

Making Queer Periods Public: Conversations on Menstruation Amongst Transgender, Non-Binary, and Genderqueer People with Periods

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Objectives

1. To understand, broadly, how respondents learn about menstruation.
2. To identify if people with periods voluntarily have conversations about periods, and if so, with whom.
3. To characterize the impact of those conversations on someone's knowledge and perception of menstruation.
4. To integrate respondent experiences related to gender identity, expression, and dysphoria into the narrative of menstruation.
5. To consider ways being a genderqueer person who menstruates might influence questions of access to products and menstrual management.

Methods

Participants were recruited by The Period Pantry Project through outreach on social media platforms, digital advertising, and requests submitted to official Period P.R.I.D.E. community partners to distribute. Potential respondents were offered to be entered into a drawing to win a \$10 Amazon gift card, of which there were ten total available.

Participants were asked to complete a Google Forms survey asking questions pertaining to their experience of menstruation and conversations about menstruation. Participants also were surveyed on general demographic data and data pertaining to period poverty criteria given the mission of the Period Pantry to support those experiencing period poverty. There were no exclusion criteria presented to possible respondents.

We collected 115 responses representing every U.S. state, the District of Columbia, and Canada. One response was excluded on analysis due to insincere responses. Of our responses, 66 were included under the umbrella of transgender/non-binary/genderqueer and 40 as cisgender women. Quantitative data was assessed in total and compared to the national statistics on period poverty. Qualitative data was qualitatively analyzed using a thematic approach in two groups: responses from cis-female participants and those from transgender/non-binary/genderqueer participants.

Results

Survey questions related to "Access" revealed that both cis-women and genderqueer respondents felt their safety has been at risk or threatened attempting to access products or navigate public bathrooms during their period due to their gender. However, TGNB respondents responded affirmatively at higher rates: 37.9% felt unsafe accessing products, 86.3% had at some point felt uncomfortable accessing public bathrooms, and 51.5% had at some point felt unsafe using public bathrooms. This is in comparison to 25.9%, 58.7%, and 36.8% among all respondents respectively, indicated a likelihood that the high percentage of TGNB respondents with this experience is likely pulling the total numbers higher.

Survey questions on "Menstrual Health Conversations," showed that most TGNB respondents looked to the internet or a menstruating family member (often a mother) for information about periods. Occasionally people would ask their doctor, but often as a last resort or if they felt there was something about their period requiring medical intervention. When asked to describe the conversations about periods they were having, responses predominantly fell into the three themes of Community, Self-Advocacy, and Discomfort. Within the theme of Community there were the sub-themes of Camaraderie, Knowledge-Sharing, Destigmatizing.

Within the theme of Discomfort there the sub- themes of Judgement, Othering, and Period Stigma. Amongst cisgender women's responses, there were most commonly the themes of Community and Discomfort. A few responses identified the additional themes "Informational," and "Practicality."

Survey questions on "Gender Dysphoria & Menstruation," demonstrated commonalities in experiences that led to participants feeling discomfort about their periods. These included Stigmatization & Shame, Gender Dysphoria, and Censure. Cisgender respondents similarly mentioned feelings of Stigmatization & Shame and Censure (57% and 40% of respondents respectively). Across groups, similar kinds of interactions were cited. These included having to ask to go to the bathroom at school, cisgender men being made aware of their period, and "period accidents," such as bleeding through pants or having pads visible through underwear. Censure frequently cited interactions with other menstruators over any other type of person. When asked "Is there anything about your experience with periods and gender dysphoria that you would like to share," participant responses demonstrated social nexus points that contributed to dysphoric feelings. These were times when periods had to become public (v. the presumed privacy associated with periods), when periods interfered with other gender affirming practices, and when periods prompted interface with the healthcare system. Notably, there were a handful of respondents that emphasized their lack of gender dysphoria related to their period and their desire for that to be known more broadly.

Conclusions

There were some experiences around periods universal across participants, and these tended to revolve around embarrassment in relation to a period and the sequestration of anything related to periods as feminine.

Gender dysphoria exacerbated existing period stigma in participant experiences, especially when menstruation was brought into public view (i.e. purchasing products, conversations with peers and providers, needing to use products in public spaces).

The means available to participants to manage periods and expectations around periods are established on periods being feminine and the definition of feminine being limited to a cisgender experience.

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