa (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0727-5392>): I have just finished the PhD program in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), for which I have obtained a scholarship. Since 2017 I coordinate, together with Bruna Alvarez, the SexAFIN project in which my doctoral thesis is framed. In my thesis, focused on sexuality and childhood, I try to understand how boys and girls from public schools in the province of Barcelona (Spain) construct, live, and narrate sexuality; how the gender with which they identify influences their narratives; and how adults talk (or not) with them about sexuality. I

combine my thesis and the coordination of the project with the upbringing of my 3-year-old daughter and a new little person who is on the way.

Bruna Alvarez (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9069-4573>): Ph.D. in Anthropology and professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), the University of Barcelona (UB), Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and tutor for the Degree in Anthropology and Human Evolution at the UOC. I am a member of the AFIN Research Group of the UAB, where I carried out research on maternity, reproduction, and sexualities. I finished my PhD in 2017 on maternity policies in Spain when my children were 8 and 6 years old. After an intense maternity experience (research and parenting) I worked on assisted reproductive technologies and coordinated research on children and sexuality. Currently, I am trying to consolidate my academic career, while my children grow up and my family includes more members.

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