



“Aunt Flo” Is Not Dead Yet: The Continued Coded Language of Menstruation

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BOOK REVIEW

“Aunt Flo” Is Not Dead Yet: The Continued Coded Language of Menstruation.

Newton, V. L. (2016). *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation: Cultural and Social Perspectives*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan Press. ISBN: 978-1-137-48774-2. \$100.00 (hardcopy).

“Aunt Flo,” “that time of the month,” “on the blob,” and “period” are all examples of euphemisms for menstruation. But why is a common bodily occurrence like menstruation a source of covert and stigmatizing language? What insight does the way people talk about menstruation offer into matters of health, sexuality, and the body? Victoria Newton (2016) explores these questions in her book, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation: Cultural and Social Perspectives*. Newton is a folklorist in a department of sociology studies, and she approaches her research from an interdisciplinary framework, in which she draws on social anthropology, cultural studies, and folklore studies.

Newton opens the book by providing broad historical and cultural context to situate both menstruation and current research. In Chapter 2, Newton walks her readers through the history of menstruation and discusses widely held beliefs and attitudes from as early as 7th century B.C. and the Old Testament's Book of Leviticus to those of the 20th century. Studies carried out in Western societies from the 1960s to the present day are discussed in Chapter 3 and cover topics such as sex education, the medicalization of menstruation, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), and hormonal contraceptives. Throughout these chapters, it becomes quickly apparent that menstruation has been seen historically as dangerous and polluting. For example, Roman records composed by Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella around A.D. 60 indicate that menstrual blood poses a threat to men, as well as to men's creations, and menstruating women could cause the agricultural crops to fail merely by looking at them.

In preparation for her book, Newton collected an impressive 590 questionnaire responses and conducted semistructured, face-to-face interviews with 62 individuals of varied ages (from 12 to over 60 years old) in North Danbury, UK. The interviews focused on cultural and social aspects of menstruation—more specifically, the vernacular knowledge of menstruation. The participants were recruited through classroom visits and a snowball approach. It is important to note that the sample was self-selecting, which means that Newton may have interviewed people with a greater interest in the topic than a representative sample would have. Among the emerging themes identified within the participants' responses were euphemisms, jokes, stories, menstrual etiquette, and appropriate conduct. Alternative language for menstruation and the process of menstruation included the euphemisms “blob,” or “on the blob,” and “rag” (p. 79). In addition, menstruation was often described as something dangerous (“code red”), or it evoked images of punishment (“the curse”) or violence (“bloodbath”; p. 140). These euphemisms and dysphemisms are similar to those reported by Sveen (2016). Some generational and gendered differences also emerged from the responses. For example, men and boys were more likely than women and girls to report having heard jokes about menstruation, and several interviewees reported men and boys making jokes or comments in the presence of women or directed at women. The most popular joke was “What bleeds for [a number of days] and doesn't die?” (p. 149). The only variability in this joke was the number of days of the cycle, which illustrates the lack of understanding of the physiology of menstruation.

Newton presents her findings in an accessible manner, weaving in questionnaire responses and excerpts from the interviews with discussions of others' research. This not only allows the voices of her participants to come through but offers the readers a tangible way to understand and deconstruct perhaps new and complex theories or research findings. Participants' voices and real, lived experiences are often missing from academic books, so this is a refreshing touch. The structure of the book also allows readers to draw parallels between their own menstrual experiences and those of the participants.

Another strength of Newton's work is that she does not dispute the value of different perspectives on menstruation, but she notes that there is bias in research toward problematizing menstruation. She approaches the research with an understanding that menstruation has cultural meaning, yet she acknowledges the complexities and realities of biology and culture. However, a weakness of Newton's work is the limitations of her sample. Despite the sample's size and age range, her participants were predominantly British, White, and lower-middle class. Although this is representative of the region where the interviews were conducted, the lack of diversity in her sample may not have captured the integral role that race and socioeconomic status play in menstrual experiences. In addition, people between the ages of 15 and 17 were missing from the sample due to age restrictions at the school where Newton carried out her research. Although this group is not essential to the validity of Newton's work, I think that this is unfortunate because girls and boys at this age may be particularly susceptible to concealment norms of menstruation and use of coded language due to social pressures, including the pressure to engage in sexual activities. Nevertheless, given that most studies of attitudes toward and beliefs about menstruation have been conducted with college students, who are often of upper and upper-middle class, Newton's sample is a positive addition to the literature.


Information regarding the sexual orientation of the interviewees was not collected, which could have provided a deeper insight into the participants' menstrual experiences. For example, Fahs (2011) found that lesbian and bisexual women were more likely than heterosexuals to be accepting of menstrual sex, which is a theme that was mentioned often by Newton's participants, but never in relation to sexual orientation. Newton chose to use the terms *women*, *girls*, *boys*, and *men* as opposed to *menstruator(s)* because, considering the nature of the research, she believed that the term *menstruator* may have been too "abstract" to determine and differentiate the originator of each narrative (p. 51). Also, it may have been an inaccurate term to use as not all the participants were menstruating: Some had not started yet, and others were either past menopause or using contraceptives to suppress their menstruation. Her choice of terminology may have failed to gain any insight into how one's gender identity plays a role in the vernacular knowledge of menstruation and menstrual experiences. Transgender individuals are often unfortunately overlooked within research, especially menstrual health research. However, one study showed that masculine-of-center and transgender individuals reported mixed attitudes toward menstruation, and most indicated that they were hesitant to discuss menstruation with people they did not know well (Chrisler et al., 2016). This suggests that an individual's gender identity could play a significant role not only in the way one experiences menstruation, but also in the way one communicates about menstruation. To Newton's credit, she does have a section in Chapter 11 that is dedicated to the difficulties she faced in finding the "right" words for her work. She discusses how she struggled with using phrases such as "menstrual products" and "sanitary protection" as she believes that these phrases contribute to the concealment norm of menstruation (p. 185).

Everyday Discourses of Menstruation is an excellent book and a strong addition to the already existing, yet limited, work on menstruation and discourse. It is a recommended read

for anyone who is interested in menstruation and/or linguistics, and it would serve as a great resource for menstrual health advocates, researchers, students, and educators. This book has 11 chapters that can be read together or independently (as references are provided at the end of each chapter), which makes the book a potential addition to a college syllabus in disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, women's and gender studies, psychology, sociology, medicine, and nursing. The appendices include more information on the responses and any themes collected (some of which she does not cover in the previous chapters). The appendices also include a guide to the coding of the interviews. Overall, I believe that *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation: Cultural and Social Perspectives* can have a positive impact within the field of reproductive health because, as Newton puts it so well herself, "period talk is powerful" (p. 145).

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