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The social form of the secret. Gendered bodies, senses and menstruation

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Date of submission: January 2022**Accepted in:** October 2022**Published in:** November 2022**Recommended citation:**

SABIDO RAMOS, Olga (2022). "The social form of secret. Gendered bodies, senses and menstruation". *Digithum* [online], 2021, no. 28, pp. 1-11. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. [Retrieved in: dd/mm/yy]. <https://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i28.396384>



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Abstract

In this article, I am going to show how the social form of the secret in Simmel's sense traverses the sensorial experience of menstruation and perception policies towards menstruation. To achieve the above, I have divided the article into three sections. In the first, I give a summary of state-of-the-art critical studies on menstruation, which allow us to think of menstruation as an object of study in sociology and to underpin this proposal. Second, using Simmel's relational sociology and sensory studies approach, I show that one of the mechanisms of perception policies towards menstruation has been to keep it secret. Third, I present a sociology of senses related to the secret of menstruation based on the findings of a recent study. The findings show that, although there are tendencies to re-signify the experience of menstruation in solidarity with friends, perception policies prevail that lead women to hide menstruation from intimates and strangers. On the other hand, although the odours of menstruation have been and continue to be stigmatized, the use of new artifacts or menstrual hygiene techniques allows a certain resignification of the menstrual smell, although this requires certain material conditions of possibility.

Keywords

Simmel; secret; bodies; senses; gender

La forma social del secreto. Cuerpos generizados, sentidos y menstruación

Resumen

En este artículo, voy a mostrar cómo la forma social del secreto en el sentido de Simmel atraviesa la experiencia sensorial de la menstruación y las políticas de percepción de esta. Para lograr lo anterior, he dividido el artículo en tres secciones. En primer lugar, presento un resumen de los últimos estudios críticos sobre la menstruación, que nos permiten pensar en esta como un objeto de estudio sociológico y respaldar esta propuesta. En segundo lugar, utilizando el enfoque de la sociología relacional y de los estudios sensoriales de Simmel, demuestro que uno de los mecanismos de las políticas de percepción de la menstruación ha sido mantenerla en secreto. En tercer lugar, presento una sociología de los sentidos relacionada con el secreto de la menstruación basada en los hallazgos de un estudio reciente. Estos muestran que, aunque existe una tendencia a resignificar la experiencia de la menstruación en solidaridad con las amistades, prevalecen las políticas de percepción que llevan a las mujeres a ocultar la menstruación de íntimos y desconocidos. Por otro lado, aunque los olores de la menstruación se han estigmatizado y siguen estigmatizándose, el uso de nuevos artefactos o técnicas de higiene menstrual permite una cierta resignificación del olor menstrual, aunque esto requiere disponer de ciertas condiciones materiales.

Palabras clave

Simmel; secreto; cuerpos; sentidos; género

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Introduction

In Jonathan Swift's poem "The Lady's Dressing Room," the author describes how a young woman called Celia spends five hours dressing to look like 'a princess'. Strepson, her lover, finds her room when she is out and discovers what the woman hides from everyone's sight, like a dirty smock "beneath the armpits well besmeared." The poem continues with this inventory:

"The various combs for various uses,
Filled up with dirt so closely fixt,
No brush could force a way betwixt.
A paste of composition rare,
Sweat, dandruff, powder, lead and hair;
A forehead cloth with oil upon't
To smooth the wrinkles on her front;
Here alum flower to stop the steams,
Exhaled from sour unsavory streams [...]"¹

Those secrets are the materialization of Celia's body and her excrescences. Martha Nussbaum analyses this poem to explain Strepson's disgust: "The climax of his revulsion arrives when he opens the laundry chest, a veritable Pandora's box of evils – and finds evidence of urine and feces (perhaps also menstrual fluids, "Things, which must not be express" (2018, p.117). In this reference, we find two issues that I am interested in developing in this article. The first is an ideal of hegemonic femininity that supposes caring for the body and the willingness to be perceived by another, generally a male. Secondly, there is a dimension that must be kept hidden from the eyes and noses of others: that is, menstrual blood. The author dares to mention the snot, the ear wax, and the sweat but omits a bodily fluid that has been historically stigmatized: menstrual blood.

In this article, I am going to interpret the experience of menstruation from Simmel's relational sociology. I am interested in highlighting how the social form of the secret traverses the experience of menstruation. To achieve the above, I have divided the article into three sections. In the first, I give a summary of state-of-the-art critical studies on menstruation, which allow us to think of menstruation as an object of study in sociology and to underpin this proposal. Second, using Simmel's relational sociology and sensory studies (Howes & Classen, 2014), I show that one of the mechanisms of perception policies towards menstruation has been to keep it secret. Third, I present a sociology of senses related to the secret of menstruation based on the findings of recent research related to the menstruation experience in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that, although there are tendencies to resignify the experience of menstruation in solidarity with friends, perception policies prevail that lead women to hide menstruation from intimates and strangers. On the other hand, although the odours of menstruation have been and continue to be stigmatized, the use of new artifacts or menstrual hygiene techniques allows a certain resignification of the menstrual smell, though this requires certain material conditions of possibility.

1. Menstruation as an object of study in sociology

Just as in Jonathan Swift's poem menstruation is not named, in classical sociological theory, this fact appears scarcely mentioned. Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss are the exceptions. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1973), Durkheim shows how, for some groups, menstrual blood and the first menstruation were associated with the impurity of women. In *A General Theory of Magic* ([1912] 1972), Mauss shows how in some cultures, women are relevant because of a "specific product," which is "menstrual blood". Yet, authors such as Norbert Elias, who in *The Civilizing Process* [1939] analysed other bodily fluids such as mucus and excrement, did not cover menstruation (Miller, 1997).² Even Karl Marx, who in his first Volume of *Capital: a critique of political economy* [1867] wrote the famous phrase "capital comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt" never refers to menstrual blood. Until the beginning of the 1980s, social studies related to the body made little mention of menstruation as a bodily fluid and of its social significance (Turner, 2003). Other research has highlighted the link between menstrual blood and stigma, based on Erving Goffman's definition (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

Recently, in several disciplines within the social sciences and humanities, including sociology, the study of menstruation has found intriguing angles of interpretation beyond the biomedical sciences (Ramírez, 2019, p. 5). The feminist approach to menstruation is another line of research that has allowed for a symbolic analysis, beyond the biological components. From a structuralist perspective, Françoise Héritier analyses menstruation's place in some myths and medical-philosophical treatises. She shows the justification of male dominance based on the classifications of biological order (Héritier, 1991, p. 95). Héritier shows how, since for Aristotle, "women's menstruation is the unfinished, imperfect form of the sperm" (1991, p. 97). For some groups, the binary representations of bodies (masculine/feminine) signify the blood of the male/warrior as related to his bravery, while menstrual blood is an ungovernable matter (Héritier, 1991, p. 102).

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* ([1949] 2010) pointed out the disgust that menstruation causes in girls: "The greater the young girl's feeling of revulsion toward this feminine defect, the greater her obligation to pay careful attention to it so as not to expose herself to the awful humiliation of an accident or a little word of warning" (2020, p. 376). Following Beauvoir, with a phenomenological approach, Iris Marion Young (2005) speaks of the experience of menstruation not only as a bodily regulation, but also as something with affective implications. According to Young, shame forces girls, teenagers, and women to hide their menstruation from others in public places including schools, neighbourhood streets, and the workplace (2005, p. 98). A new vein of research in feminism relating to menstrual activism (Tarzibachi, 2017, Bobel, 2020; Ramírez, 2019) is taking on increasing relevance regarding

1. Swift, J. "The Lady's Dressing Room" In URL: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50579/the-ladys-dressing-room>
2. Sosa-Sánchez, Lerner & Erviti, 2014, revisit Norbert Elias' work to explain menstrual civility.

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not only awareness and depathologisation of menstruation, but also political activism surrounding this bodily fluid.

Recently, the international field known as “critical menstruation studies” has brought together different disciplines,³ including sociology (Bobel, *et. al.* 2020). This field of research is picking up significantly, and one of its common denominators is that it seeks to bring awareness to menstruation from a non-stigmatizing perspective (Bobel, 2020, p. 1). These perspectives share the criticism found in feminist epistemologies, which show how there are “gender biases” in several fields of knowledge (García Dauder & Pérez, 2018) that could be subverted with research that includes knowledge not only gathered by women, but also based on listening to women, or “menstrual bodies”⁴ and their bodily experiences. Although one of the main points is to show that menstruation is a biological process, it also underscores that the study of menstruation, like any analysis of bodily functions, blurs culture/nature, individual/social, and private/public dualities (Winkler, 2020a, p.9). As such, critical research into menstruation analyses which “systems of power and knowledge” underpin the social construction of menstruation and who benefits and who does not (Bobel, 2020, p. 3).

There are six groups of topics analysed within the research into “critical menstruation studies” which stand out (Bobel, *et.al.* 2020):

- a) sociocultural;
- b) phenomenological;
- c) legal and economic;
- d) public policies;
- e) material; and
- f) narratives.

The **first research topic** is related to the sociocultural analysis of the meanings associated with menstruation in different social and religious contexts (Winkler, 2020a, p. 9). The **second** vein, called menstruation as embodied, covers the phenomenological experience of the body and the bodily disciplines that compose it, as well as the stigmatizing mechanisms attributed to menstrual blood (Roberts, 2020, p. 177). This vein analyses how the meaning attributed to menstruation, from menarche to menopause, constitutes ways of *doing female gender* (Tarzibachi, 2017, p. 37; Roberts, 2020, p. 177).

A **third** vein is related to the impact of stigma on menstruation, and its sexist image, in legal and economic processes. Legal processes are analysed that have restricted women's rights because menstruation has been considered an “incapacitating” phenomenon (Fahs, 2020, p 349). Meanwhile, research is performed into how the pharmaceutical industry and menstrual hygiene products have exploited this image by offering “solutions.” A **fourth** vein of research has centred on the analysis of menstruation from a structural perspective. There is a great deal of research into the emerging field of the “management of menstrual hygiene” as a sustainable development practice (Winkler, 2020b, p. 469). This vein highlights the analysis of efforts to improve menstrual hygiene and health, going from innovative products and adaptations in schools to campaigns to lift taxes on menstrual products, and an analysis of menstrual health policies, among others (Winkler, 2020b, p. 469).

The **fifth** vein concentrates on the analysis of menstruation and the various artefacts surrounding it, from sanitary towels, tampons, ecological products, and menstrual cups to smartphone apps and how they make up part of the industry surrounding menstrual hygiene products (Hasson, 2020, p. 669). Finally, the **sixth line of research** covers menstruation as a narrative. This shows how personal stories, urban legends, literature, and other forms of artistic expression, as well as the media, provide narratives about menarche, menstruation, and menopause (Kissling, 2020, p. 865). These narratives also include voices that challenge biomedical definitions, such as menstrual activism and its various forms of expression (Kissling, 2020, p. 866). In Mexico, Rosario Ramírez (2019) analysed the use of digital platforms by feminist communities aimed at depathologising menstruation.

Within the framework of this broad panorama of research, I focus on the perspective that analyses menstruation from the dimension of embodiment, based on the meanings attributed to the bodily experience of menstruation, as well as the affective implications in gender talk. I subscribe to a reading of Georg Simmel's proposal that showcases three aspects. The secret as a social form always links us with others. Those who know the secret constitute a world apart, “a second world”, from those who do not. Secrets generate social bonds and social asymmetries because they imply ignorance of certain things. We all have secrets, and their discovery or revelation can generate various bodily-affective states ranging from anger, guilt, relief or shame, to a combination of all of these, if we consider the processual nature of emotions. Here, I particularly want to focus on shame. Third, the degree to which, in our society, menstruation is still a stigmatized topic is strongly linked to the ideas of secrets and shame. In the following section, I will develop this analytical perspective.

2. The social form of the secret

As various authors have pointed out, Simmel's proposal is essentially a blueprint for the development of a relational sociology (Emirbayer, 1997: 288; Vernik, 2003; Cantò-Milà, 2006; Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2018: 121; Crossley, 2011). For Simmel, humans not only exchange money and commodities but also objects, gestures and affective states (Sabido Ramos, 2020). *Human beings are with others*. Even affective states, such as the feeling of loneliness, involve breaking one or more ties, yet not their absence. In this respect, Simmel's relational ontology (Pyyhtinen, 2010; 2018) allows us to contend that our affective and bodily condition is not substantial but rather relational insofar as we are *always with others*. This means that, for Simmel, sociology studies the different ways of *being with others*. One of these social forms is that of the secret.

In chapter five, “The Secret and the Secret Society” of *Sociology. Inquiries into the Forms of Socialization* ([1908] 2009), Simmel recounts the problem of the secret to the first a priori of social life. In other words, all social bonds are based on the fact that people know

3. History, sociology, psychology, anthropology, art, nursing, social service, communication studies, medicine, law, public health, among others.

4. I am revisiting a proposal by Eugencia Tarzibachi, who alludes to “menstrual bodies” (2017, p. 51), based on her idea of not supporting the idea of gendered bodies, because various bodies menstruate (non-binary people, transgender men) that are not necessarily recognized as part of the binary of hegemonic gender.

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things about each other. This mutual knowledge conditions the possibility of initiating a social relationship. So, for example, gender markings of the body and its artifacts (clothes, hairstyles, perfume) guide us minimally in code on how to behave with another. However, this mutual knowing simultaneously presupposes a certain ignorance: not knowing everything about the other. Strephon, for example, knew certain things about Celia, but not others, which were kept hidden in her room. This paradox is constitutive of social life, namely, knowing/not knowing, familiarity/strangeness, are a condition of possibility in the social encounter.

Nevertheless, if we want to answer the questions: How and what is perceived of a menstruating body? What is known or unknown about it? Furthermore, what role do the senses play in this perceptual mechanism? It is important to note that perceptual processes intersect with power. As Constance Classen and David Howes point out:

“The social control of perceptibility – who is seen, who is heard, whose pain is recognized – plays an essential role in establishing positions of power within society. Such control is exercised both officially and unofficially, and determines not only who is perceived, but also how they are perceived” (2014: 65-66)

One of the mechanisms of perception policies towards menstruation has been to keep it secret. As a social mechanism, secrets are a way of being with others, where there is control over the information that circulates and that can be known (Simmel, 2009), as well as everything that may or may not be perceived. Secrecy intersects powerfully with perception because it implies that certain information cannot be perceptually seen, touched, smelled, or appreciated through any of the perceptual channels. This can be seen in advertising, where the red colour of menstrual blood has been made invisible through its replacement with other chromatic tones, such as blue (Turner, 2003). There are also olfactory norms associated with how a woman should smell (Low, 2009) that currently generate economic profits with the sale of deodorant products and so-called “intimate hygiene” products (Synnott, 2003). That is, the politics of perception regarding menstruation are built under a gendered sensory order and operate in the form of secrecy.

The topic of secrets is also linked with corporality. Simone de Beauvoir states that in the West, from the earliest socialization processes, genital manipulation is differentiated by gender. While boys play with their penis, for girls, their genitals are secret, unnamed organs, and merely touching them is prohibited. A sociological study into the clitoris states that girls discover this part of their body at a very young age, but that they are unaware that it has a name (Vannini *et al.*, 2012, pp. 36, 39). Silence surrounding the naming of the clitoris are related to sex-gender perception policies, which highlight the cultural mediation of coded gender sensations (Vannini *et al.*, 2012, p. 39). In the same way, “secrets” about the female body turn into ignorance about the first menstruation, or menarche. We can see this in some myths that base their worldview on how mythical secrets were stolen from women, whereby their power to dominate men was taken from them (Héritier, 1991, p. 95).

Simone de Beauvoir (2010) mentions a survey conducted by British sexologist Havelock Ellis⁵ on 125 U.S. high school students

in 1826, where it was discovered that 36 of them knew absolutely nothing about menarche, while 38 had minimal information. Beauvoir notes that not much had changed by the mid-1960s. As other recent research from modern times has shown, experiences regarding the first menstruation are generally characterized by ignorance (Sosa-Sánchez, Lerner & Erviti, 2014, p. 372). Thus, menstruation is a topic that is kept a secret and that connects women, although paradoxically, at times, it keeps them from knowing about themselves and their bodily experiences. As mentioned above, in this sense, another effect of the policies of perception can be seen in marketing, where the red colour of menstrual blood is made invisible, substituted by other chromatic tones such as blue (Turner, 2003).

The secret and the corporeal-affective states that this ‘way of being with others’ is highly relevant to this proposal. The secret and its discovery is related to shame. Celia would most likely have experienced shame if she had discovered that her crush had broken into the room she used to beautify herself. But what is shame? In a brief essay, “On a psychology of shame” ([1901] 2018), Simmel criticizes Havelock Ellis, for whom the origin of the shame lies in nudity and the exhibition of the genitals, and for whom women are more likely to experience this shame. Simmel considers that such an explanation is insufficient. For Simmel, shame implies a simultaneous emphasis on the self and a reduction of it. When a person is ashamed, it is because they experience an accentuation of another’s gaze on them, which is linked to condemnation due to the violation of a norm or convention (Simmel, 2018, p. 70).

In Simmel’s critique of Ellis, he states that shame can have different origins depending on different cultural codes and on the evaluation we make of ourselves through the eyes of others. Shame is a feeling that arises when others’ gaze upon a person becomes accentuated (Simmel, 2018, p. 70). Shame arises when we deviate from an idealized image of ourselves according to the gaze of others and because we are aware of that deviation. In this sense, shame is a moral emotion because it reminds us of others’ disapproval and the assurance that others are right in their negative judgment of us. Like other authors, Simmel states that shame favours the continuation of set asymmetries, because it is a feeling that places the norm and its idealization to the detriment of the person and indicates incompliance with that norm: “The accentuation of the self and its respective reduction due to the distance between an imperfect and an idealized reality, a normalized totality” (Simmel, 2018, p. 71). For this reason, as for other contemporary authors (Gaulejac, 2008; Barbalet, 2004; Heller, 2018), shame contributes to the maintenance of certain structures, since it is an emotion that prioritizes norms and their idealization over possible transgressions or deviations. Fear of being the target of shame makes a relationship possible in accordance with social conventions and expectations (Barbalet, 2004, p. 112).

Any information that deviates from the ideal image of the self is subject to being hidden or covered. It becomes convenient for the self to conceal certain information that might separate it from the expected desired behaviour. For example, Celia hid her hair, sweat, dandruff and bad smells from Strephon’s eyes and nose. Closer to Beauvoir than to Ellis, Simmel notes that if women are prone to

5. Simmel also confronts Ellis’ ideas regarding shame.

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feeling shame, it depends on the context and the relationship they have with the 'masculine gaze'. In other words, for Simmel, shame is not explained in terms of an individual, but in ways of relating that make it possible. As a result of his project on relational sociology, for Simmel, emotions are ways of relating to others. Emotions, therefore, have enormous sociological relevance, because they constitute not only a social product but also a way of relating to others.

Shame among women does not depend on inherent modesty or sensitivity, but rather on the relationship they have with the gaze of others. In this sense, shame has been a topic of feminist analysis, because it is made up of the common experiences of being a woman (Shefer & Munt, 2019, pp. 146-147; Tarzibachi, 2007, p. 69; Young, 2005, p. 109). In other words, shame becomes a control mechanism that marks gender, because it arises when someone feels inadequate in the face of hegemonic normative ideals of gendered bodies. Yet, paradoxically, menstruation continues to be seen as something abject (Young, 2005, p. 109) that should be kept out of sight and hidden from others' sense of smell. When it is shown to the public, the response is shame, and in extreme cases, disgust (Young, 2005, p. 98; Tarzibachi, 2017; Miller, 1998; McHuhg, 2020), even within intimate relationships, such as between couples (Sabido Ramos & García, 2017; Sabido Ramos & García, 2018), as with Celia and Strophon. For this reason, menstruation is closely linked to the idea of secrecy, and one of its key emotional responses is shame (Sabido Ramos, 2022). But what senses are pertinent and how do they intervene in the politics of perception based on secrecy? What is the sensory experience of menstruation like?

3. The sociology of senses and menstruation

In Chapter Nine, "Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society", of *Sociology. Inquiries into the Forms of Socialization* ([1908] 2009), Simmel presented "Excursus on the Sociology of Sense Impression". To Vannini, Wakuk and Gottschalk, Simmel pointed out humans' being together in "embodied, sensual ways that connect individuals to social existence" (2012, p. 17). According to Simmel, the exchange of glances is the prototype of the "reciprocal effects": "Among the individual sense organs, the eye is applied to a fully unique sociological accomplishment: to the bonds and patterns of interaction of individuals who are looking at each other. Perhaps this is the most immediate and purest interactive relationship." (2009, p. 571). In mutual perception, we obtain information from the other, and the other receives information about us. Simmel asserts: "One cannot take with the eye without at the same time giving. The eye unveils to the other the soul that seeks to unveil the other. While this occurs obviously only in immediate eye-to-eye contact, it is here that the most complete mutuality in the whole realm of human relations is produced" (Simmel, 2009, p. 571). For that reason, it is not by chance that the experience of shame involves hiding one's face from another. To quote him at length:

"Hence it becomes really quite understandable why shame leads us to look to the ground to avoid the gaze of the other. Certainly not only for the purpose of keeping us spared of being perceptibly detected from observation by the other in such a painful and confusing situation; but the deeper reason is that lowering my gaze deprives the other somehow of the possibility of detecting me. The look into the eye of the other serves not only for me to know the other but also for the other to know me; one's personality, one's mood, one's impulse towards the other is carried forth in the line that binds both our eyes. The 'ostrich-like attitude' in this physically immediate sociological relationship has a very real purpose: whoever does not look at the other actually eludes being seen to some degree. The person is not entirely quite there for the other should the other notice one, unless the first should also return the look of the other." (Simmel, 2009, p. 572).

However, Simmel does not point out that what we learn to make visible and what we must hide from the gaze of others is traversed by many politics of perception. In the case of women, what should and should not be seen is crossed by hegemonic ideals of femininity and even of beauty. Celia, for example, should not show the process of being beautified; she must offer herself to the gaze of others having already been beautified. The menstrual stains that Strophon does not dare name must remain secret, because they not only look bad but also smell terrible. But what happens in the twenty-first century? Do women still consider that menstruation should be a secret? Are we still experiencing embarrassment and shame from our menstrual stains? Do we continue to reject our own scent? And finally, what implications did the confinement caused by Covid-19 have on the sensory experience of menstruation?

3.1. Menstruation and the male gaze

In 2021, I conducted a survey relating to the experience of menstruation;⁶ the general profile of the respondents was middle-class urban women in the Valley of Mexico. Almost all those surveyed ($n = 837$), 99.5%, did not think that menstruation should be a secret. 80% ($n = 671$) did not believe that menstruation was a matter only for women. Even though in some circles today the experience is more pleasant, girls still suffer in secret and begin to be seen differently, as "barely legal," or "that they should stop acting like little girls" (ID0027). In these responses, it appears that the male gaze is uncomfortable and references a heteronormative sexuality.

As Laura Mulvey (2001) remarks, the male gaze invokes a patriarchal order of perception where man is the beholder and woman is the image to be seen. While for Simmel, the exchange of glances is the most perfect reciprocity, for Beauvoir, experiences that make girls aware of others' gaze make them feel that their body is being taken away from them and that it is no longer their own. Beauvoir revisits an excerpt from a novel in which the protagonist

6. The survey entitled *Virtual Survey on the Experience of Menstruation in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic*. The sample was narrowed down to the metropolitan area of the Valley of Mexico. This area had the highest number of responses ($n = 841$). The education level of most of the respondents was undergraduate degree ($n = 490$), followed by high school ($n = 141$), master's degree ($n = 134$), PhD ($n = 45$), and middle school ($n = 27$). In other words, the respondents had high levels of education. When they filled out the survey, 528 of them were employed, and 50.1% ($n = 430$) had faced economic difficulties during the pandemic. I retrieved some aspects of the survey currently carried out by UNICEF (2021). A more extensive explanation of the methodology appeared in Sabido Ramos, 2022.

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narrates this experience of alienation through wearing a short skirt and receiving comments from an adult man: "The next day, my mother made me wear stockings and lengthen my skirt, but I will never forget the shock I suddenly felt in seeing myself seen." (De Beauvoir 2010, p. 369). These are some of the consequences of beginning to dress "differently" when the first menstruation arrives. One survey respondent notes: "A hypersexualization for women, since you become a 'young lady,' meaning that you are potentially a sexual subject, that they can have coitus with you, that you can now reproduce, that has a strong emotional impact because we're still girls and we're not prepared for it" (ID0293).

There are also suspicions of the possible immorality of women's bodies for provoking desire in others. One 42-year-old female employee stated: "I was judged for menstruating irregularly (they thought of pregnancy) and it made my first visit to the gynaecologist a traumatic one. I felt relief and a lot of anger" (ID0550). Despite disagreeing with this representation of menstruation, one 31-year-old female student considered that in our society, this meant: "The loss of childhood and the beginning of a sexual awakening. 'Now she's a young woman,' is a phrase heard more often than we might or would want to think" (ID0044). One 22-year-old female student who also held a job said that she refused to accept how, in our society, menstruation means: "That you 'become a woman' and 'must close your legs,' a very chauvinistic idea, as if our menstruation belonged to the heteropatriarchal society" (ID0154).

The secret of menstruation creates ignorance, as noted above. One 21-year-old female undergraduate noted that: "Menstruation as something that should be private, watched out for, hidden, secret and, since we don't get adequate information, when the menarche comes, it takes us by surprise and there are accidents that make us feel insecure, fearful, embarrassed, subject to mocking and, from then on to hide at all costs that we are menstruating" (ID0266). A 33-year-old saleswoman responded how, in her experience, this ignorance had consequences for her self-esteem. "Well, you don't know anything. It happened to me and my mom only gave me a sanitary napkin and I felt content but later in middle school they made fun because there tended to be accidents with staining and that harmed your self-esteem" (ID0383). It was noteworthy that 85% ($n = 721$) of survey respondents did not believe that schools gave sufficient information regarding menstruation.

Hand-in-hand with the secret is concealment, fear, anxiety, mocking, and shame, as well as strategies to hide it. One 27-year-old woman who works in the home wrote that, in our society, menstruation in women meant that "They have to hide this fact from their life." (ID 0053). A 31-year-old female worker stated that "In the collective imagination I would make the association: girls turn into women, something dirty and impure that should be hidden and only a private topic among women" (ID0069). As we have noted, shame emerges when there is a feeling of inadequacy in the face of hegemonic ideals of gendered bodies; menstruation is the opposite of purity and cleanliness. In the sense that the unclean is associated with what is outside of the norm (Douglas, 1988), it is not surprising that menstruation is considered something 'almost' morally wrong. One survey respondent stated that: "It's almost handled as a sin, if you start to menstruate they ask you to keep it completely secret" (ID0104).

Despite this negative perception of menstruation, it is interesting to point out the lessening of shame when the experience is shared with female friends. As Simmel (1997) rightly said, acting collectively lessens the conditions of shame. As one 23-year-old student remembered: "I was at school and was wearing light-coloured pants, it was super uncomfortable because my friends wanted to cover me with everything so that nobody would realize it" (ID226). A 24-year-old student recounted how: "On the school bus with my friends. I felt embarrassed, but they [were older] they made me feel calm and safe, because they lent me a sweater to cover myself" (ID0339). It may seem that the challenge for male classmates is still present in the younger generations. A 24-year-old student writes, "It was quite embarrassing because that's how my classmates in middle school made me feel, I was with my girlfriends, they were supportive, but the men were like troglodytes" (ID295).

3.2. Hiding from the gaze of others: intimates and strangers

Concealing menstruation from the gaze of others is the most recurrent strategy. At times women even feel that it is necessary to conceal their menstruation from people close to them, as one 29-year-old professional woman notes. "In my experience, it was to be kept secret, only my mom knew and my sister was curious, but for some reason I felt I shouldn't tell her about it" (ID0592). Despite the awareness that menstruation is not something that should cause disapproval, its meaning is still perceived as negative, as one 29-year-old professional woman writes. "It is seen as something shameful and secret, when it is something natural" (ID0218). One 14-year-old respondent disagrees with the norm. "In society they tend to say that you are now 'a woman' but I don't agree at all" (ID250). Even among those who do not share these ideas about menstruation, the fact is that shame has a performative effect on women's bodies, their movements, and even their relationships with items such as clothing. One 38-year-old researcher with a PhD says, "It is considered a transition stage in the lives of women. Yet it is not normalized, it is not something we talk about openly. In practical terms, we have to live it practically in secret. Even the way we dress has to change" (ID071).

The confinement had paradoxical effects on the respondents and their concern about being seen by both intimates and strangers. In the findings of this research, it is striking that most respondents considered that they had the same privacy that they had before confinement. 62% ($n = 525$) responded that it was not modified, but 35% ($n = 296$) answered that their privacy decreased. For some women, the confinement involved a constant invasion of their privacy and the discomfort of being seen. In some cases, the lockdown meant an increase in the number of cohabitants in the house, as this 17-year-old respondent points out: "There are more people in my house. All day I have to worry about staining myself" (ID605). A worker shared with us that in her house, "everyone is aware of everything" (ID462). Some women were even worried that their relatives might see that they had ordered sanitary towels at home, as this 36-year-old teacher shared with us: "Because I order sanitary towels at home and everyone finds out that they arrived" (ID191).

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Some respondents were also uncomfortable when their relatives saw them carrying out activities related to menstrual management, as this 24-year-old worker shared with us: “Yes, because before, if I was alone at some point, it was more comfortable to wash my clothes if they were stained, without anyone noticing.” (ID493). For another 39-year-old respondent, being in confinement involved a more conscious menstrual management: “Yes, now my partner is here all day, and that makes me more aware of waste related to menstruation. For example, roll up the towel well so that it does not open, and the blood can be seen” (ID016). Similarly, another 25-year-old student shared: “Yes, because they complain if they see bloody paper in the bathroom or if I wash my underwear” (ID573). The confinement meant that sanitary towels now had to be disposed of at home. This generated not only discomfort but even feelings of shame, as this 24-year-old student shared with us: “Yes, because I am ashamed to dispose of towels in the garbage at home. And they joined with my sister’s. Before, I could dispose of them in public toilets” (ID293).

One of the most striking issues is that 50% of the respondents ($n = 421$) reported feeling more comfortable in confinement with the menstrual experience. Another 27% ($n = 228$) considered it more uncomfortable, and 22% ($n = 181$) did not consider that they had experienced changes. The reasons for this varied, but among the most pronounced is that in the case of staining, they would not be seen by strangers. For one 41-year-old academic, the confinement was positive: “Thanks to the fact that I have been privileged enough to be able to be at home, I have been able to relax much more around the idea of getting dirty in places shared by others who are close to me like work.” (ID018). Another 27-year-old female worker said: “I do not have to manage everything that involves going out while menstruating (wearing certain clothes, emptying my cup in public places, carrying tampons, colic, constantly checking to see if I have stained myself)” (ID008). Another respondent shared: “At least I no longer worry so much about getting dirty on the street” (ID426). Another respondent wrote: “I have been able to enjoy the process in the comfort of my home, without traveling on public transport and with the fear of staining myself” (ID583).

3.3. The smell of menstruation

Menstruation should be hidden not only in terms of being seen but also in being smelled. Classen, Howes and Synnott pointed out: “Menstrual odors are, in fact, considered polluting in many cultures around the world” (2003, p. 137). In European civilization, women have often been accused of bad smells. According to Muchembled (2020, p. 65) this belief has persisted since ancient times: “women had a disturbing aura that was unpleasant-smelling by nature and terrifying during menstruation”. The ‘female odour’ is associated with a deviation from the olfactory norm and even with a sexual reputation: “Prostitutes, for example, were known as ‘stinker’ (*whore*, *putain*) in various languages because of their assumed bodily and moral corruption” (Classen, 1997, p. 9). Also, olfactory prejudices against women have been related to racial prejudices. According to Federico Kukso (2019, p. 241), in 2013 the Johnson & Johnson company was sued by African American women claiming that its

vaginal deodorants did not warn of their carcinogenic potential. In summary, there are norms associated with how a woman should smell (Low, 2009) that currently generate economic profits through the sale of deodorizing products (Synnott, 1991).

Simmel states that when we perceive the bodies of other people in the same space as us through the senses, we make sensory, emotional, and cognitive associations (Sabido Ramos, 2020). The olfactory impression is the most notable example of how sensory impressions and their meanings provoke extremes of antipathies or sympathies. In our societies, anything that deviates from the olfactory norm (Low, 2009; Synnott, 1991) is susceptible to being qualified as good or bad in moral terms. In the West, smell is considered to be a dirty and immoral sense. This judgment is mainly because hatred and shame towards the body identify smell with the most sensual part of perception (Jaquet, 2016, p. 60). So, we could resignify Simmel’s enigmatic phrase: “The social question is not only an ethical one, but also a nasal question” (2009, p. 577). It is in this last point that Simmel gives us a clue as the relationship of smell with the world of values.

Furthermore, a person’s smell “is a most intimate perception of that person; that person penetrates, so to speak, in the form of air, into our most inner senses” (Simmel, 2009, p. 578). For this reason, “perfume plays a social role”: “Perfume covers the personal atmosphere [...] With the perfume that creates this fictive atmosphere, one presupposes that it will be agreeable to the other and that it would be a social value.” (Simmel, 2009, p. 578). De Beauvoir refers to the constant management that girls must perform regarding the smell of menstruation:

“And once the first surprise has passed, the monthly unpleasantness does not fade away at all: each time, the girl finds the same disgust when faced by this unappetizing and stagnant odor that comes from herself—a smell of swamps and wilted violets—this less red and more suspicious blood than that flowing from children’s cuts and scratches. Day and night she has to think of changing her protection, watching her underwear, her sheets, and solving a thousand little practical and repugnant problems” (2010, p. 376).

Today, keeping period stains and period odours hidden is still essential. One 25-year-old girl answered: “Although I share a room with my brother, leaving my cloth towels to dry seems a bit invasive for him” (ID059). It is still necessary to keep the sights and smells of menstrual blood away from others. Even when the smell of menstruation is pleasant to women, olfactory norms are imposed on gendered bodies - as one respondent says: “For me, it can be pleasant but I’m embarrassed to smell around other people” (ID0016). One 30-year-old woman said of her menstrual smell, “Strong, it doesn’t bother me but sometimes I swear that others can perceive it and if that were to happen, it would be embarrassing” (ID0758). Another respondent noted, “I try to use some product to cover it up” (ID0361.) One CSO director pointed out: “Personally, it can be pleasant but I feel sorry for smelling around other people” (ID0016). Another 30-year-old woman replied: “Strong, it doesn’t bother me, but sometimes I swear that others can perceive it and if it happens, I would be sorry” (ID0758). In a more negative sense, a 31-year-old master’s student noted, “It’s what we’ve been taught since we were girls. ‘Bleeding is shameful,’ it’s being exposed to creepy gazes, to

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mocking, laughter. The stain is the visible (and 'smellable') part of something that should be concealed" (ID0044).

3.4. My menstrual smell and my concern for others' perception of it

In the survey, we found a significant transformation from respondents' points of view. They were asked to complete the sentence: "For you, the smell of menstruation is ...": The responses varied widely. 30% ($n = 252$) were indifferent; for 26% ($n = 223$) it was disgusting and unpleasant; 22% ($n = 85$) did not dislike it, it did not bother them or they did not lend it importance; for 8% ($n = 75$) it is even pleasant. However, two issues stand out. Some respondents refer to the somatic work (Vannini, *et al.*, 2012) that they have carried out to re-signify the unpleasant sensation of menstruation. One 33-year-old master's student points out: "Now I don't notice that it has an odour, but occasionally when I was still a teenager it happened that I found it unpleasant" (ID0626). Sometimes this somatic work is related to the use of new menstrual hygiene devices, as another respondent shares: "Before, it disgusted me, but since I have used the menstrual cup, I find it interesting because it doesn't smell bad and I cannot smell the iron" (ID0243).

During the COVID-19 confinement, it was difficult for some respondents to share the same space with their family (bathrooms or waste receptacles). Among their concerns, the smell of menstrual blood stood out. One 25-year-old teacher shared with us: "I feel more uncomfortable if I smell bad because of the possibility that my relatives will perceive it. Also for staining" (ID174). Another 24-year-old student stated: "Being with your family all day is tiring because if you go to the bathroom and someone else comes in, it is like they notice the smell of blood, and it is something I cannot control" (ID467). For another respondent, waste management bothered her during confinement: "The garbage in the bathroom is greater because you are at home all day. I throw away the bag of hygienic waste daily when I am menstruating, and I think it generates a particular odour in the bathroom that I do not want my family to perceive" (ID140).

3.5. The smell of blood and new artifacts

For some respondents, confinement during COVID-19 allowed for the use of new artifacts such as menstrual cups or other menstrual management techniques such as free bleeding, which made another type of sensory experience possible. For one 27-year-old female worker, confinement allowed for less stressful management because she did not have to carry menstrual hygiene products when going outside: "I have less stressful periods because I do not have to manage everything that involves going out" (ID008). In some cases, the lockdown guaranteed the use of a private bathroom, which afforded more comfort, as this 23-year-old research assistant responded: "It has been great for me to be able to change my menstrual cup in my own bathroom. It was a challenging and uncomfortable experience to do it in the university's bathrooms. It has also been promising that I can be more comfortable in the case of colic" (ID042).

The use of the menstrual cup has also fostered another relationship with the smell of menstruation: "Thanks to the use of the cup, I have noticed that there is no menstrual stench, the odours that have been associated with menstruation are caused by products such as towels that have a fragrance to 'hide' it, however, they are the ones that cause an unpleasant odour." (ID0341). It is necessary to clarify that the respondents assume they have material conditions such as their own bathroom and menstrual hygiene products: privileges that not all women enjoy. Even these conditions allow them a more comfortable sensory management of menstrual cramps, as this 22-year-old student shared:

"I think my experience is very privileged because I live in the city, have menstrual education and support, and can also manage the purchase of the necessary supplies. For this privilege, I can apply heat, stand or be in comfortable positions if I feel pain before I could not and had to resist or, when I can no longer, the journey to get home involves a lot of time and inconvenience of public transport." (ID033).

On the other hand, free bleeding also allowed for another sensory experience of menstruation. A 26-year-old student shared: "Since I do free bleeding, confinement has helped me make the entire menstruation process more comfortable. I can go to the toilet when my body tells me it needs to expel blood without the pressure to leave the classroom 'very often' or look for a toilet if I am on the street." (ID841). For another 29-year-old employee, experiencing free bleeding made her resignify contact with menstrual blood: "I took the time to stain myself, to let the blood flow. In the end, I did not like it because you have to wash it before it dries and gets hard, but it helped me lose the fear of staining my bed and clothes. I already know that with hydrogen peroxide, it is solved, and although I do not like the sensation of touching or smelling blood, I feel comfortable having contact with it." (ID227)

4. Conclusions

As we have seen, one of the mechanisms of perception policies towards menstruation has been to keep it secret. As Simmel pointed out, secrets have implications for the ways in which bonds are formed. There is a paradox in making the menstrual experience into a secret and wanting to confine it to a feminine "other world". As we have seen, this way of 'being with others' contributes to ignorance; a secret has the effect of creating disinformation and uncertainty. In terms of menstruation, it has consequences for the alienation of bodily experiences. Ignorance of, or a vague idea about, a bodily process such as this causes fear, anxiety, worry, and in less extreme cases, discomfort with one's own body. Although there has been awareness of the mythicized nature of this meaning among the survey respondents, they share the implications of this concept of menstruation in their own experiences, even as they question it. We can see how the secret as a type of relationship contributes to the asymmetry between genders, to the detriment of women or feminized bodies.

We have seen how women are prone to feel shame not because of a condition inherent to their sensitivity but because of the hegemonic gender norms that run through their bodies, and the link between them and the gaze of others. When menstruation begins,

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there is asymmetry in two ways. On the one hand, the gaze of others highlights aspects of corporality that are not consensual and that classify bodies into a peephole, women barely understand: sexual beings, "barely legal," said one respondent. It causes their body to "get away from them," to cease to belong to them. On the other hand, gazes related to gender markings that leave bloodstains on clothes focalize a diminished self, which through its "carelessness" demonstrates the opposite of the ideal of femininity – clean, pure, and tidy. It is one of the origins of shame, which also has consequences for the ways women carry their bodies and its artefacts. In other words, shame fosters the persistence of asymmetries in the corporeal-affective code in the gender order. But acting as a group can also help dismantle shame (Simmel, 1997). The opportunity to share with other women that which leads to shame and to feel affective support and mutual care, as well as to be able to express in a group disagreement with stigmatization processes, helps dismantle mechanisms and resignify shame.

In addition, confinement had several effects on the sensory experience of menstruation. For some women, lockdown meant an increase in the number of cohabitants in their homes. This situation meant a constant invasion of their privacy. Some respondents also felt uncomfortable when members of their families saw them performing activities related to menstrual management. This situation generated not only discomfort but even feelings of shame. At the same time, for other respondents, not leaving the house enabled them to feel more comfortable because they did not have to face the gaze of strangers. Nowadays, it is important to keep menstrual stains hidden from others' sight. It is also important to conceal the odours of menstruation. During the lockdown, such odours were a concern for some respondents. Many experienced discomfort or embarrassment at the idea of their scent being noticed by their families.

At the same time, the confinement allowed for the use of new artifacts such as menstrual cups or other menstrual management techniques such as free bleeding, which made another type of sensory experience possible. For example, the use of the menstrual cup had positive effects on the perception of the smell of menstruation. In some cases, confinement allowed for the sensory management of pain associated with a thermal dimension, including heat appliances and comfortable clothing. The respondents assume that these possibilities imply the privilege of having material conditions of possibility. In this sense, the pandemic revealed that menstrual management technologies are not within reach of all menstruating people: a fact recognized by the respondents themselves.

Although today, the negative judgments towards Celia we read in Jonathan Swift's poem are questioned, the idea prevails that menstruating bodies should be confined so that their excrescences are not seen. Even in lockdown, it is necessary to hide bodily waste from the eyes and noses of others. Although the use of new artifacts or menstrual hygiene techniques allows for a certain resignification of the menstrual odour, this resignification occurs only from the woman's point of view. Perhaps we can conclude by pointing out that it is still necessary to dismantle the prejudices that the figure of Strephon represents in our societies. Furthermore, sights are easily deconstructed, but smells are more resistant and conservative.

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