

Women Speak of Menarche:  
The Experience and Its Influence on Views of Self

by

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the influence of the menarche experience on self-concept. Six women, aged 30-61, residing in the interior of British Columbia participated in interviews. Transcripts of interviews were analyzed and summarized under the following themes: Recalling the Experience, Previous Knowledge, Telling Someone, Private/Secret, A Step to Growing Up, Things to Deal With But Accepted, and Something in Common Among Females.

The following themes were found to be influential on participants' views of self: The Reaction of the First Person Told, Previous Knowledge, and the Meaning of the Private/Secret Nature of Menarche and Menstruation.

Overall, this study provides a deeper understanding of the influence of certain aspects of the menarche experience on the development of girls and women's views of self. The major finding was that this experience did influence the way that participants saw themselves. The study concludes by describing the implications of these findings for parents, educators and counsellors.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Early adolescence is a time of great change for girls. Menarche, or a girl's first menstrual period, is often considered the most dramatic developmental change that occurs at this time (Golub, 1992). In the physiological sense, menarche is a message from the girl's body that she is or soon will be physically capable of having a child. She has begun to develop breasts, pubic hair, and more body fat (Golub, 1992). Her uterus begins to shed blood and her ovaries will soon release ova (Golub, 1992). Socially, menarche is a time when girls are flooded with the realities of being a woman and what that means in her society and culture (Ussher, 1989). As the girl matures, she becomes more aware of the roles assigned to her (Ussher, 1989). She learns from her family, peers, teachers, and the media about the expectations society has for women. Around the time of menarche, the social and cultural expectations of what it is to be a woman are more apparent than ever before (Ussher, 1989). Although all these changes are taking place for the adolescent girl, it has rarely been considered how her view of self is affected by the experience.

### Impetus For Study

The impetus of this study came from an interest I have in women's issues stemming from my own experience as a girl and woman, in particular my experience of menarche. Present in the literature on menarche and menstruation are gaps relating girls and women's experiences of menarche with their views of self. My first period was frightening and painful, both physically and emotionally. I went through it alone with no clue that what was happening to me was a normal part of the process of growing up for a girl. The lack of information I had and the fear that I felt at the age of ten spawned an interest in how others went through menarche and what it meant for them. I wanted to know how other women went through this process. As I considered having my own children I also wanted to have some clarity as to how to introduce the idea of menstruation to my children, to normalize the process so that if I had a little girl she wouldn't feel the isolation and fear that I felt.

As I reflected back on my own experience of menarche and read about menarche rituals in different cultures and how it can be recognized and celebrated, I was struck by the silence and lack of recognition of this coming of age process in my world. I wondered what the event has meant in the lives of other women in this society. I was curious about

how the cultural etiquette and language of menstruation affects a woman's sense of self. I wondered about the variations in women's experience and whether there were women who had a positive first period experience.

While I was considering what exactly I wanted to do and how to do this research, I wondered if should I call it "MEN-ARCH-EE" or if should I say "first period". Menarche sounded so harsh, why couldn't it be pronounced MEN-ARSH? I talked to friends, acquaintances, and colleagues. I found their responses to my idea varied. Some were a little surprised that I would choose such a topic – why on earth would you want to write about periods? Others were amused – well, *that's* an interesting topic! Most were curious about it. Many of the women I told about my research idea had a story to tell. I was surprised when women I had just met would tell me the details of their first period and what it was like for them. It was as if they had never been given the chance to speak their story. I wanted to give woman who were interested in telling their stories of menarche a chance to do that.

### Statement of Problem

As counsellors we need to be prepared to talk with women about the experience of events that are developmental milestones. We are trained to be empathic, to understand the experience of another by trying to imagine what it must be like for that person. Given the negative view and discomfort in openly discussing menstruation by the general public, I am left wondering whether psychologists, counsellors, and other helpers are open and willing to discuss the experience and meaning of menarche. More knowledge about the lived experience of menarche and menstruation would be useful in engaging in dialogue about the experience and the implications of this landmark event for women. Chrisler and Zittel (1998) assert that, "social scientists ought to pay more attention to women's early menstrual experiences and consider their importance to sexuality issues and to the psychology of women in general" (p. 311). Women seem to have difficulty discussing topics such as menarche as it is often portrayed and experienced as a private issue, something to keep hidden. Engaging in dialogue provides an opportunity for women to speak about an experience that is rarely discussed. For some women the topic may be something they have been yearning to talk about but have never been given the opportunity or they have never felt comfortable bringing up the topic. Open discussion of

women's experiences can lead to learning. First, the person discussing their experience has the chance to explore a topic that has been spoken about very little if ever. They are given an opportunity to have a voice and to revisit a developmental process that may not have been explained to them with much detail. Each participant would come to know herself better as she remembered her menarche experience and discussed its affect. Secondly, for those who read this and come to know about the experiences of the participants, something can be learned about the experience of menarche – what it was like and how it influenced these women's views of self. It can be learned what kind of studies may be helpful in the future to help us expand our understanding about this developmental event. Although each girl's experience is unique, a glimpse into what was important and what may have been missing for these women may inform parents, educators, and counsellors how to better respond to and support girls so that they can have more positive feelings and experiences associated with their bodies as young women and throughout their lifetime.

#### Purpose of the Study

The available academic research suggests that women's lived experience of menarche, the meaning that women assign to menarche, and its effect on views of self have been rarely considered. Studies indicate that views of self are affected by the experience of menarche (Koff, 1983; Weisgarber & Osborne, 1990). The purpose of this study was to increase our current understanding of women's experiences of menarche and provide a more in-depth look at their perceived influence on their views of self. It is important to have insight into how menarche and menstruating have influenced women's views of self so that ultimately we can have a better understanding of how to support girls so they can have more positive feelings about themselves and their bodies.

The objectives of this study are: 1) to increase our understanding of women's experience of menarche, 2) to provide an opportunity for women to voice their experience of this event and how they make meaning of it, 3) to provide further insight into how menarche and menstruating has influenced women's views of self. This study will provide an opportunity to learn about the way in which menarche influences women's lives and their perceptions of self.

### Methodological Considerations

This study is informed by a phenomenological methodology, which was used to explore women's experiences of menarche and menstruation and how their experiences influence women's views of self. The use of this method explored the lived experience of menarche and the influence of the experience on their perception of self. The participants are women aged 30 – 61, residing in the interior of British Columbia who were willing to participate in interviews. Participants were asked to describe their experience of menarche and how it influenced the way they saw themselves. The research question was: What are women's experiences of menarche and how do such experiences influence their view of self?

### Definition of View of Self

A number of different terms have been used in the literature when referring to how people describe themselves: view of self, sense of self, self-concept, self-esteem. Jacobs, Bleeker, and Constantino (2003) define self-concept as the sum of attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values that an individual believes she or he has. In the literature self-concept can be used to describe domain-specific self-beliefs. Other researchers describe a more global self-concept that includes an overarching view of self.

“View of self” is a less formal term than “self-concept”, and was more consistent with how the participants seemed to be describing their experience during the interviews. In this study view of self is considered to be a more global concept, including “an individual's' overall perceptions of their abilities, behavior and personality” (Santrock, 1993, p. 57). The term “view of self” is used in this study to denote the way a woman would describe her self, how she sees herself - an internal representation of who she is in the world. This may include both cognitive and affective representation.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature on menarche is quite extensive in some areas and scant in others. The studies include a variety of foci including biological, interpersonal, cultural, and psychological aspects. While a review of all the literature on the topic of menarche is not possible, the following relevant aspects will be covered: A Description of Menarche, North American Perceptions of Menstruation, Preparation and Timing of Menarche, Psychological Experience of Menarche, and Women's Remembered Experiences of Menarche.

### A Description of Menarche

During adolescence a biological transformation is taking place within a girl's body. Her body has started its maturation process prior to menarche. During adolescence, a girl's breasts develop, body hair increases, weight and height are gained, sweat glands become more active, and bodily proportions change (Golub, 1992). Within the girl's body, her vagina and uterus are growing and her hormone levels are changing (Golub, 1992). These changes take place over a span of 1.5 to 5 years (Golub, 1992). Menarche usually takes place between the ages of 9 and 16 (Golub, 1992). Menarche takes place near the end of puberty, generally around 12.5 (Rome & Reame, 1998), but anywhere between nine and 18 is normal (Golub, 1992).

Although menarche is an indicator that the girl's uterus is mature, this does not necessarily mean that she has reached reproductive maturity. It may take several years for a young woman's menstrual cycle to stabilize (Golub, 1992). During this time ovulation is irregular - any individual cycle may or may not be ovulatory.

What exactly triggers menarche is controversial. Golub (1992) lists the two competing theories regarding the start of menarche as the skeletal growth hypothesis and the accumulation of fat with a critical minimum weight for height hypothesis. The skeletal growth hypothesis suggests that a certain amount of skeletal growth must be present for a girl to reproduce. Her body, especially her pelvis needs to reach a size capable of carrying and birthing a child. The accumulated fat hypothesis proposes that a critical weight for height must be reached as well as the accumulation of a certain level of body fat is required to begin menstruation.

As her body is maturing, the biological changes that occur have physical, psychological and social effects. Adolescent girls must adjust to a more shapely body, sexual advances, and demands from society to conform to assigned gender roles (Ussher, 1989). It seems that menarche is a turning point at which females reorganize their sexual identification and body image (Rierdan & Koff, 1980, 1985, as cited in Daniluk, 1998).

#### North American Perceptions of Menstruation

In our society, menstruation carries a great stigma. The blood that women shed is often portrayed in our culture as dirty, or vile - a curse that women are under (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, 1988; Houppert, 1999). However, “the curse” is not the only term used to communicate the message that a woman is menstruating. While some of these euphemisms have a kind of endearing tone others have undertones that are less than flattering. ‘On the rag’, ‘riding the cotton pony’, ‘period’, ‘the curse’, ‘monthlies’, ‘moon time’, ‘*that* time of the month’, ‘menses’, and ‘the visitor’ are just some of the phrases used (Houppert, 1999).

The concept of menstruation as a ‘curse’ is linked to the notion of menstruation as taboo. In the Webster’s Dictionary, taboo is defined as “the prohibition of certain contacts, words, actions etc. on religious grounds among many primitive peoples; the state or quality of being thus prohibited; anything which is prohibited by tradition or social usage” (1988, p.1006). Delaney, Lupton, and Toth (1988) assert that in North American culture, menstruation is considered taboo and women continue to feel the effects of this. Golub (1992) states that “Menstrual myths, misconceptions, and taboos are universal...” (p. 1). Although variations among cultures exist with regards to menarche rituals (Paige, 1983), the underlying taboo of menarche and menstruation is pervasive (Delaney, et al., 1988).

In North American culture, menstruation is portrayed as a “hygienic crisis” (Berg & Block Coutts, 1992; Golub, 1983; Houppert, 1999). Women are bombarded with messages that menstruating is unclean. Menstruation is kept secret, hidden carrying with it the potential to cause great embarrassment and shame. This portrayal is reinforced through advertisements that try to convince us that if a woman uses the right products, she can hide the evidence that she is experiencing anything at all (Houppert, 1999). Some may say that the presence of advertisements for menstrual products may be seen as

evidence that we are more open about this topic than ever before. But consider the ads for menstrual products. It is not clearly stated in the ads that the product is intended for menstruation (Houppert, 1999). The intention of these advertisements is not to open the dialogue about menstruation but to increase the sales of their products.

Berg and Block Coutts (1992) analyzed the portrayal of menstruating women in contemporary menstrual product advertisements. The researchers noted a change in the language used in advertisements from “sanitary protection” to the phrase, “feminine hygiene” to refer to menstrual products. On further analysis, the researchers found that this shift in language involved more than just semantics. The marketing of panty liners carry the implicit message that “women are always in a state of uncleanness and that this condition makes them ineligible to participate fully in a wide array of activities” (p. 19). The female body is portrayed as unclean, not feminine, and in constant need of maintenance. The researchers further note that many women view menstruation as a “negative, shameful, and femininity-detracting event because they personally define menstruation as an uncontrollable, untamable, natural function” (p.19-20). The connection between women’s perceptions and the socially constructed meaning of menstruation that does not value menstruation is missed. Menstruation viewed as a hygienic crisis delivers the message that women are inherently unclean especially when they are menstruating, and in the case of pantyliners, all month long.

In a book titled, *Is Menstruation Obsolete?*, Coutinho (1999), a professor of Gynecology, Obstetrics and Human Reproduction, proposes that menstruating is outdated. He suggests that through the use of synthetic hormones women need not menstruate. He provides information supporting the idea that suppressing menstruation has great health advantages for women. He reasons that women were never meant to menstruate each month, that in earlier times women did not menstruate monthly due to the absence of birth control methods. Coutinho further explains that women were in a perpetual state of pregnancy or nursing, therefore not menstruating as frequently as the modern woman. Coutinho seems to view menstruation as an inconvenience at best and unnatural at worst. When women are presented with this view of menstruation by experts in the field, what influence does it have on their ability to feel good about their bodies and about being women?

Although popular culture tends to present a negative picture of menstruation, a counter culture exists where menstruation is valued. Within this counter culture the power and wonder of the female body is highlighted while the realities of menstruation are acknowledged. Books such as *Sweet Secrets: Stories of Menstruation* (O'Grady & Wansbrough, 1997), *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1998) and *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom* (Northrup, 1998) are examples of this view of menstruation. In *Sweet Secrets*, O'Grady and Wansbrough provide information in an upbeat, accessible manner that normalizes the process of menarche and menstruation, discusses the social implications, and encourages girls to feel good about the changes that are happening to them. In *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, sexual anatomy, reproduction, and the menstrual cycle are discussed. Rome and Reame (1998) include a physical description of the changes taking place during menstruation and ovulation, feelings about menstruation, physical and emotional problems that may occur, remedies for these problems ranging from diet, sleep, and exercise to herbal and prescription medications. In *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*, one chapter is dedicated to an explanation of the cycles of a woman's body and connects women with nature by drawing links to the natural cycles of the moon and seasons. A song by alternative artist, Ani DiFranco, titled *Blood in the Boardroom*, uses menstruation to provide an alternative, in-your-face message to corporate America. As well, on the Internet websites have emerged such as The Red Spot ([redspot@onewoman.com](mailto:redspot@onewoman.com)) where information on menstruation and women's stories of their first periods and experiences with menstruation are shared. Some manufacturers of menstrual products have also developed websites, such as [www.girlspace.com](http://www.girlspace.com) by Kotex. Websites like these are tapping into another opportunity to market their product while providing information on adolescence and menstruation. Although the more common view is one of women being 'cursed' with menstruation, other views do exist and provide a more positive way for girls to learn about the realities of menstruation.

#### Preparation and Timing for Menarche

The amount of preparation that a girl has prior to menarche and the timing of her period as compared to her peers have been indicated as influential on how she experiences menarche. Studies have found that girls who are unprepared for menarche

have a negative experience of menarche (Rierdan, 1983). Being informed can make the difference between a normal experience and trauma especially for girls who are among the first in their peer group. The timing of menarche in comparison with peer group members is another factor that has been found to influence a girl's psychological experience. For girls who start menstruating early in comparison with their peer group menarche is seen as more negative and results in a more difficult menarche experience (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1983). Socially, girls who develop early feel different than their peers at a time when developmentally blending in or being similar to peers is viewed as very important. For girls who have their first period late compared to peers, negative consequences seem to be negligible (Golub, 1992). Apter (1990) found that late developers showed less awkwardness and shame. Perhaps this is because there is little social stigma for girls who develop later. However the most favorable result is experienced when girls consider themselves on time in comparison to their peers (Brooks-Gunn & Ruble, 1983). In particular, these girls feel more attractive and favorable about their bodies than girls who are either early or late developers.

Rierdan, Koff, and Stubbs (1989) assessed the significance of two timing variables (objective timing and subjective timing or the belief of one's status as early, average, or late maturing) and two cognitive variables (preparation for menstruation and ego functioning) as predictors of the experience of menarche. The study looked at 92 girls, grades 6 to 9, who experienced a shift in status from pre- to post-menarcheal within a 6 month period. The girls filled out questionnaires. Measures that were analyzed for this report were: objective timing (grade at menarche), subjective timing (girls estimated the number of their grade-mates who had already reached menarche), preparation (7 point likert scale indicating what they knew about menstruation and a sentence completion test measuring ego development), experience (7 point likert scale indicating how positive or negative they felt about the experience of menarche). Significant findings of the research supported the results of previous research. In regards to timing, girls who experience themselves as very early had a particularly negative response to menarche. Again supported by previous research, analysis indicated a significant relationship between preparation and experience. Girls who were not as prepared reported more negative experiences than girls who were better prepared. No significant relationship was found

between level or timing of ego development and menarcheal experience. The researchers caution however that the model of ego development should not be dismissed unless a study yields similar results when level of ego development is assessed a year before menarche. They note that an assessment at this time may be more predictive of the experience of menarche than ego stage just prior to menarche.

#### The Psychological Experience of Menarche

Adolescence is a time of transformation of body and body image. For girls, the event of menarche brings into awareness the bodily changes that are taking place and they may begin to identify with being a woman or feel more grown up. For girls the event of menarche combined with its social perception of indicating a shift from girl to woman appears to be an important trigger for maturation (Daniluk, 1998). Ussher (1989) claims "It is during adolescence that the foundations are laid which result in women being defined through their bodies, their biological structure, for the rest of their lives" (p. 40). Golub (1992) states that "Changes in body image - the way girls see themselves - are among the most dramatic reactions to menarche" (p. 39). With age girls begin to give more importance to interpersonal factors to shape their body image or physical self-perception than ever before. The childhood reliance on sensorimotor experience to shape perception is somewhat displaced with interpersonal factors during adolescence (Daniluk, 1998). Rather than relying solely on their sensual experiences of themselves, adolescents begin to place more importance on others' perceptions. Girls begin to look outward and integrate what they interpret as others' perceptions of them into their concept of self.

Koff's (1983) research demonstrates that although a girl's body changes gradually, it is at menarche that the girl recognizes the changes and conceives of herself differently. In this study, 87 grade seven girls were asked two times (at six month intervals) to draw male and female figures. Thirty-four of the girls were pre-menarcheal at both intervals, 23 were post-menarcheal, and 30 changed menarcheal status between the two times. Pre-menarcheal girls' drawings were not as sexually differentiated as post-menarcheal girls'. The most noticeable difference was between the drawings of the girls whose menarcheal status changed during the six-month interval. Their second drawings of the female figure had changed - breasts, more distinct waists and hips were noted. Koff and her colleagues also used a sentence completion task that revealed descriptions of

bodily changes at menarche that embody “primarily a fantasy of instant metamorphosis from child to adult woman” (p. 81). These statements were congruent with the differences noted in the drawings. The researchers note that the media, especially manufacturers of menstrual products, proclaim that on the first day of her period the girl has become a woman. Although the media is a powerful force, the note that post-menarcheal girls, who have experienced menarche and know that it is not an overnight transformation, still hold on to the belief that at menarche they were transformed into a woman. It is noted that menarche is a time when a reorganization of a girl’s body image occurs in the direction of greater sexual maturity. This study supports the idea that at menarche the body begins to function in a new way, and in association with this new function the identity of woman is integrated into the girl’s perception of self. It is through the appearance of her body that she is outwardly identifiable as a woman.

Garwood and Allen (1979) focused particularly on the relationship between self-concept and the menarche experience. They considered identified problem differences between pre- and post-menarcheal girls. The study compared 232 grade seven middle and low SES girls. Participants completed a personal history questionnaire, the Tennessee Self Concept Scale, and the Junior High School Form of the Mooney Problem Checklist. Results of statistical analysis using MANOVA cross-sectional designs indicated that post-menarcheal girls had more problems, but were also higher on self-concept variables than pre-menarcheal girls. They concluded that the findings supported the position that menarche is a positive event in girls lives and that while post-menarcheal girls reported having more problems than pre-menarcheal girls, “these problems were not viewed as serious enough to support a negative view of the menarche” (p. 536). Interestingly, a variable that was noted by the researchers yet not controlled for as a variable outside of SES was that all of the middle SES girls in the study were white and all of the low SES girls in the study were black. Oddly, the researchers acknowledged that many would see their position as untenable, yet defended their position by citing research that indicates the significant impact of social class on menarche.

In terms of the emotional responses of girls at menarche, studies have found that girls report feeling surprised when they get their first period, but don’t find it that upsetting. Apter (1990) found that girls are surprised at menarche, even when prepared

and that shame, embarrassment, and self-consciousness are other frequent responses to menarche. Apter also noted that it is difficult for girls to integrate sexual maturity into sense of self.

Using a sentence completion task Koff, Rierdan and Jacobson (1981) studied pre and post-menarcheal girls reactions to menarche. Most girls described menarche as mostly negative – painful, a “drag”, scary, and disgusting. Post-menarcheal girls also felt more self-conscious about their bodies and about their perception of whether others could tell they were menstruating.

Ruble and Brooks-Gunn (1982) interviewed post-menarcheal girls about positive and negative aspects of menstruation in an attempt to determine the meaning of menarche. Positive elements that were reported included: a sign of maturity, the ability to have children, and part of being a woman. The negative elements that were reported were: hassles of dealing with messiness and menstrual products, physical discomforts caused by menstruation, limitations on their behavior, and the emotional changes that occurred.

Beausang and Razor (2000) explored 85 written stories by women aged 18 to 61. Stories were coded according to perception of a positive or negative experience, the identified primary teacher, the age at which they were taught, and their age at menarche. An interesting finding was that of the eleven women who described menarche as a positive experience, ten identified their mother as their primary teacher. They also found that girls were sensitive to subtle messages from their mothers and girls wanted more information from educators. Beausang and Razor make suggestions for those who educate girls about menstruation, including the minimization of embarrassment by working with smaller groups, and comfort with the topic of sexuality for those who teach it.

McGrory (1990) looked at the responses of early adolescent females to menarche. Ninety-six girls between the ages of 11 and 15 years were given the menstrual Attitude Questionnaire, and the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-concept scale. McGrory reported no significant difference in overall self-esteem or physical self-esteem in premenarcheal and postmenarcheal girls.

In a Mexican study, Marvan, Vacio, and Espinosa-Hernandez (2001) compared pre- and post-menarcheal girls expected and experienced changes. Participants were 95 pre-menarcheal (mean age = 11 years, 2 months.) and 98 post-menarcheal girls (mean age = 13 years, 2 months.). In a survey format, girls were asked to write out “single words” that best described how they expected to experience (pre-menarcheal girls) or what they had actually experienced (post-menarcheal girls) immediately before or after the onset of menstruation. The participants’ words were categorized into physical, psychological or physical/psychological and also into positive, negative or neutral categories. They found that post-menarcheal girls were more likely than pre-menarcheal girls to report physical changes such as general discomfort and fatigue. However pre-menarcheal girls were most likely to mention psychological changes related to cognitive-emotional expressions as well as changes that could not be classified exclusively as physical or psychological. Although hardly any girls reported positive changes, more post-menarcheal girls experienced them than pre-menarcheal girls who expected them. Most girls who mentioned positive changes did not mention any negative changes.

Research with pre- and post-menarcheal girls that focused on the psychological significance and the meaning of menarche produced limited data. Some researchers have relied on women’s recollections of menarche reasoning that with time a greater level of awareness or integration of the menarche will have transpired. The results of these studies have yielded consistently similar results to those done with adolescent girls.

#### Women’s Stories of Menarche and Menstruation

In this section studies that have asked women to recount their experiences of menarche and menstruation will be reviewed. Methods that have been used include questionnaires, written accounts of women’s narratives, and interviews.

In a study by Chrisler and Zittel (1998), female college students (mean age = 18-20 years) from Lithuania (n=26), Malaysia (n=20), Sudan (n=23), and the United States (n=27) were asked to write their stories of menarche in as much detail as they could. Their stories were analyzed looking for details such as emotional reaction, preparedness, sources of information about menstruation, changes in body image, and celebrations of this rite of passage. The timing of menarche appeared to have more salience for the

American women than for the women from the other countries. It was important to the Americans to have their first period at close to the same time as their friends. In terms of feeling ready for menarche, 50% of the women from Lithuania, 78% of the women from Sudan, 89% of women from the United States, and 90% of the women from Malaysia felt that they were prepared for menstruation. Sources of information regarding menstruation included mothers, female relatives, friends, teachers, books, and movies. Ten percent of the Lithuanian, American and Malaysian and 22% of the Sudanese women felt completely unprepared for menstruation. Mixed feelings about menarche were more likely to be reported by the Americans and the Malaysians than the Lithuanian and Sudanese women. Eight percent of the Lithuanians, 30% of the Sudanese, 45% of the Malaysians, and 37% of the Americans reported some kind of private celebration at menarche. Changes in body image were recorded as feeling older, feeling grown up, and feeling like a woman. Unfortunately, this study is limited in that the participants were asked to write their menarche stories in English, which was not the first language for many of the women involved in the study. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether reported differences found between the groups, such as the length of the accounts, variation and breadth of the descriptions of affect, and the use of humor, are due to the writers' grasp of the language or to a greater comfort level in writing about this subject. Chrisler and Zittel also reported that many Americans enjoyed writing their stories and were grateful for the opportunity.

In a study on women's perceptions of the adolescent experience, Kaplan (1997) recorded the discussions of two focus groups composed of 24 culturally diverse female college students in California, ages 19 - 35 years. All were from middle class, two-parent homes. Women who participated in the study were asked to rate their experience of adolescence as either mostly positive (n=6) or mostly negative (n=14). Some of the women felt that their experience was an equal combination of both positive and negative (n=4). Questions posed to the focus groups considered the women's experiences as an adolescent, the strategies they used to handle problems, and the single most important experience recalled about their adolescent years and how they handled it. With regards to menarche, all of the women in the focus groups agreed that this was a major turning point in their lives, that they were vulnerable at that time, and that their relationships with boys

became more negative (unwanted sexual advances).

Britton (1996) conducted an anthropological study that explored how women learn about menstruation and its effect on their lives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women between the ages of 18 and 39. Fourteen of the women were from South East England, three were Irish, one was from Trinidad, one was from Malaysia, and one was from Sri Lanka. It is not mentioned how the sample of women were chosen, or the exact methodology utilized. Themes identified by Britton from the interviews were: learning about menstruation, pollution and menstruation, menarche as a rite of passage, seclusion, and menstruation and its meanings. Mothers, sisters, school, and one father were listed as the sources from which the women first learned about menstruation. Those who reached menarche later than their peers often felt embarrassed or excluded. Britton noted that when discussing the actual bleeding, the women in this study often used words such as “yucky, dirty, goo, and mess” (p. 648). Some of the women attempted to “neutralize the negative connotations of menstruation by describing menstrual blood as being positively associated with womanhood” (p. 648). Britton notes that the negative images of menstruation that woman learn at an early age “may be very powerful in their personal construct of being a woman.” (p. 648).

In an exploratory study, Lee and Sasser-Coen (1996) used a phenomenological methodology centered on feminist and life-span development approaches to gather retrospective narratives from thirty older women (60 - 90 years old) about their memories of menarche. Twenty-two oral histories were collected through interviews (that were tape recorded and later transcribed) and eight written histories were collected. The women were asked to recount their first menstrual period and the feelings, emotions, and meanings attached to this event, grounding these memories in their own personal and demographic histories. The use of reminiscence in the research interview was explained by the researchers to be “a process of reframing the past, in the context of the present” (p. 85). Rather than looking for an accurate, empirical account of what happened, the researchers were interested in finding out “how women’s subjective understandings of their lives provide glimpses into complex, changing and socially constructed realities” (p. 85). Through the analysis of the women’s transcribed stories, three themes emerged from the older women’s narratives: shame and embarrassment, sexualization, and issues of

power. The authors stress that although these themes are shared, each woman's experience of menarche is also unique and influenced by the cultural sociopolitical and historical contexts in which these processes take place.

In a phenomenological study, Weisgarber and Osborne (1990) described results from individual interviews with four women (ages 15, 17, 37, and 65 years) about their experience of menarche. The women who were interviewed in this study were those who had prior contact with the interviewer but were not familiar with the interviewer's perceptions of menarche and menstruation. It was believed that the previous contact would help to promote trust and openness. The first question asked in the interview was "Could you describe in as much detail as possible your experience of your first period?" After the participant had said all that she could about this question, a second question was asked: "Could you describe or explain any attitudes, beliefs or practices regarding menarche or menstruation that you were aware of in your environment when you began menstruating?" The following questions completed the interviews: "How did you feel about your body when this was happening?" "What were the effects, if any, on friendships and relationships?" and "How did you feel about yourself?" A between persons analysis resulted in a synthesis of themes from the women's stories. Themes were reported in the areas of orientation and preparation (none of the women felt fully prepared), emotional ambiguity, cultural context (menses is generally guarded and suppressed; considered shameful and distasteful), the body (experienced as dirty, unclean and messy), relationships (boundary between the sexes became more marked), and self-image (experienced simultaneous conflicting images, personal restriction, self-image was enhanced to some degree for 2 of the women). In their article, Weisgarber and Osborne wonder "Is it possible for a woman to have dignity and self-expression when an integral part of her identity is essentially ignored?"(p. 35).

Bishop (1999) used questionnaires to explore young women's recollections of menarche. She examined the relationship between menarche experience and current attitudes towards menstruation, adult female sexuality, and body satisfaction. One hundred women, ages 18 to 30 who had never given birth volunteered to complete questionnaires that focused on menarche preparation, timing of menarche onset, and other factors contributing to the objective and subjective experience of menarche. Bishop

found that eight participants identified that menarche affected identity issues. Six women reported a positive shift in their sense of self, and two reported a negative effect on how they felt about themselves. The major findings of Bishop's study were that: 1) neither a positive nor negative menarche experience appeared to influence a woman's attitude about menstruation; 2) evaluative experience of menarche does not predict a woman's experience of herself years later in young adulthood.

#### Summary

Despite the fact that menstruation is a part of most women's lives from about age 12 to age 55, the experience of menarche and menstruation are under researched. The silence and secrecy of menarche and menstruation is mirrored in the lack of research that is found on the psychological impact of this event. Much of the literature on menstruation and menarche presents a varied, but mostly negative picture of women's experiences of menarche and menstruation. Women's experiences of menarche seem to be quite variable although feelings of ambivalence tend to accompany a girl's first period. Researchers mention the importance of this event in the lives of women. It is written about as a rite of passage or a coming of age. Although most often, feelings of secrecy, embarrassment, and self-consciousness are reported, there are also some positive pieces in some women's stories. Ruble & Brooks-Gunn (1982) indicated that "because of the intimate link between menstruation, womanhood, and sexuality, more general aspects of a girl's self-concept may be affected as well" (p. 1557). Some studies have found that sense of self does change for some women at menarche (Chrisler & Zittel, 1998; Weisgarber & Osborne, 1990). While these studies noted a shift in girls' sense of self, a richer exploration of the phenomenon is needed. The current study will provide the opportunity for women to voice their menarche experiences and provide a more in-depth look at how the experience has influenced her view of self.

The current study broadens our knowledge base of the experience of menarche and its perceived affect on participants' views of self. The study consists of retrospective interviews with six women, aged 30 to 61, residing in the interior of British Columbia. How these women have integrated the menarche experience and its meaning into their views of self was investigated. As mentioned previously, for this study self-concept or view of self was defined as the way a woman would describe her self, how she sees

herself - an internal representation of who she is in the world. This may include both cognitive and affective representations that make up “an individuals’ overall perceptions of their abilities, behavior and personality” (Santrock, 1993, p. 57).

Through women’s stories it can be learned what is shared in common among each woman’s unique experience and how menarche has influenced her sense of self. We can also learn which messages, interventions, and perceptions were helpful and which were harmful for girls during this process. This information may help inform us of ways in which we can help ease the transition from girl to woman. The next chapter will describe the methodology that informed the current study.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Qualitative Method

Qualitative methods adhere to some common features that are congruent with the needs of this study. First, a qualitative design and methodology provided the opportunity to study women's experience of menarche with a depth that would not have been possible without the use of unstructured interviews. This method allowed women to discuss their experience openly and allowed me to obtain personal narratives of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). As researcher, I was able to be as open as I could be to participant's needs in terms of telling their stories as they chose. Participants were provided with the time they needed to reveal what they believed was salient to their experience. This quality was important as it met the second objective of the study, which was for women to have an opportunity to voice their experience. Second, a qualitative design requires a focus on the meanings of experience (Moustakas, 1994). Having participants consider the meaning of the experience of menarche and being a menstruating woman was an important part of this study. Third, a qualitative approach is grounded in the fact that the data generated through narratives of personal experience are essential to our understanding of human behavior (Moustakas, 1994). Women's stories of their menarche experience will increase our understanding of this event and how it influenced their behavior. Fifth, the method allowed me to formulate questions and problems that reflected my interest in the phenomenon as the researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

I wanted to find out from women how they felt the experience of menarche had affected their sense of self. I wanted to hear women's reasoning, links and ideas. I believe that the stories generated by the participants contain rich information that could not be gleaned through the use of another method. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the depth and detail being sought a qualitative methodology is an appropriate choice.

### The Phenomenological Approach

This study topic was informed through the use of a phenomenological approach. The aim of the phenomenological method is "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This approach provides insight into the meaning of menarche for women, and what it meant to their views of self.

I was looking for a method that would acknowledge the value of women's lived experience in an intimate manner. A phenomenological approach focuses on the lived experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). Through this research study, I have attempted to capture each woman's story in a way that allows the integrity of their stories to remain intact as well as identify common themes that emerge across protocols – the essences of the phenomenon (Kvale, 1983, p.84).

As a counsellor, the phenomenological approach to research seemed appropriate. It fits with my views of human nature and the valuing of an individual's lived experience. As Osborne (1990) wrote, "Phenomenology... has a close affinity with counselling practice, and is therefore worthy of careful consideration as a research methodology which stays closer to the meaning of human experience" (p. 79). It was important to me to choose a method that demonstrates the value of the human experience and the meanings it holds. I wanted to honor the subjective experience of participants while still obtaining an essence of the phenomenon being studied.

#### Role of the Researcher

In considering my role as researcher, I realized that I would have an influence on all aspects of the study. One method of handling researcher bias that is in debate is the method of "Epoche" or "bracketing". Epoche is described by Moustakas (1994) as a process of setting "aside our prejudgements, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (p. 85). Through the process of bracketing we are "challenged to come to know things with a receptiveness and a presence that lets us be and lets situations and things be, so that we can come to know them just as they appear to us" (p. 86). Our biases, assumptions, and judgments are meant to be set aside in an attempt to hear another's story as it is, rather than with all the layers of our own worldview interfering. I don't believe that it is possible to disengage from one's worldview, so instead I have engaged in a process of reflexivity - exploring my biases, and assumptions as well as stating my presuppositions as a means to be more conscious of my influence. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, as cited in Maxwell, 1996) use the term "reflexivity" to describe the acknowledgement that it is impossible to separate the researcher from the phenomena studied. A reflexive process focuses on the researcher's self as an integral constructor of the social reality being studied. Fontana and Frey (1994) write that the influence of the

researcher “of course, cannot be eliminated, but it can be neutralized if its assumptions and premises are made as clear as possible” (p. 368). I have attempted to become more aware of what I bring to the research, my influence on the process, so that I could “be available to situations as experienced by those who are living them” (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997, p. 351). In this spirit, I will be including captions from my reflexive journal to acknowledge my process and its influence on the presentation and analysis of the data.

#### Presuppositions.

At this time, I will name my presuppositions that underlie this study. First, I believe that menarche is a rite of passage and at this time the adolescent girl should be honored and recognized in a way that is tailored to suit the girl. I believe that this would help girls to feel good, happy, and proud of growing up and eventually becoming a woman. A ritual or celebration of menarche, however small, has the potential to promote feelings of pride and help adolescent girls identify with menstruation in a more positive, meaningful way - providing an opportunity for girls to embrace this part of identity and changing status from girl to young woman. Second, the absence of any kind of recognition and the secrecy that accompanies this event for many girls, are viewed as reinforcing the devaluation of women’s experience in our society and promoting feelings of embarrassment and shame. Third, I see menarche as an event that symbolizes women’s connection with nature. Women have a cycle that marks the passage of time as the moon, the tides, and all aspects of the lifecycle. Fourth, I believe that feelings of embarrassment and shame accompany the societally imposed secrecy of menstruation for girls. And finally, I assume that women are affected by the experience of menarche and that it affects their perception of self.

During interviews I used open-ended questions, and expressed curiosity about participants' experiences. It was important to me to retain an open and accepting stance as I listened to women's stories and their variations of experience. I wanted the women to feel comfortable telling their story, whatever it may be and however it may have influenced them.

### Overview of Methodology

#### Interview Format.

An unstructured interview allows a greater expansiveness than other types of interview formats (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Lofland (as cited in Mishler, 1986, p. 27) characterized the unstructured interview as a "flexible strategy of discovery" with the objective of retrieving rich, detailed conversation to be used in qualitative analysis. An unstructured interview format was used for this study to obtain a rich detailed description of women's experiences of menarche and its influence of their view of self. Questions and further prompts were open-ended as much as possible. An interview guide with prompts for further exploration of the phenomenon was available and used as needed during the interview process (see Appendix E).

#### Interview Questions.

The main research question was: What are women's experiences of menarche and how do such experiences influence their view of self? During the individual interviews each participant was asked to tell me in as much detail as she could, about the experience of her first menstrual period and how menstruating influenced her concept or view of self. The woman's first menstrual period included the actual event of the woman's first period, the time leading up to it, and the time after it. The amount of time prior to and afterward were not specified as it was how the woman remembered the event of menarche, and the events prior to and after that she considered to be linked to the actual event of menarche, that was deemed important.

As stated earlier, view of self was defined as the way a woman would describe her self, who she is, how she sees herself - an internal representation of who she is in the world.

### Selection of Participants.

The participants in this study were 6 women, ages ranged from 30 - 61, who were residing in the Interior of British Columbia. Participation in the study was voluntary. Requirements for participation were: over the age of 18, memory of the event of menarche and being articulate in their descriptions of the experience.

Participants were recruited by word of mouth and by contacting representatives from women's groups that were listed in the local community services directory. A written description of the study was distributed (see Appendix B). Women were asked to disperse the information to others that they believed might be interested in taking part in the study. Seven women volunteered to take part in the study. Following the initial interview, one woman was not included in the study because she did not have memories of her first period.

The rationale for interviewing women rather than girls who were in their adolescent years is grounded in the research. Initially, I had planned to interview girls who had recently experienced menarche and ask them how the experience had influenced their self-concept. I changed my mind as I read research articles that noted the difficulty for adolescent girls to articulate the changes that had taken place. Some researchers have noted that interviewing menarcheal girls may not allow for an in-depth explication of their experiences due to their level of cognitive development. This research influenced my decision to interview women rather than post-menarcheal girls. For example, Lovering (as cited in Moore, 1995) asked approximately forty 12-year-old girls what their first period meant to them. Lovering found that girls at this age were uncomfortable with the anxiety-arousing concept of sexual maturity and had not yet integrated the experience of menarche into their concept of self. Moore noted "The difficulties associated with encouraging girls at this young age and corresponding level of cognitive development to be introspective, especially about sexual topics, are obvious."(p. 90). In another study, Kaplan (1997) used focus groups with women, aged 19 – 35, to explore their experiences of adolescence. Kaplan noted, "with the advantages of hindsight, they would be able to evaluate and compare adolescent developments more clearly than would girls currently going through such experiences" (p. 719). Similarly, Lee and Sasser-Coen (1996), interviewed older women asking them what their experience of menarche was

like with the intention of learning “how women’s subjective understandings of their lives provide glimpses into complex, changing and socially constructed realities” (p. 85). Reminiscence was viewed as a “reframing of the past, in the context of the present” (p. 85).

In the current study, the focus of the remembered experience highlights the pieces of the experience that are the most salient for the woman in her life now. It was not considered important whether each participant remembered all the specific factual information, but how the experience had been integrated into her view of self. I decided to interview adult women with the hope that the passage of time would allow for greater clarity about the integration of the event into the woman’s views of self.

#### Research Procedure.

Prior to beginning the research for this study, ethical clearance was obtained through the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Committee (see page 83). Participants who volunteered to take part in the study were contacted by telephone to set up an individual interview time and to discuss the purpose and procedure of the study. Each face-to-face interview lasted between 50 – 80 minutes, depending on how much time each woman required to tell her story in as much detail as she could. The first interview with the first participant was used to determine if the questions on the interview guide would be sufficient for the participant to explore further her experience of menarche. This was to ensure that the main question and the prompts in the interview guide yielded the information relevant to the research question.

Following each interview, I transcribed the audiotape and the transcript was sent to the corresponding participant. Two weeks after the transcripts were sent out, I contacted each participant by phone to set up a follow-up meeting to discuss the transcript and any additions or changes that might be needed. One woman had a few minor changes that she sent to me by mail. Three women had a few additions or changes and met with me in person. Two women felt satisfied with the completeness of their transcripts and chose not to meet the second time.

#### Data Collection.

Prior to the interview, each participant received a copy of the study details. These were also discussed over the telephone when the time and date for the initial interview

was being set. Participants were given a choice of where they would like the interview to take place. All but one participant chose to have the interview in her home. One participant chose to have the interview in an office at her workplace. The interviews were recorded on audiocassette tapes for transcription.

During the interview, I went over the Letter of Informed Consent (see Appendix C) with the participants and after ensuring they understood, had them sign it. At this time demographic information was also collected (see Appendix D). Following the process of informed consent, I began with the opening, “How did the experience of your first menstrual period and becoming a menstruating person influenced your view of your self?” Additional open questions were asked to elicit further information or explanation (refer to Appendix E for interview protocol).

Following transcription, the interview transcript was given to the corresponding participant to review along with a letter of thanks (see Appendix F) and a red pen. The letter requested that the participant read over the transcript and make any notes necessary to increase the accuracy with which the protocol reflected her experience of menarche. Participants were asked to contact me when they were ready to discuss the transcripts or I would contact them after two weeks to set up a time to discuss any additions or comments they would like to make. This gave the participants an opportunity to add details that may have been missed in the initial interview and to clarify any unclear statements. For example, one participant added that her mom’s positive response to her first period was very influential on the way she felt about herself.

Through telephone calls four participants communicated that were satisfied with the accuracy of their transcript and the completeness of their stories. One woman chose to let me know of her clarifications and additions by sending me her copy of the transcript with her notes. Another woman discussed modifications with me face-to-face. I made notes of clarifications and read them back to each participant to check that I had their intended message.

#### Treatment of Data.

Data was stored on my home computer and back up discs. The back-up discs and audiocassette tapes were stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home. The participants’ names were coded and any other identifying data was kept confidential. Information such

as names and telephone numbers of participants were kept separate from the tapes and transcribed data. All tapes, notes and transcripts will be destroyed once the thesis defense is complete.

#### Data Analysis.

The process of data analysis described in this section followed a modification of Colaizzi's model as outlined in Haase (1987, p. 66-67). The first step of the analysis involved reviewing the taped interviews and transcribing them to get a sense of the meaning of each woman's experience as a whole. I had taken notes as I listened and wrote a summary of what I had heard after the interview, as well as my own reactions to what I was hearing. This process was meant to help me acquire a sense of the meaning of each participant's story – the meaning of menarche and its influence on each participant's views of self.

The next step was to extract significant statements from the transcripts. I went through each interview individually, considering each statement and its significance to the research question. Those I was sure did not have significance to the study were discarded, those that were significant and those I was unsure about were written out as meaning units onto strips of index cards and labeled with the participant's code number as well as the number of the meaning unit in brackets following the statement. For example, for participant one, her 31<sup>st</sup> statement would be labeled as (1, 31). This allowed me to keep track of where each statement was located in the transcript. This was a challenging process for me, as I felt attached to the women I had interviewed and their stories. I yearned to keep their stories whole. I wondered how I would capture their meaning by cutting up their stories into little bits of information.

*From my journal: I am wondering if I have made a big error creating my neat little meaning units and tidy little categories. Have I missed out on something? Should I be looking at the whole of the transcripts again and checking for the pieces that I was asking about in my enquiry? Am I supposed to be looking at the phenomenon of menarche and not each participant's individual story? But the individual story is important too. It is a way to break the silence about menarche that has gone on for so long – an opportunity to honor each woman's experience as unique, as they all are so unique. Another part of me just wants to plough on and just finish it. But the process seems to be one of focusing on the big picture of each story as unique, then breaking it down and looking at each meaning unit and clumping those into categories to find the essence of the experience for all.*

After the meaning units were extracted, they were sorted into piles that seemed to be related. Next, each pile of index cards was reviewed and a word or phrase that linked each of the statements together was extracted or created. As much as possible the participant's words were used. Then the phrases or category headings were grouped together into clusters that were related and again a phrase or word that was the common thread among the clusters was determined. After this process was completed for each participant, the tentative categories and clusters were sent to respective participants. I met with each participant to discuss the tentative categories and to check if they represented her experience.

The next step was the thematic analysis. I looked at all the categories that had emerged from the data and looked for those that existed across participants. I also went back to the transcripts and made notes of statements that stood out, checking to see if I had missed anything when a category was shared with a majority of the participants, but not represented for others. Those categories that existed across participants became themes. Some categories were very closely related and became condensed into one theme. For example, "hidden", "private", and "secret" themes were grouped into the theme "private/secret". This process sometimes resulted in a common link across participants. I also went back to my journal and made a list of the hunches that I had about possible themes. In choosing the final themes, I considered how each was related to view of self for each participant.

The final step of the analysis was to organize the results into a description of the menarche experience for each participant and a discussion of the influence of the experience on view of self. During this process I realized that while the meaning units I created were helpful to find a way to organize all the data, they seemed to miss something in their presentation.

*From my journal: I thought I was through this piece and here I am again – spiralling through, revisiting and seeing things in a different way. Going through each transcript again considering the questions I raised and looking at what came out of those. It feels kind of strange to extract little pieces out of the stories rather than leaving them whole. I'd rather be just noting participants' responses than breaking them down into little bits that lose their authentic flavour. I want to use larger phrases from each participant rather than the current meaning units.*

I located the meaning units within the transcript and used larger phrases from the transcripts that described participants' experiences in the way I understood they had meant it to be.

During the process of considering themes that were linked to women's feelings of self, a trend seemed to emerge. The themes indicated that the social construction of self was very influential in the relationship between menarche and the way the women felt about and viewed themselves after menarche.

#### Credibility and Confirmability

Qualitative notions of validity do not "imply the existence of any objective truth to which an account can be compared" but rather provide "some ground for distinguishing accounts that are credible from those that are not" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 87). Throughout the process of this study attempts were made to ensure that the data collected were credible. Procedures were followed to try and maintain credible accounts and counter certain threats to validity. For example, in terms of counteracting description validity, individual interviews were audiotaped and were transcribed verbatim for analysis (Maxwell, 1996). A form of member checking (Maxwell, 1996) took place at two times during the data analysis. The first time was following transcription, when the respective transcripts were sent to each participant to check for the accuracy and completeness of the transcript. Any additional comments were included in the analysis. The second member check took place following the initial analysis of the data (extraction of meaning units, and the grouping of each participant's meaning units into categories). At this time copies of the tentative categories and their meaning units were sent to each participant. After each participant had reviewed the categories, a final meeting to discuss the tentative categories was held with each participant. The length of these meetings varied for each participant from 30 - 50 minutes. Notes were taken during these meetings to record the participant's responses to the categories and to note any pieces that were missing that they felt were important. Any notes made were checked verbally with the participant for accuracy.

The current study is informed by a phenomenological methodology. Through the use of individual interviews, the six participants were asked to describe in as much detail

as they could the experience of their first period and how it influenced their view of self. Through the process of analysis the following themes emerged from the data: Recalling the Experience, Previous Knowledge, Telling Someone, Private/Secret, A Step to Growing up/Maturing, Things to Deal with but Accepted, Something in Common Among Females. These themes and a discussion about the experience of menarche and its influence on views of self will be presented and discussed in Chapter Four.

#### Chapter Four: Presentation of Data

Menarche was an experience filled with positive and negative feelings for most of the participants, indicating a level of ambivalence about the event. Initially, the meaning of menarche was not something that was clear or easily articulated for most of the participants. Often it seemed that participants were making meaning of the event as they spoke about it:

*From my journal: I am seeing the emergence of meaning for the participant as she discusses her memories of menarche and as she speaks she recalls more about it. I witness her pausing and thinking about the experience. Pondering how it affected her. It strikes me that we often do make sense of our world and our experiences by discussing things with others, listening to others, writing. Through discourse we make sense of our world and our experiences. I can see this happening as these women talk in detail about menarche - often for the first time since the event took place. It is a little discussed phenomenon that is being given space and time to be considered through questions that encourage women to consider the meaning of their experience of menarche with a depth that these women have likely never considered before.*

In many ways the ascribed meaning of menarche for the participants of this study was unique to each individual as were their experiences. What the participants did share in common were the themes described below and the general consensus that the experience was significant and important for them. During individual interviews each woman described for me the details of her experience and how it had affected her on many different levels. The freshness of participants' memories of menarche and the feelings they carried with them often surprised them – after all, it had happened so long ago. For each woman interviewed, the experience of menarche had left her with certain feelings about her body, her self that often carried forward into her adult life.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the results obtained from the interviews conducted with each of the six participants of this study. Selected quotations that elaborate on the themes are included to illustrate basic concepts, with an overall goal of describing the experience of menarche and its influence on self-concept. The results are organized into the following seven themes that emerged during an analysis and study of the data: Recalling the Experience, Previous Knowledge, Telling Someone,

Private/Secret, A Step to Growing up/Maturing, Things to Deal with but Accepted, Something in Common Among Females.

The results are presented below in the order of the interviews. Participants are identified by a “code name” of their choice or one assigned to them, as desired. In order to keep this report aligned with the participants’ original meaning the participants’ own words are used as much as possible. I will follow with a discussion that considers the influence of the participant’s experience on views of self.

### Women’s Stories

#### Carmel

##### Recalling the experience of menarche.

At the time of our interview Carmel was 61 years old. Carmel had her first period when she was 13 years old. She went into the bathroom and found blood on her underwear. She had been expecting it to come soon. Carmel felt relieved that she was like everyone else.

I don’t think there was any great big deal for me cause your expecting it for a fairly long time... your friends have been starting to get theirs, so I think in a way it was a bit of a relief that, oh well yeah, I guess I’m normal (laughs) and things are the way they should be... There was no trauma to it really. It was just one of these things you’d been expecting to happen and relieved that you were like everybody else.

Carmel describes the day as “just sort of a normal kind of day”. She did not recall the event holding any special meaning at the time other than the reassurance that she was normal.

##### Previous knowledge.

Carmel had been given information about menstruation from her mom and through a presentation that had been offered through the Girl Guides. She found the presentation helpful:

I thought it was really good. You got a really good basic talk about the actual process and the process of having a baby and a little booklet to take home. And I mean that was the first clue I had about what really was happening. I think it was just before I had my period. I’m not really positive about that. I think it was just before.... So yeah, and that probably helped relieve a lot of the concerns I had about it.

Telling someone.

When Carmel told her mom she had her first period, her mom was happy for her and gave Carmel a warm response.

Well my mother, you know, she was quite, you know, quite happy about it. And “Oh, isn’t that good”, and “that’s great!” and all that sort of stuff. And you know, “I’ll get you some Kotex.”.

Private/secret.

Carmel felt secretive about her period when it first started. She mentions speaking to girlfriends about it generally, but never speaking about it to a boy.

...when it first started, I was quite... like at that point I wouldn’t have wanted to talk about it. It was quite... I felt fairly secretive about it and.... just in general. Like you know I would never have talked to a boy about it. Definitely. And even talking to your girlfriends, it was usually...just general things.

When advertisements for feminine products began being advertised on television, her feelings about menstruation being a personal thing came to the surface:

When they started advertising on TV, like Kotex and Tampax, I was quite horrified by that. I mean this is a personal thing. You don’t walk into a living room and see this on your TV screen kind of thing. So, that kind of thing really bothered me. More because, I guess I almost felt like this was a very personal process. And it just wasn’t to be... you know, made public knowledge (laughs). You know?

Carmel spoke about how she felt as an adolescent when she thought of others knowing that she had her period:

It’s almost like I didn’t like... other people knowing (laughs) about it or something and I mean I, that’s silly. It makes it sound like it was because I was ashamed of it or something. But, I don’t think... It wasn’t that. It was just that it was more a private and intimate thing. Especially boys, I didn’t think they had any business knowing about this kind of stuff (laughs). I mean its silly now that I look back at it. But it used to kind of gall me if I figured they even knew about it. Now this is when I was really younger.

A step to growing up.

Carmel saw menarche and menstruating as a natural part of “growing up”, but she didn’t think of it as becoming a woman at the time.

I'm not sure at that stage if I thought a whole lot about becoming a woman.... Not sure I thought about kind of the changes, you know all the other kind of changes you go through at that time, as becoming a woman. I thought of it more as growing up.... Because at thirteen, you don't really consider yourself a woman, you know. Even though you have started menstruating. I certainly didn't anyways...

#### Things to deal with but accepted.

Although Carmel didn't think that periods were any big deal, she did have some symptoms that made that time of the month a little less than ideal.

I had quite bad cramps. So I did have that to deal with for quite a few years. They lasted until I had my first baby. And so there's always that about it that makes it more of a drudgery than for anyone who doesn't experience that. ...it's kind of a thing you just go through your life dealing with because its there and everybody is dealing with it and its just one of the things that's part of being human that you need to deal with. So, you don't really almost even think that much about it, you know. It's just something that's there, that needs to be dealt with I suppose. Even the words I'm using kind of gives away how I feel about it in a lot of ways. But I guess I made no secret of that. You know, its a little bit a nuisance.

Although she admits that periods were a bit of a nuisance, Carmel had an accepting attitude when it came to periods. They were something that was a necessary part of being female.

But it is necessary... At least it seems to be. I mean it seems to be the way we've been created at any rate.

...I think I was just very accepting of just the natural processes that take place in growing up.... I don't think it really bothered me all that much... You just sort of dealt with it step by step. Let things unfold as they may.

#### An understanding among females.

Carmel expressed a feeling of connection that exists among woman because we all experience menstruation and therefore have an understanding of what other women experience.

...it's put us all in the same boat. So, I'm part of womanhood. Yeah, I guess there's a common... thread. Something we all need to contend with in some way or another.... Other than giving me a common link to other women it's made me feel part of the whole thing. When women are going through it I know how they feel cause I've been through it too.

## Jennifer

### Recalling the experience of menarche.

Jennifer was 30 years old at the time of the interview. It was during the excitement and nervousness of her first day of grade eight that she had her first period. She was 13 years old and reasoned that she must have got it because she was feeling so excited and nervous about her first day at the high school. She was aware of what was happening to her and knew what to do.

I remember it was... I was totally not thinking about it. I wasn't ever worried about getting my period. I guess because I wasn't really expecting it at all. And it was my first day of grade eight (laughing). I came home from school and went to the bathroom and I was like "Oh, my god!" Like I was totally shocked and surprised! But I wasn't scared or worried because my mom had told me about it when I was in grade five. She told me that I would be getting my period and all about it. But I still had really major questions about it.

Jennifer's memory of menarche is a positive one.

...I had a good experience. Like I don't... I feel like... when I look back on it I'm happy. Like I see me, happy. Thinking oh, first day of grade 8, "Oh my god!" Like I was excited about it and I was all nervous and (Laughs) And so when I think back about it, its more that kind of thing. Like when I actually got it I wasn't like worried.

....so I don't know if it like, meant anything. I mean obviously it meant that ... I don't know. Like I felt glad that I got it. I know that. (Laughter)

### Previous knowledge.

Even though Jennifer's mom had provided an explanation prior to her first period, Jennifer still felt confused and not sure how to ask for the information she needed.

I didn't really understand how it worked. I remember thinking, 'Ok, I don't understand. Does it just happen when you go to the bathroom?' I knew about tampons and pads and stuff, but I didn't get it. Like that didn't make sense to me (laughs). .... I remember asking my friends. They didn't really know what I was trying to get at. Cause my one friend, she got it in grade 7 and I remember asking her, "So, like is it just when you go to the bathroom?" (Laughs) And she couldn't really explain it either...

As well as wondering whether periods were a voluntary or involuntary act, Jennifer wondered how it would affect her life. Would there be any changes she would have to make because she now had a period? Although Jennifer had a hunch that periods may affect her life in some ways, she wasn't willing to give up sports to have a period.

I know the thing that I was wondering was about sports ...cause people always talked about cramps and stuff. And I was wondering, how's that going to be? How's that going to affect me? ...My friends would talk about not wanting to take PE because they had their period. Or my friend, she wouldn't go swimming when she had her period. And so then I was thinking, oh my god! That isn't going to work for me! (Laughter)

Telling someone.

Jennifer didn't feel comfortable telling her mom when she got her first period, even though her mom had talked to her about menstruation before menarche.

I was scared to tell my mom. I was embarrassed. I was *totally* embarrassed to tell her. Even though she talked to me about it and stuff, she was embarrassed too-- talking to me about it. So she gave me books and stuff. But then I didn't want to go and buy my own tampons. I was kind of all freaked out. So I used hers for the very first time and... Yeah, and I don't even know like how... I guess I obviously... I figured out that like, why you have to have tampons--that it doesn't just happen when you go to the bathroom. And then I remember the worst part was when I finally had to tell my mom (laughs). That was the worst part!

When Jennifer did gather the courage to tell her mom that she had got her first period, her mom's response was positive. She was glad it had happened for Jennifer. Her mom's response left Jennifer feeling happy about it.

I totally remember, we were downstairs and my mom was doing laundry or something. And we were the only ones down there. "Mom... I got my period." (laughs). And she's like, "OH!" And she's like, "Oh, that's great!" And I was just like "Yeah, yeah."

....And then when my mom's reactions was like, "Oh! Good for you!" then I was kind of like, yeah! I never really thought of it that way but yeah... (Laughter). You know like.... So I guess I was like happy about it.

Private/secret.

Jennifer talked about the private, secretive nature of menstruation and how she learned to keep it secret. Her desire for more openness about menstruation was also discussed.

I guess that's the biggest thing. Is it shouldn't be something you have to hide. Like right from that very first day, I was like, I don't want anyone to know. ...cause my mom just, it was like such a... like she would come into my room and talk to me about it. It wasn't like she talked to me and my sister. She was embarrassed about it and she said that her mom didn't tell her anything. ...So, yeah. I think it definitely came from that... Thinking that its something totally

private and... not something to be open about. So I think that even caused it... made it hard for me to talk about it probably with my friends. And so that's probably why I just dealt with it and didn't even really talk about it with my friends. Even though, I know, like my friends and I would joke about--ah, it's that time of month. So we would let each other know. You know how you have ways. So, yeah. Kind of strange how you internalize that without even really thinking about it.

Jennifer spoke about her relationship with her sister and how strange it seemed that the secrecy of menstruation had even made it into their close relationship.

And you know what? I didn't... I don't even know when my sister got hers. Isn't that weird? We're two years apart. And I have no idea. We were pretty close and you'd think that I might have... like, talked to her about it or... Or she might have said, "Oh my god I got mine." Or... Yeah... Nothing. I had no idea.

Jennifer recalls wondering if others could tell there was something different about her. Jennifer felt worried that there may be some clue that she carried with her that would give her secret away.

Oh, I remember... that uh, feeling like, can other people tell? Totally thinking that other people could tell. Like do I walk differently? Yeah, wondering about that kind of thing. Yeah, because I remember boys talking about it or the things people talk about is that they could sometimes smell, you know. And so I worried about that too...I forgot about that. I do remember thinking, "Oh my god I wonder if anybody can tell?" and worrying about that. So being more aware of what kind of clothes you had to wear cause you didn't want people to notice. (Laughs) So, yeah, I remember that too....

#### A step to growing up.

When I asked Jennifer what menarche meant to her, she wasn't sure at first. As she talked, she made sense of what it must have meant for her, on an unconscious level. It meant that she was maturing.

I don't know if I know what it meant to me. I don't think I, if I even... It must have meant that... I was maturing. You know what I mean... but I probably never actually thought about it.

Later on in her teens, having a period meant that she could get pregnant.

I honestly don't remember thinking to myself that... that it symbolized me becoming a woman. Like I don't remember thinking of it that way. I just remember thinking of it like, that I could get pregnant now.

### Things to deal with but accepted.

Jennifer found that periods meant extra “things to deal with”. Jennifer found the products women use to “deal with” periods, such as tampons, are not comfortable and left her concerned about her health.

I know that I feel like thank goodness it’s only four days! (Laughs) Cause what I hate about it is.... Is it’s just like... tampons and stuff aren’t comfortable. And pads are even worse for me. Like they’re just... not a comfortable thing. I don’t like having to deal with that uncomfortableness. And I still constantly worry about ... toxic shock syndrome. I always worry about that. So right now, I always have had such a total regular period. I’ve never had any problems. And so for me it’s an inconvenience.

I just think its part of being a woman. (Laughs) ... and sometimes I wish I wasn’t (Laughs) because there’s so many things to deal with, with it....

Jennifer believes that menstruation is special and natural which indicates a level of acceptance.

I think it’s just special because...because its something that’s supposed to happen to you. .... It’s like something that’s hush-hush... and so that seems so crazy cause it’s such a natural thing and something that is special.

### An understanding among females.

For Jennifer menstruation is something that woman have in common and creates a connection, and a level of understanding that takes place when you experience something that someone else has too.

I feel connected to other women because... because I know that they understand... that they’ve been through the same thing and they understand like what it is, what it feels like. And that means a lot to me. Cause it’s so hard when someone else [boyfriend] doesn’t understand and they don’t get ever the chance to. (Laughs) You know what I mean? So, I think it is a huge... It is a huge thing between women. And... also in teaching... I even feel it’s a bond between me and the girls. And just the fact that because they do come up to me and say, “Ah, Ms.\_\_\_\_, I have to go to the bathroom. It’s girl things.” And I can relate to it. It doesn’t just, to me its not just like oh yuck. It’s like oh. And so I think it does just create that bond and it also... just makes you... I don’t know... it made me feel good that she could tell me that.

She goes on to explain how she feels a bond of understanding exists between women. The bond exists because women experience something that is important to life.

... We [women] are we are lucky because we do get to experience something that's so important to life. And in that sense that's where I must, I see more meaning in it. When I can think about it with me experiencing it with other women. Like you know what I mean... It creates an understanding... yeah there's that total underlying understanding between all women. When I talk to other women, I know that there's an underlying like... bond because of it.

### Xena

#### Recalling the experience of menarche.

Xena was 58 years old at the time of our interview. At the age of 9, Xena experienced her first period. Her experience was at first traumatic and then celebratory. For a few brief moments, alone in the bathroom she wondered if she was dying.

I came home at noon hour with terrible cramps in my tummy... I came in the house crying because I had this terrible tummy ache. I went to the bathroom and then, you know, there was blood on my underwear and I was freaked right out.

As Xena sat in her bathroom seeing the blood on her underwear, alone and uninformed, the first meaning she made of menarche was riddled with fear.

I thought there was something really wrong inside me. I thought I was sick or there was something really wrong. And um, I knew I hadn't fallen or anything. So, I knew I hadn't hurt myself. But, I can remember just being shocked at this stuff on my underwear. And thinking, oh good grief, there must be something really wrong.

#### Previous knowledge.

Xena had no previous knowledge about menstruation. The day she got her first period was the day she was given information about it.

It was very frightening... because I didn't know anything about it. I was only nine and a half. And I guess my mom hadn't thought it would be that soon. She was a good mom. She was just shocked.

When Xena's mom found out Xena had begun her first period she did provide her with information about adolescence.

...my mom was kind of shy about stuff like periods. She just really... didn't talk about it. I can remember she did hand me this book after I had started mine. And it had a picture of what happens and everything. But she did explain to me a little

bit about the anatomy and... what happens physiologically and stuff. So it was a good experience for me.

Telling someone.

Xena screamed for her mom, who wasn't home. Someone did hear her cries though, and Xena's fears were eased as her brother helped her to understand what was happening to her. A terrified girl made a shift to feeling that she was experiencing something very special.

...I was still crying and he came in and he knelt on the floor in front of me and he read all the instructions on this belt. And he said, "We'll get you all organized and then I'll tell you about this." ...So he sat me down, and he told me that that meant that I was now a woman. And that that was really special--that all women have these. They're, you know, what they were called, and how often they have them.... And he said to me, "I'm gonna take you out for lunch and when I take you back to school, I'm gonna tell your teacher that we had a special lunch. And we're going to celebrate cause you're a woman." And so, we did. We went out for lunch. ...And I remember we went to the Elite Café in Penticton. Which, there were only about two cafes at the time anyways. And, I can remember I had banana cream pie... (Laughter)

The explanation and celebration she received from her brother and later information from her mother, left Xena feeling good about the experience. It was all Xena needed to make sense of what was happening to her and to feel good about maturing.

And I think it was such a good experience for me. Because it could have been so terrible had no one been home or I had someone who just didn't know what to do... So, just an amazing experience.... And I think it left me...feeling good about being a woman.... that he made such a big deal of it. And women were really special because of this, and that they could have the babies. This means that you could have a baby and, and you know, all those kinds of things. And I loved babies.

Xena had always loved babies and wanted to have children. Having an explanation of menarche that included becoming a woman and the ability to have children helped Xena to feel positive about periods.

I had a good attitude about it because I always, I wanted to have children. ....It meant that I was a woman. It gave me the concept of being a woman. And being different from a man in that respect. And being able to produce eggs, and

carry a baby... You know and things like that. It was the woman. It sort of enhanced my womanhood and made me feel good about being a woman.

Private/secret.

For Xena, the secrecy of menstruation is evident in the fact that she had no previous knowledge of menstruation prior to her first period. This secrecy continued after menarche, as it was never directly spoken about, even with her mom.

...it was never talked about. You know, I might have a tummy ache or something and my mom would say, "Do you want something for your tummy ache?" Or, "Here is a hot water bottle." But she knew. She knew darn well when I had a tummy ache but we never talked about it. That was very personal and very private.

A step to growing up.

Xena learned from her brother that menarche was the passage to womanhood and from her mom that it was a sign of maturing. At the tender age of 9 1/2, Xena had become and a woman.

...he told me that that meant that I was now a woman. And that that was really special--that all women have these....And he talked to me just as though I were, you know, I'd grown up and... he didn't talk down to me or make me feel like a crying little brat...

When Xena's mom talked with her about menarche and what it prepared you for, Xena felt ok about it.

Later on that night my mom explained to me you know what this prepared you for, and why women had these... and it was really...it was ok.

Having her period also left Xena feeling that she was more mature than other girls her age. She said, "I felt like I was more mature than they were... than my peers were".

Things to deal with but accepted.

Xena always wanted to have numerous showers when she had her period. She felt dirty, hot and sweaty and didn't want to have any odor.

And I didn't like it, you know, having this period thing much. I thought it was really yucky and disgusting and gross.... I didn't like having periods. It always made me feel dirty. I always felt like I had to have a shower... You know I'd feel like I wanted a shower in the morning and I wanted another one at night and.... I was really set on cleanliness. On being, keeping myself clean and um... I didn't want any odor or anything like that from periods. I didn't find it a particularly

enhancing thing as far as how you felt. I always felt sort of hot and sweaty. Like I was not clean. Because...it was on the outside of my body and... you know it would get all over you and so...

Xena found that with a lack of choices in sanitary supplies dealing with periods was clumsy and awkward. She began to see periods as something women have to put up with, a curse.

...in my day, like, it was really a clumsy, awkward thing. You know, didn't have all the nice, various choices of sanitary supplies that there are now.

...I think I felt probably that um... that my sisters used to call it the curse. And uh, you know I think I sort of... in a way took that on. I thought well this is something women just have to put up with.

She sees woman having to put up with a lot, deal with a lot and reasons that this makes women stronger, more able to deal with whatever comes their way.

I feel that women... have been put in a position where they have to put up with a lot... And that's part of being a woman... that you... you just have to put up with things... It's made me a strong person, a stronger person because I know that I can deal with whatever I have to deal with...

As she spoke she came to a realization that menstruating has affected her in ways she hadn't thought of before. She reasoned that because she put up with periods, she began to believe that she could handle putting up with things that she later didn't think she should have.

...so it's affected me in all sorts of ways I guess. I mean I'd never really thought of it before. But definitely it made me feel like women - it was their job to put up with things. And to the point I put up with things I should never have put up with. And uh, just thought that, you know, I could handle it. And it would be all right long term. And yeah... I never even thought about that before... But that certainly had a bearing...

When Xena first had her period, she accepted it as something women experienced. Although, she did feel a little uncomfortable about being the only one in her peer group who menstruated.

...But I accepted that this happened and just dealt with it every month. And felt fine about being a woman... a little uncomfortable because nobody else had their period. I thought well... this was weird. I felt different.

Later on, Xena considered why women and not men have periods to "put up with". After some contemplation she came to an acceptance of it.

I thought, well, this is something women just have to put up with. Um, how come men don't have something to put up with? You know, why is it just women that have to go through this every month? Why don't, you know. And then I'd balance that by thinking well, men have to shave everyday... for the rest of their lives unless they want a beard. And I wouldn't want to have to do that. And, you know just... Um, but I think that you just; I just kind of accepted that.

#### An understanding among females.

Xena told me how she understood and was sympathetic when girls to whom she was teaching piano lessons were not quite themselves.

It made me more aware, as a woman, of what women went through. And I taught piano for years, and I could always tell, when girl students... If they were having a really bad day and they were a little clumsy or a little cranky or... You know I never said anything, but I always knew that that was probably the reason... And could kind of be sympathetic through their lessons and things.

#### Jane

#### Recalling the experience of menarche.

At the time of our interview Jane was 30 years old. Jane was 13 when she first had her period.

I do remember that it was Friday the thirteenth. And I thought that was really ironic. And I think I was...surprised but...sort of...excited because some of my friends had already had it. So, I knew it was coming. But I was sort of excited to be at that point in my life because I had friends that had already experienced it... So, I remember I snuck into her [mom's] room and I always used to go through her stuff and I knew where her pads were. And so I snuck into her closet and took one. And, I guess I knew how to use it, cause I did.

.... And I got it in gym class. I remember that. I got it when I was in PE. I didn't really do anything about it until I got home. And I didn't tell anybody at the time... And then I told a couple of my friends the next day...

#### Previous knowledge.

Jane had heard about periods from a friend whose mother was a nurse and very open when it came to explaining the maturation process and sexuality to her daughters. Jane also had gained some knowledge through a class provided at school.

We [mom and I] never talked about anything, like that. I think, what I knew about it was from my friends and whatever the class was in school and... mostly from

friends... cause you know girls talk about that kind of thing. And then we [mom and I] never did any follow up talk about it either. She just got me the stuff and... I think she might have asked me if I had any questions. And I'd say no, cause I was sort of embarrassed to talk to her about it. When I was out of pads I probably must have said something to her so she would get more. But we never really talked about it. Until I took the step where I had to use a tampon -- which was a whole other story. (Laughter).

#### Telling someone.

Jane told her mom, though not right away.

I was a little bit nervous about telling my mom. I remember I didn't tell her right away cause I remember we never talked about it. It was just... my mom wasn't really open about things like that. And so we just never talked about it...

When Jane did tell her mom she had gotten her period, she received a positive response. Her mom was happy for Jane.

I think later in the day I told her. And she screamed! (screaming sounds). And she was *so* happy and I was like *so* embarrassed. And she's, "Oh, do you know what to do?" And I said, "Yeah". And I told her that I had went into her room. And she's, "*Oh*, I'm so glad."

#### Private/secret.

Jane recalls feeling self-conscious when she had her period. She remembers wearing certain clothes or wearing them a certain way to be sure that no one would know that she was having a period—to keep it hidden, a secret. There was a fear of being embarrassed or teased about it if anyone found out.

I was very self-conscious when I *had* my period that I wanted to hide it in any way I could. I didn't want anyone to know. Even though I talked openly about it with my friends and I wasn't embarrassed that I was having periods... I *really* didn't want anyone to know when I was *having* my period. I did everything that I could to avoid people knowing, even girls. I mean in changing it. And for PE, I remember just always wearing *long* shirts and, and so nobody could notice when I was changing. And, and a lot of times wearing big sweaters around my waist so that nobody could notice through my pants that I was having a period. So, I remember that was a *really* big thing but I don't know how you could explain like what I was *feeling* about it. Like I, not that I was ashamed. Maybe a bit embarrassed... But I know it was definitely something that I didn't want anyone to know. There was a stigma to it... I remember a friend was teased once because somebody thought she had it. All the boys were teasing her. And I remember *not* wanting to get into that situation.

A step to growing up.

Jane didn't think of getting her first period as becoming a woman, but as growing more mature.

It's a, I guess a step toward being a woman. But I don't think I associate it as, as being a woman... Because I can't, I don't remember recalling it as, as you know, entering womanhood or anything like that.

Jane said that she always wanted to be older. Turning 13, meant she was a teen and growing up. When Jane started having periods, she felt that much more mature.

I guess it made me feel more mature. And it made me feel... It was a big thing for me when I turned 13. Just, just the age of 13 and that was a big sort of...I wanted to be a teenager so much... I was actually a teen. And that was huge for me and it just made me feel like I was growing up and I was...you know just the whole image of being a teenager was a big thing for me. And I think, getting my period was the same thing. It was just, maybe a little more mature, more developed and more... a sense of growing up.

Things to deal with but accepted.

Despite long, frequent, painful periods that were frustrating for her to manage, Jane accepted menstruation as a natural but inconvenient part of being a woman.

... It was frustrating and it was painful and it was a pain in the butt, because I had to deal with it so frequently. But, I was accepting of it.... It's something that every female went through...

She further explains how she didn't have a negative view on having a period:

A lot of people have very negative views on having a period and I ... It wasn't something that... made me feel bad, or that I thought was a horrible thing. More of an inconvenience I think. Logistical issue rather than a negative thing... I think it would be [negative] if like half the women got periods and half didn't. But it's something that I felt that we're all going through. It's just part of life. All women go through it and.... Yeah... That's the way we're built.

Jane talked about her acceptance of menstruation as something that made women special because it is a part of the reproductive cycle.

But I think my perspective of the whole thing is that I was pretty accepting of it. It was something that I knew that happened to women that made them special. I think that was maybe a positive thing for me. I was maybe, as much as I was hiding it, I think I was still... proud of it. If that makes sense? And I think it was something that I accepted that that was the way of life, and was sort of a role that, that women, females, this is then, I'm not saying this is now (laughs). That it was

just, that's the way it was. There is nothing you can do about it and that's the way our bodies were built and we were the ones to have babies and we were the ones to have periods and that's a process that you know, is all incorporated.

#### An understanding among females.

Jane spoke of a special connection or bond that she feels between women because women can relate to each other's stories and experiences.

I guess it's sort of a connection that I have with other woman. I don't think that's changed.... it's a strong sort of connection that you can't have with a man. It's something that you can... relate to. Something weird that you go through ...that you have as a teen. As women you can discuss it and talk about different things and I think it makes you closer and creates a relationship that you can't have with men. And every woman can, I think most women can relate to it. You have stories to share and it makes you less.... You know when you're younger you don't talk about it as much when you go through your different things. And your not really sure how to... You know, this is happening to me, but is this normal? Is this, you know, am I a freak? But as you get older and you talk about it, everyone has their stories and you realize that everyone is going through the same thing. So it's almost like team building and relationship building. Bonding...

#### Ayla

##### Recalling the experience of menarche.

Ayla was 36 when we met for this interview. She was twelve when she went to the washroom one day and saw blood on the toilet paper for the first time.

When I was going to the bathroom and after I had gone pee, I wiped myself and there was blood on the toilet paper. Half of me thought, "I'm dying". And half of me thought, "this might be this thing that I kind of knew something about but I didn't really have a sort of concrete idea about what it really was."

I just had heard about there's this thing that happens that... So, when it happened it was confusing and scary and I was nervous and embarrassed. I didn't really know what to do.

##### Previous knowledge.

Ayla has some foggy memory of a sex education class at school where a film on pregnancy was shown. She also remembers being curious about the menstrual products her mom had at home.

I remember at school, and I think this was before my period, that we had some sex education class. And they showed a film about pregnancy and things like that. I don't have a lot of clear memories about it. But, and it must have been before my period. So, I think at that session I probably had heard something about

menstruation and...what not. So I think or that and maybe because of my friends.... I'd always known my mom to have Kotex at home. Tampons and what not. So I knew that there was something happening that women had to wear these things that looked like diapers. But I wasn't really clear about what it was and I don't know that I was clear that it was blood. So, I had little signals early on that I started getting curious about.

#### Telling someone.

When Ayla saw the blood on her underwear, she felt a mixture of emotions--scared, nervous, embarrassed and confused. She was afraid to tell her mom about what she saw. She confided in her sister, "I told my oldest sister what happened (laughing). I don't know why.... I felt scared to tell my mom."

So she [my sister] sort of whisked me away and showed me where the Kotex were and gave me one. I don't remember a really big explanation about what that was about.... When I came back in the kitchen, I saw my sister whispering to my mom, that I had got my period.

Ayla described the moment when her sister told her mom that Ayla had got her first period and how the secretive way it was done left her feeling like "a bad thing had happened".

When they talked about me having my period they were so... they never looked at me. I remember my mom was cooking and my sister went and whispered to her that I had my period. I'm assuming that's what she said. And my mom never turned around – never looked at me. So I felt like it was almost a bad thing that had happened you know? So I felt shamed at that time. Like it was dirty or something had happened that shouldn't have happened.

#### Private/secret.

Prior to menarche, Ayla had picked up on some hints at home that menstruation was something to keep hidden or secret.

Mom had... Under the sink, she had her Kotex – the napkins but ... she had all these little paper bags that whenever she would go to the store and get something, if it was a small bag she put it under the sink. So the used Kotex she would wrap up, put it in these little paper bags and throw them in the garbage. So we actually never even saw. There was never ... a lot of evidence about what goes on, what was in those paper bags. (Laughs) It was quite hidden. So, she went to a lot of effort to hide... the evidence.

Ayla found that menstruation was something to keep secret from anyone, especially men.

Definitely keeping it secret from men. I think basically keeping it secret. But, definitely, don't let men know anything that's happening. It is sort of... Once your period starts then you low-key it till it's over.

A step to growing up.

For Ayla, menarche was another sign that she was maturing which was a double-edged sword for her. On one side maturing carried with it some prestige—signs of being older which was desirable. On the other hand the symptoms of maturing—for example, sweating, and menstruating were not desirable and carried with them feelings of shame.

When I hit puberty, it was something that I was totally ashamed of. I just hated it. And menstruating and all that.

When Ayla was younger she desired to be older:

When I was younger I wanted it (be older) to happen really quickly. So I'd try to...look and act older than I was. So, yeah, I always wanted to be older, when I was younger... cause I guess, I had older sisters and stuff. I wanted to be, do and be, what they were doing at the time.

Ayla found that in her peer group the signs of maturing would lead to an elevation of status.

If I became one of the ones [friends] that was menstruating, then it would have elevated my status to be... somebody that was higher up in status... You got your bra and then started this first. It all elevated your status to be older.

Things to deal with but accepted.

Ayla has experienced painful periods and mood changes, she still believes that menstruation and all that it entails is something that is important to go through.

I'd rather have gone through this. And gone through all this pain and mood changes and all that than not... You know it's something that I think is important to go through. And I'm glad that I did even though it's got its negative side to it. So...ya. But it is something so natural now that I don't think about it as suffering. (Laughs)

Ayla has come to accept menstruation as a natural part of life, something with which she now feels content.

It's like breathing, you know. I don't... put a lot of thought into it anymore. It's just something that happens. I accept it. I've done rituals about it and I'm at... actually I'm kind of even really content with it. Knowing that it's going to happen. It does happen.

An understanding among females.

Ayla qualified the experience of menarche and menstruation as something that *most* women share, considering those women who have never menstruated for some medical reason.

It's like something, as women, we all share. At least most of us share – some of us don't [hysterectomy, menopausal, other health reasons].

Lora

Recalling the experience of menarche.

Lora was 46 at the time of our interview. She was 12 when she had her first period. Lora had tears in her eyes as she recounted her experience. She felt exposed – that everyone knew a secret that she shouldn't have told. Her body betrayed her by telling her secret before she even knew what was happening.

We had a whole bunch of company staying at our house. And we were all sitting around in the morning. You know, hanging out. And my mom came over to me and said, "Lora, come here". Takes me into the bathroom and says, "Your dad's noticed that you have blood on your pyjamas. So, I guess your period has started." And I was just *totally* devastated. *Totally* ashamed because I guess I didn't want dad to know. I mean for him to notice that I had this. So, I'm thinking who else saw? It was such a shame based thing somehow and it wasn't...you know a proud thing or a wonderful thing. It was an icky thing. So, for me to have it and I just assumed that everybody saw. I just didn't even want to come out of the bathroom. And it was kind of like hand me a pad and say, "Here, you put this on." (Pause) That's it!

Previous knowledge.

Lora didn't have any information about the symptoms or signs of menstruation before menarche.

I didn't know about signs or symptoms or warnings or you know. So, it happened unexpectedly.

Telling someone.

At menarche, Lora didn't have the opportunity to tell someone verbally that she had her first period, her body had already shown the evidence to an audience that Lora did not want to know her secret.

I wish she'd have just told me, I notice you've got your period or something. I think that somehow it was more devastating that my dad, so a man knew. Somehow that kind of added to it too. If she'd of just, you know, come here. So, she was discreet. My dad was discreet. I mean it just blew me away. It just ooeuyah! But yeah, she marched me in there and said, "Your dad noticed you have blood on your pyjamas." So, it was like that just... humiliated me. And then she walked out. And she left and left me to it.

Private/secret.

From the moment her mom told her that she had blood on her pajamas, Lora felt embarrassed that others knew her secret even before she did.

I think the periods didn't bother me so much... as the thought of who all had seen. That they knew. That's the thing. I didn't want everyone to know. It should be my secret.

... So I was *embarrassed* when everyone *knew*. So, obviously a secrecy-based thing. It's not a public thing in my house or in my time. It wasn't a proud thing. Of course, then you'd tell people. It's a ...secrecy thing. Private, personal...So, our family values were that was private--all your body functions and your body itself.

Lora is frustrated with the continuing secrecy of menstruation and how the size of menstrual products and the advertising for them supports it.

So, if you could put it in your pocket then you [they] don't know? I'd like to say who cares if you do know or don't know? But it's against... its keeping with the secrecy stuff... So they make them smaller and smaller so nobody knows.... I was raised with secrecy. We're still in secrecy....

A step to growing up.

Lora found that she became a woman when she developed breasts more than when she began menstruating.

You know like, so there was something about once you had boobs, it was visual and um... You know, you became a sex object. I think that that's about when I went from girl to woman, and women are objects.

Lora found that her daughters were excited to get their period, to be growing up. Lora didn't feel any more grown up or any desire to be older.

...they're [daughters] excited to get theirs. Cause they...I guess they feel like a woman then. And they feel mature or they're grown up. So, they're striving to be grown up and I guess I wasn't in a big hurry. (Laughs)  
.... I was still a kid.

#### Things to deal with but accepted.

Lora didn't like having her period for many reasons, but she did come to an acceptance that they are just something that women have, like it or not.

It's drudgery and it's like... work or chore or that kind of thing. Ick. You know it's like to be a woman wasn't... fun. I envied men who didn't have to have blood every month. Dealing with it. Coping with it. Carrying your... pads somewhere privately, so you know that kind of thing. Yuck.

.... It was just kind of a resignation kind of thing. Like, well there's nothing new about it and it happens and... It's what is. So, get on with it kind of thing. But it ain't fun and it ain't pleasant. And... it didn't make me feel good. You know, it didn't make me feel wonderful. I didn't have cramps and stuff like I do now but... You know I didn't have problems. But I did have a very heavy 7-day, long, heavy flow. And that was not fun. It ruined my life. Cause I liked doing activities, so it slowed me down. I couldn't do everything I wanted to do to the extent I wanted to do it... because you know, conscious of that or bringing the supplies or finding places to change. Things like that.

.... Like it's a pain. RrrrRrrr. But it's life. So I think there's kind of an acceptance. We have them.

#### An understanding among females.

Lora views periods as something that women suffer through. They are something woman deal with.

So I think of woman as... poor women... Because we, you know, poor me - victim. We have this junk to deal with. You [men] don't have junk to deal with.

This concludes the presentation of the participants' stories. The next section moves into a discussion of these findings as related to views of self.

#### The Menarche Experience and Views of Self

While general themes were found in the participants' experience of menarche, it was found that the experience of menarche was unique for each participant. How they viewed its perceived influence on themselves, particularly body image, varied as well. In this section I will discuss the use of the term "views of self", the definition of self-

concept as separate from self-esteem, and highlight those parts of the interviews that the women identified as having a particular influence on views of self. Those aspects of the experience of menarche that seemed to particularly influence views of self include the reaction of the first person told, previous knowledge, the private/secret nature of menstruation. These are not separate sections but are woven in to the discussion.

Most participants found it difficult to answer the direct question of how their menarche experience influenced their view of self. One reason for this difficulty relates to definitions of “self” and “self-concept”. So the term “view of self”, while obviously related to self-concept, is actually grounded in the participants’ data and is true to their experiences rather than to an abstract concept only. My explanation of self-concept during interviews was that self-concept was the way she saw herself, her view of herself, or how she would describe herself. At times during interviews, some participants might have been thinking more of the evaluative or affective aspect “self-esteem” than the more neutral or cognitive “self-concept”. For example, Lora contemplates the evaluative part of self, self-esteem more than self-concept in this next quote: “As a woman, I don’t think I have a negative view or a positive view...like that it affected my view... It affected my view of them...of periods.” The lack of clarity in regard to the difference in meaning may have contributed to some seeming inconsistencies or contradictions in the data.

Jacobs, Bleeker, and Constantino (2003) describe William James’ division of the self into the “I-self” and the “me-self”, where the “I-self” is the experiencing self, the knower, existential or implicit self and the “me-self” is the material self, social self, spiritual self, or the aggregate of things objectively known. It is the “me-self” that is represented in more recent developmental literature as self-concept. Self-concept is further distinguished as “the sum of attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values that an individual believes he or she is”(p. 35). Self-esteem is described as “an aspect of self-concept that is evaluative, involving judgments of one’s own worth” (p. 36). The terms are also psychological terms that may not have been related to by the participants for this reason the term “view of self” was used. Perhaps distinguishing between self-esteem and self-concept prior to the interview would have made some statements that were made about the two concepts clearer.

The major overall finding of the study was that the experience of menarche did

affect how each woman perceived her self. Each participant described how she was affected by the experience in her own way. Most of the participants felt that with the experience of menarche, they had become more grown up than they had been prior to menarche. Menarche was a sign of maturation, whether she was ready to grow up or not. Menarche is an inevitable event for healthy women. Throughout the world menarche is interpreted as a “rite of passage” for girls even though it is rarely celebrated as such in Western society (Britton, 1996). Most of the participants did not describe their menarche as a rite of passage per se, however all of the women felt different, and some felt they had gone through something important. Carmel spoke about experiencing a sense of knowing that what she had experienced as menarche was something greater than the physical event that it was treated as in her life. Jennifer said, “I totally remember that day and the day I told my mom. Obviously it was important – it’s so clear in my mind.” For Xena the experience was clearly a rite of passage as is evident in this statement: “My experience really made a big strong difference in how I felt about being a woman”. Again Jane’s words indicate a rite of passage: “When I turned 13, I was actually a teen and that was huge for me. The whole image of being a teenager was a big thing for me... Getting my period was the same thing as turning 13”. For Ayla the experience was “something that I think is important to go through. I’m glad that I did go through it even though it’s got its negative side to it”. Lora’s story indicates that the beginning of menstruation was not a welcome part of her life, yet it is important in the sense that it did change her life. She said, “My period was “the friend” that interfered with life. It didn’t make me feel good. It didn’t make me feel wonderful. It ruined my life because I liked doing activities, so it slowed me down”.

Whether they described the overall menarche experience in more positive, negative or mixed terms, most participants found the experience of menstruating was something that elicited mixed feelings. A sense of ambivalence about periods was sensed reading through their stories and is reflected in the theme “Something to Deal with but Accepted”. On the positive side women reported feeling glad that she was normal, more mature, she was a woman now, or special because she could have babies. Yet they also felt certain constrictions or limitations associated with menstruating. Women felt held back by having to remember to bring menstrual supplies, a heavy flow that interfered

with sports and life in general, the unavailability of places to change menstrual products at outdoor events (e.g., sports), the physical pain (mild to severe cramping and back pain), mood swings, or social mores (e.g., no sex while you have your period, swim but only with a tampon, don't let anyone know you are menstruating).

Participants in the study all focused on the influence of others on their feelings about themselves. The social construction of self for the women in the study was explained in detail and often was the most clearly recalled part of their story. Whether participants would describe their experience as positive or negative, all of the women mentioned how others responded to their new status, especially their mothers. The way that others responded to their news was an important part of how they ultimately felt about the experience, their bodies, themselves. Four of the six women interviewed said that they found the experience of menarche to be self-enhancing. For these participants having their first period left them feeling good about who they were, and who they were becoming. The reasons they felt that way were unique to each of their experiences. What these four women's stories hold in common is that the responses received from the first person they told were positive. The interaction with this significant person (for all but one her mother) left them feeling good about themselves and their maturing bodies. For the women who did not have positive responses from the first person told, the experience of menarche was not found to be self-enhancing.

When I asked Carmel how the menarche experience influenced the way she saw herself, she replied:

I think it helped. In that I felt that I was like everybody else and was... one of the girls kind of thing. That I could talk about my period too. I didn't have to feel different. You were the way you were supposed to be, which is kind of a relief... I certainly didn't feel bad about it or ashamed of it.

For Carmel, getting her period was positive because she felt a sense of belonging and inclusion in being one of the girls.

Jennifer felt good about getting her first period. Her view of her self as a late bloomer was challenged, resulting in positive feelings about menarche and her self.

I felt glad that I got it. I know that. (Laughter) And... I bet it had something to do with the fact that I was such a late bloomer for the other thing [breasts] (Laughter). It was probably a relief that I wasn't a late bloomer for that too. So, I

think that was a good thing.... It is something special. It does make girls feel special, that they actually have their period. It's just special because... it's something that's supposed to happen to you.

Jane's experience was also a positive one. After reviewing the transcript from our interview, Jane said that she was surprised by her mom's response to her news. The happy, excited response that she received was very important to her and gave her a boost in self-esteem. During our interview she said that menarche enhanced her self-concept (she saw herself as older), and increased her self-confidence.

If anything my self-concept probably would have gone up rather than down. And so maybe I had... a little more self-concept or self-confidence...It increased my self-concept. I always wanted to be older than I was. So, yes definitely there was a change. And I felt that change right when it [menarche] happened.

When girls are expecting menarche, either because some of their friends have shared that they have begun menstruating, or they have been given a comprehensive explanation about it, then it is more easily accepted as something that is a normal part of growing up. This was what happened for Carmel, Jennifer, and Jane.

For those who had never heard about periods or were the first in their peer group to have it, menarche was a scary experience. Without previous knowledge of menstruation, the experience can be traumatic as the girl is left wondering if she is dying. Blood, up to that point, has been something that is associated with being hurt and a cause for concern. From Xena's story we learn that if a girl did not have any prior knowledge about menstruation, all is not lost. Xena ended up having a powerful experience that left her with positive feelings about growing up and being a woman. Her view of self was enhanced by the explanation that she was given. Menarche meant that she was now a woman and that women were special because they could have babies. She was also taken out for a celebratory lunch. This act reinforced the idea that becoming a woman was indeed a very special thing. Xena's experience became self-enhancing. Xena explained how her brother's response helped her to accept and feel better about her maturing body:

That [her brother's explanation and celebratory lunch] really made a difference for me. A big strong difference in how I felt about being a woman. Cause it was hard to be... like you know, to have a chest and stuff ahead of everyone else. Having to wear a bra and nobody else did. And the boys at school would snap my strap when I would walk by. And I was way bigger. You know I was a tall, big

built girl right from the day I was little. ....So that made me feel really special. And that was something about me that was unique. And so it was good...

When the first person told reacted in a negative way, feelings of shame about the girl's maturing body surfaced. Ayla and Lora both had unsupportive responses from their moms and the experience left them with feelings of shame about their bodies. Ayla explains:

How it's related to how I view my self...is, this thing about shame about body. That's been something that's been difficult to get over. And, just the whole... process of what I go through as a woman. Like all the different stages, I haven't always felt comfortable talking about that.... There wasn't any real positive meaning that came out of it. It just sort of enhanced the experience that was already prevalent, which was shameful of body, shameful of any kind of hormone change that was happening.

Lora described her experience as "awful" and speaking about it brought tears. Lora's mom didn't stay to provide her with comfort or to help her feel ok about what had happened. Lora felt "exposed", alone, and unsupported.

And it was kind of like hand me a pad and say, "Here, you put this on."... That's it! ... Not a lot about how often or how this or...how I am feeling or anything.

Lora identified poor self-image and body image existing prior to menarche. Her feelings of discomfort with her maturing body were reinforced at this time.

I'm starting to see body image...about the menses and the breasts were poor self-image. So... not comfortable with woman shape. But I'm trying to think if I was happy with my shape and size before I got breasts or before I got my period.... I think I already, even before breasts, I think I already had an image of myself of being big, cause my close girlfriend was a lot thinner and slighter. So I already had a negative image of being big.

Others' reactions to menarche, especially mothers, who are key to a young women's life demonstrated a big effect on the way women felt about themselves at the time of menarche and during other rites of passage during her lifetime.

All of the women interviewed mentioned the private nature of menstruation, that it is kept hidden or secret. Why do women keep it hidden? Is it because it is viewed as dirty or rude? Is it private because it is a something personal and intimate? Is it secret because it is something to be ashamed or embarrassed about? Or is it private because it is

something special? Women are given the message in our culture that menstruation is not something to talk about, especially in mixed company. Other than the use of advertising, (see Chapter 2) what is the most noticeable about the depiction of menstruation in the media is its relative absence (Daniluk, 1998). Daniluk notes that other than jokes pertaining to premenstrual syndrome, we never see the way that women may be affected when they are menstruating. Female stars never seem to experience the physical bloating, pimples, cramping or fatigue that are sometimes experienced (Daniluk, 1998). It is very rare that girls and women see their experience as a menstruating person represented in the media. Perhaps the media representation is simply a reflection of our reality – menstruation is something to keep hidden and private.

When asked what keeping menstruation hidden and privacy meant to them, participants responded in different ways.

Carmel felt private about menstruating because it was something intimate and personal, not because she was ashamed of it.

It was more that it was a privacy thing not that I was ashamed of it... Although I'm not sure the reason I felt that it was private was because there was anything wrong with it, or dirty about it, or to be ashamed of. It was just an intimate thing, and about my personal body.

Jennifer acknowledged the silencing of the menstrual experience and expressed a desire for a change in the way that society handles menstruation, so it wouldn't be such a big secret. She believes that by not talking about menstruation it becomes something that is "not a good thing" or something that girls don't feel good about.

I would try and just be more open about it and not create this... like, cause my mom still did... treat it as a hush-hush issue. Like it wasn't talked about in front of my dad or anything. And I don't know...like I don't know how you should handle that... But, I think that society should be treating it more open. So it's not something to be treated like it's not natural or not a good thing, which is what it makes it by not talking about it.

Ayla recalls that all her female firsts were moments that were shameful and secretive, not self-enhancing or something of which to feel proud.

...as far as menstruating and getting the bra and using deodorant for the first time, those weren't...really significant, happy moments. They were moments I remember, but they were always done in a way that wasn't happy and...proud. They were always done in the same consistent secretive, shameful way....I think

somehow that not having that in my life is, is not having... good experiences with all other processes that are happening. So, the first bra and all those other things-- everything was shameful and kind of...secretive.

Lora's introduction to menstruation began with the betrayal of her body telling her secret before she even knew. With the unwritten rule of secrecy broken, Lora found her experience of menarche to be painfully embarrassing and shameful especially since it was her dad who had noticed the blood on her pajamas.

I didn't want everyone to know. It should be my secret. Shame-based.... Like its not been shameful since. I've just always hated it.

Connected to the secrecy of menstruation is the self-consciousness that many of the participants said they felt when they actually had their period. The perhaps painful self-conscious feelings that girls experience when they are menstruating is demonstrated in the descriptions detailing the thought and energy that went into concealing signs of menstruating. Women feared embarrassment and teasing from male peers if they were not discreet about menstruating. One woman described preventative measures she took to conceal signs of menstruating from anyone. She would wear long t-shirts to change for gym class and wear a sweater tied around her waist to conceal any sign of a bulky pad. Women reported feeling self-conscious that others would find out they were menstruating by noticing a trip to the bathroom to change a pad or tampon. Some women were concerned that an odor may be detected. Some women said they did not feel clean while menstruating. One woman would take multiple showers a day to feel clean while menstruating. Ayla identified the social pressure for women to keep body functions "hidden in order to remain feminine and beautiful".

I think somehow that menstruating was associated with beauty and making women less beautiful...or less feminine... the flow of blood and all that. So there was lots of stuff about... feminine ladies or pretty ladies don't...probably don't fart, don't (laughs) sweat, don't have anything coming out of their body that's dirty, or bloody, or whatever. ...They must stay hidden in order to remain feminine and beautiful.

With the lack of discussion about menarche and menstruation, especially in mixed company, the message is clearly one of "silence" or "secrecy". Even though it is not stated explicitly not to talk about it, young girls pick up a strong message that they're not

really “supposed” to be talking about it. They learn that menstruation is not quite “nice”, and doesn’t fit in with our societal ideals of what is beautiful or good. Feelings of self-consciousness are likely influenced by cultural views of about body and bodily functions. For example the use of euphemisms with mostly negative connotations used to describe menstruation “reflect a sense of shame and degradation related to the process that marks girls’ entrance into womanhood” (Daniluk, 1998, p. 60).

Weideger (1976, as cited in Kowalski & Chapple, 2000, p. 75) spoke of the impact of the silence of the experience of menstruation:

When we are taught that something has to be hidden, we naturally believe that it contains an element that is not acceptable to other people.... We are ashamed of menstruation... we are taught to hide all evidence of its existence, and we come to believe that there is something in the experience that is ‘wrong’.

This chapter provided a presentation of selected data collected during the process of this study. A rich description of the six participants’ experiences of menarche was introduced. The seven themes that emerged through analysis of the data were presented using the words of each of the six participants. Lastly, the relationship between the experience of menarche and views of self was explored highlighting the role of the social construction of self with focus on the response of the first person told, previous knowledge, and the secret/private nature of menstruation.

This concludes the presentation of results. The final chapter moves into meanings, implications, and concluding thoughts.

## Chapter Five: Meanings, Implications, and Concluding Thoughts

The present study provides insight into women's experience of menarche and its influence on their views of self. It relates to the current and future understanding, adjustment, and well-being of women. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of menarche and its influence on views of self. A discussion of the experience, feelings associated with it, and time to contemplate its effects on a deeper level were needed. Girls and women are not given many, if any, opportunities to discuss the experience of beginning to menstruate and the affect it has on them. Time to engage in self-exploration of the experience through discussion and probes can help women to discover if and how this physical change affected and continues to affect them on cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal levels. This study provided an exploration of the affect of the menarche experience on views of self while providing participants with the opportunity to tell their story and explore their experience of menarche.

The six women interviewed provided rich descriptive data about their experiences of menarche, the meanings of the experience, and its relationship to views of self. An increased understanding of the menarche experience and its uniqueness for each of the participants was gleaned. Themes that existed across the stories of participants emerged through the analysis of meaning units, categories, and interview transcripts.

Seven themes emerged through the process of analysis. They are: Recalling the Experience, Previous Knowledge, Telling Someone, Private/secret, A Step to growing up, Things to Deal with but Accepted, and Something in Common Among Females. The themes were presented using the participants' words.

Insight into how the menarche experience influenced participants' perception of themselves was attained. The relationship between the experience of menarche and views of self was explored highlighting the role of the social construction of self with focus on the response of the first person told, the secret/private nature of menstruation, and feelings of self-consciousness.

Across the participants, experiences can be grouped into three major themes related to the way the women felt about and viewed themselves after menarche: Response of the First Person told, the Private/Secret nature of menarche and menstruation, and

feelings of self-consciousness. These themes indicate that for the participants of this study, views of self were highly influenced by sources outside of themselves, namely their relationships with others, information that was available to them prior to menarche, and the private/secret nature of menstruation. All participants mentioned these themes, and they are all related to views of self although they varied with regard to the content used to describe them.

### Meanings

As mentioned in the literature review, the risk factors of lack of preparation and perceived early timing in comparison to peer group typically lead to a negative experience of menarche. Whether a girl had previous knowledge of menstruation and menarche had an effect on her feelings about her body at menarche. Some participants recalled a distinct lack of preparation for menarche and experienced a negative effect on their initial feelings about menarche (Koff, Rierdan & Sheingold, 1982). Even though some participants felt they had been adequately prepared for menarche, they still may have felt a little surprised initially yet knew what was happening to them, what to do about it, and took it in stride.

Some participants experienced shame about the experience of their first menstrual period for a number of reasons. Some reported that they felt little or no support from their mothers during this time in their reproductive cycle. Koff and Rierdan (1995) found that the absence of support at the time of menarche is a risk factor for a negative menarche experience. Participants in the current study reported that the support received following menarche helped them to feel positive about the experience. Some participants received a positive response from the first person they told. These women described menarche as being a positive experience or having a positive effect on their views of self. This was true even for the participant who had no preparation for menarche and was early in both subjective (self-comparison with peers) and objective (age) measures of timing. For this woman, the response and support of the first adult with whom she shared had a greater impact on how she felt about the experience than did the combination of the two risk factors of timing and preparation. Considering the shift of girls' focus from forming perceptions based primarily on sensorimotor experience in childhood to depending more on the interpersonal when creating perceptions of their body (Daniluk, 1998), it makes

sense that the response of the first person told after they had their period influenced how each participant felt about their bodies and menstruating. More research to investigate the power of support following menarche is needed to confirm whether or not this is a common experience or if it is unique to this group of participants.

Studies have reported that some girls and women report a shift in their sense of self at the time of menarche. For example, Weisgarber and Osborne (1990) found that self-image was enhanced to some degree for some of the participants. Other studies have noted shifts in body image between pre- and post-menarcheal girls (Chrisler & Zittel, 1998; Koff, 1983). The participants in this study reported a shift in their views of self. For example, they described themselves in terms such as feeling more mature than they had prior to menarche, feeling more grown up than they had prior to menarche, or seeing themselves as having become a “woman”. While the ways in which the participants’ views of self were affected varied, all of the participants acknowledged that there had been an influence.

All participants mentioned that menstruation is something they have in common with other females. For most of these women this meant there was a greater level of understanding among women. Women made comments such as “bonding”, “a greater connection”, “more understanding”, and “sympathetic” when describing how menstruating has influenced her feelings about women and herself as a woman. Weisgarber and Osborne (1990) found that some women interviewed also reported a bond and a “sense of comradery” with females although they countered this with feelings of separateness between generations of females.

Themes of pollution (describing menstruation as dirty, messy, unclean, and yucky) are found in women’s stories (Berg & Block Coutts, 1992; Britton, 1996; Golub, 1983; Houppert, 1999; Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996; Weisgarber & Osborne, 1990) and were again supported in this study. Some participants used terms such as dirty, messy, unclean, ick, and yuck to describe menstrual blood. Girls pick up on messages in the media, from friends, and family members that it isn’t necessarily nice to menstruate. As one participant mentioned blood is often considered “gory”. It is not surprising then that women choose these words to describe menstrual blood.

All participants expressed the need to keep menarche and menstruation private or secret (Britton, 1996). Feelings of self-consciousness were used to describe how participants felt when they were menstruating (Weisgarber & Osborne, 1990). Daniluk (1998) writes that girls “are experiencing painfully heightened self-consciousness regarding their changing bodies” during adolescence (p. 55). As a woman, menstruating means that there is a potential for great embarrassment and shame (Lee and Sasser-Coen, 1996) if others were to find out. Participants were unified in their identification of the *threat* of embarrassment, teasing or humiliation that was ever-present while menstruating. The pressure to conceal that they were having a period made menstruating something that was not only to be dealt with physically (the menstrual blood, and for some physical symptoms), it also had cognitive, emotional and social affects. Some women mentioned the threat or experience of being teased by the boys if they had found out somehow that she was menstruating. This seems to be giving the message that in our culture women need to be careful or their bodies will betray them, leaving them open to being the target of jokes that may cause great embarrassment. Women are given the message that their bodies are acceptable only when they are neat and tidy, not when they are menstruating.

It takes a lot of energy to conceal the fact that one is menstruating. Cognitively girls and women have to keep themselves prepared by having a ready supply of menstrual products on hand. They have to consider how often they need to change their menstrual product, have an idea of where they might do that, have a means of how to transport the menstrual products discreetly, and consider what they were wearing. For example, it was mentioned that white pants are not to be worn when menstruating as it could result in an obvious show of blood if they had any leakage. Emotionally, participants said they felt very aware or self-conscious that others might be able to tell that they were having a period (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996). Socially, girls are limited by constraints about the acceptability of the discussion of their feelings and experiences to do with menstruation. As an adolescent, menstruation is definitely not a topic to bring up with boys or men (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002). For participants of this study, when talking about their period with other females during early adolescence, sharing was kept to a minimum if discussed at all. Some participants expressed a greater freedom now that they are older to discuss any aspect of menstruation with their girlfriends. One participant described her

transition to feeling free to leave a bloody tampon applicator in the wastebasket without feeling embarrassed about her husband seeing it. Most women however did not express this comfort and said that only women really understood what they were going through. While one woman reported taking steps to rebel against the societal constraints within her home, most comply with the societal expectation that females keep others under the impression that they are period-free.

The issues of silencing, secrecy and privacy seem to be insidious at menarche even entering into the realm of close relationships. This is reflected in the comments of some of the participants who were surprised that they had never spoke with their sister or saw any signs that their sisters menstruated. Participants knew that their sisters must menstruate since they were female, but it was never disclosed. One woman found it strange that she never knew when her younger sister had started menstruating since they were close. Another found it odd that she didn't know her sisters menstruated since they all shared a bedroom. Some participants mentioned knowing that friends had started to have their periods, but their friends did not share the details (what it feels like, looks like, etc.) with them.

Some participants questioned at some time in their lives why it is that women menstruate. "Why not men?" they asked. An opportunity to consider this possibility exists within the following quote:

What would happen if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate and women could not? Clearly, menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event: Men would brag about how long and how much. Young boys would talk about it as the envied beginning of manhood. Gifts, religious ceremonies, family dinners, and stag parties would mark the day. To prevent monthly work loss among the powerful, Congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea.

-Gloria Steinam,  
*Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*

While this may be a humorous rendition, the remarks of these participants indicate a feeling of injustice and dissatisfaction with the experience of menstruation. Although these were not feelings that women recalled experiencing at the time of menarche specifically, it is interesting that they were feelings that developed. This may be due to

social restrictions that are placed on menstruating women such as the expectations of others for women to “grin-and-bear-it” (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002). In our society, women are not encouraged to take care of themselves during certain times in their menstrual cycle. They are expected to carry on as usual, ignoring any signals from their body that they may do well to do otherwise. Often women are not supported when they need to take care of themselves, when their bodies are asking for it. One of the expectations of women in our society is that women are the caregivers. Often it is difficult for caregivers to find the time to take care of themselves. When a woman does not take care of herself, often her body will still respond in ways that will slow her down. The busy pace of our current world does not necessarily make time for needed rests, or breaks. As women in our culture are left with little or no time to care for themselves, perhaps a result of this quick-paced world is that eventually their bodies can no longer keep up and eventually her ability to cope with the stress is pushed to the limits. Perhaps this can lead to stress-induced illness or dissatisfaction with the body. For some women this means that they will turn to medicine for a quick fix. Some women do honour themselves at certain phases in their menstrual cycle, acknowledging that they need a little more sleep, need to eat well and exercise, or need some time to themselves to engage in creative pursuits (Northrup, 1998). Some people believe that during menstrual cycles women come into a time that they are at their most creative state, and for some, meditative (Northrup).

Menarche was an experience filled with positive and negative feelings for most of the participants, indicating a level of ambivalence about the event. Feelings of ambivalence about menarche and menstruation have been supported in the literature (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996; Weisgarber and Osborne, 1990). All of the women mentioned things about menstruating that they did not enjoy (cramps, messiness, menstrual products, feeling self-conscious, etc.), but despite these misgivings, many participants mentioned that the trade-off—being able to have children—made it worthwhile and special. One woman said that if she could have chosen, she would have menstruated even with the discomfort she felt so that she could have children and experience being what she defined as a true woman for herself. Some women mentioned that it was worth it even with all the negative parts associated with menstruating. Most of the women were happy to be

maturing (reaching menarche) yet often felt self-conscious that others would find out they were menstruating.

The mixed messages that young girls often receive about menstruating must seem paradoxical to them (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). They are told that it is normal, natural, and something to be happy about, yet they are also taught how to conceal its existence and expected to behave as though nothing were happening (Koff & Rierdan). Girls are receiving messages in our culture that certain parts of being a woman are desirable and others are not. Women are not necessarily accepted in their fully natural menstruating state in our society, hence the need to keep it hidden. Parts of women's bodies are exploited and seen as desired. Other parts are denied and kept hidden. This objectification and rejection of the female body as a whole must have a negative affect on girls and women's views of themselves.

#### Implications for parents, educators, and counsellors

In her book, *Yesterday I Cried*, Iyanla Vanzant writes about young girls' need for what she terms "womanhood training":

The training includes having information and examples that will enable the young girl to take care of herself and her "womanness" as it grows within her and through her. (p. 119)

Iyanla is talking about female sexuality and our ability to know ourselves, feel good about ourselves, and take care of ourselves. These are needs that every woman that I interviewed described in one way or another. It is a need to know what to expect on the road to becoming a woman. It is a need that is basic in the formation of one's self-identity as a female. Often, information of what is to come, in terms of maturing, is given as it is happening rather than with foresight about the future. When information about menstruation was provided, girls are often left wanting more.

Although the participants received various amounts of information about menarche and menstruation prior to menarche none of the women felt they were as prepared as they could have been (Lee & Sasser-Coen, 1996; Weisgarber & Osborne, 1990). All mentioned that they did things differently with their own daughters (were more open, talked to them about it sooner, supplied more choices of menstrual products, provided books, a celebratory dinner) or plan to do things differently if they do have a

daughter (speak about it more often, talk about menstruation with female siblings together, follow-up initial talk to make sure she understood or had no questions, be less secretive). It has been questioned whether it is possible to fully prepare a girl for menarche since the event itself is unpredictable by nature. It is not known exactly when it will happen. The variability of experience between girls is vast. It is important for girls to know that the signs and symptoms of menarche for one girl may never be experienced by another (Koff & Rierdan, 1995). For example, some girls experience headaches, bloating, cramping, and/or breast tenderness while others do not.

Not one participant mentioned knowing anything about their mother's, or sister's experience of menarche. Costos, Ackerman, and Paradis (2002) found that 68% of the 138 participants in their study had no awareness of their mothers' experience with menarche. Likely it would be helpful to hear another female tell their story of menarche or talk about what it is like to menstruate (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis), including the positive and negative aspects of it. It would likely increase the young woman's understanding and normalize the experience. Health care providers such as counsellors who are involved with parent education or with girls and their parents have opportunities or can create opportunities to support and encourage this dialogue.

Every woman interviewed, even those who reported that they had adequate preparation for menarche and a self-enhancing experience, expressed some desire for more: more information before hand, more real life examples, more warning, more comfort, more understanding, and more meaning. Ayla expressed some of these needs in the following caption:

Now that I look back on it, I think it would have been really nice to have some sort of a celebration or any sort of educational stuff leading up to it. Or some comforting situations with my mother where she would tell me what was going to happen.

Some women interviewed also yearned for more of a positive, celebratory or ceremonial spin to the experience--something to positively mark her transition from girl to woman and provide a greater understanding about the meaning of menarche. In this way each girl would have the opportunity to include a positive explanation of their development into their changing concept of self. Some women mentioned sensing a

spiritual dimension to menarche, a rite of passage that wasn't acknowledged at the time. Menarche and menstruation were explained purely in a physical sense. Carmel contemplated what it would have been like if someone had provided an explanation that went beyond the physical aspects of her experience of menarche:

In the field that I'm in there's some ceremony done with it [menarche]. And it's seen as a rite of passage. They do meditations and some ceremony around the first blood... Which is nice. It gives more meaning to this thing. It's more like a progression to a different stage of your life. And there's some celebration to it. Rather than just sort of a physical type thing... So, that would have been nice, but I guess in those days it was unheard of.

In the book, *Daughters of the Moon, Sisters of the Sun*, Wind Hughes writes about the possible variation in breadth and depth of a ritual or ceremony, and how it can acknowledge that we are a part of something greater.

With ceremonies and rituals we can make a moment or a day sacred, or honor something or someone important to us. They can be as elaborate as a Catholic mass or as simple as stopping on a path in the forest to place a flower on a stone while giving thanks for the beautiful day. Rituals are a natural expression of acknowledging and experiencing something greater than ourselves. (p. 39)

The sexual education of young girls that explains the transformation that their body will be going through and the implications of those changes are important for their understanding and development (e.g., Diorio & Munro, 2000). The big effect that other's responses to menarche had on women's views of self has implications for the inclusion of this topic in parent education programs. Menarche is a time of opportunity for parents to have a positive influence on the way their daughter feels about herself and about being female.

Girls need women who are comfortable with their bodies, its processes, and their own menarche experience to help them understand their own bodies as they mature into young women. Parents, educators, and counsellors need to provide this information to young girls in a way that helps them to see menstruation as a healthy, normal part of being a female. It has also been demonstrated that providing the opportunity to see the positive aspects of the menstrual cycle helps to form positive attitudes and feelings about it (Chrisler, Johnston, Champagne, & Preston, 1994). In particular sex education programs for girls need to be lead by women who have healthy, natural feelings about

their bodies and menstruation.

Some of the things that the women in this study said they would have found helpful were more comforting situations with their mother and some kind of recognition (ritual or ceremony) on a scale that suits the girl. Counsellors can help girls make the transition—perhaps by being involved in helping the mother and girl plan such a ritual or ceremony. Another idea is to organize small, intimate groups of girls and their moms (or other significant adult support person) to get together for discussions about what menarche and menstruation are, and what it means to menstruate. Maybe the girls and their moms could do some research on what it means in different cultures and if there are any ceremonies, celebrations or rituals that are performed. These types of groups may promote a more open forum for girls and their moms to learn about menarche and menstruation. Counsellors, parents, and teachers need to be aware of their attitudes and perceptions of menstruation as they will affect those of our clients, daughters, and students.

In terms of counsellor education, the addition of information related to the process of sexual maturation, particularly menarche, would be a helpful way to open the dialogue about the topic in counselling circles. The goals of having this information available to counsellors would be to help to build awareness about: girls' experiences of menarche; the social, cultural, and interpersonal influences that affect girls' experience; and how to facilitate the development of healthy views of self among girls. While I recognize that more research is necessary to reach these goals, this information would be helpful for counsellors and educators of preadolescent, adolescent and adults (especially parents).

#### Limitations of the Study

At this point I will make clear the limitations of the study. First, the individuals who participated in this study were self-selected. The nature of self-selection indicates that the participants represent a group of women who felt comfortable talking about a subject of a personal nature. They were also women who found their experience of menarche important enough to warrant discussion. Most participants remembered their experience of menarche in great detail, which may indicate that for these women menarche held greater importance or lasting significance.

Second, as the ages of participants ranged from 30 to 61, the stories collected

were based on the memories of an event that had taken place anywhere from 17 – 49 years prior to the interview. The recollection of the menarche experience required the use of long-term memory, which may raise concern about participants' distortions of recollections. The influence of subsequent life experiences would be difficult to determine. However, it was evident during the interviews that participants had no difficulty getting back in touch with some significant emotions. Also, the emphasis of the study was to give women a chance to voice their experience and consider the enduring influences of the experience on their views of self.

Third, the findings are based on the interviews of six individual women. Although the background demographic information that was collected did not include the designation of cultural heritage, all of the women interviewed were of similar regional background. The findings of this study and participants' experiences would not necessarily reflect the experiences of all women. It is possible however to obtain an essence of the phenomenon as experienced by these women. The purpose of this study was not to generalize and predict, but to describe and analyze.

Most participants found it difficult to answer directly how the experience of menarche influenced their view of self. Due to the silencing and private nature of menarche, it makes sense that it is difficult for women to name exactly how it influenced their view of self. This is still a sensitive area that is not talked about. Without having any previous discussions about how the experience affected them in any detail if at all, many of the women were making sense of the event and its influence as we spoke. Only having one interview may not have provided enough time for women to reflect on the influence of the experience. Without having any prior opportunity to sift through their memories in dialogue, they may have needed more time to contemplate how their experiences affected their view of self. An incomplete picture of their experience and its influence may have resulted. It is believed that if the participants had time to consider the topic over a longer period of time, they would have an opportunity to think things through on a different level. With this insight, it is suggested that for a future study a focus group a few weeks following the initial interview, with all participants present. This would provide an opportunity to discuss their experiences within a group of women, and may trigger further insights resulting in a more complete exploration of the topic. A

focus group would also allow women to engage in the bonding process and discuss the connection that exists between women as a result of sharing the menstruating experience. More in-depth investigation is needed.

Another idea for a more proactive future study is to facilitate the co-creation of a small ceremony or ritual with menarcheal girls (or those who have been menstruating for a short time) and their mothers (or other close female) following a menarche educational program that involves girls and their mothers. Have girls and their mothers who engage in the ceremony/ritual describe what it was like to have this experience and its effect on how they feel about themselves and the menstrual cycle. This could be done in written format, interviews or focus groups.

### Concluding Thoughts

When I began this study I set out to find out how women felt the experience of menarche had influenced their view of themselves. I wanted to complete a study that would expand our understanding of how women integrate and feel about menstruating in a world where menstruation is not valued. I wanted to give women the chance to speak about a topic that is silenced and unrecognized. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to listen to women speak their stories of menarche. Their stories have enriched my understanding of the experience and helped me to understand my own experience on a deeper level. Further, the sharing of stories and the resulting analysis contribute to our knowledge about the experience of menarche and its influence on views of self.

I wanted to understand how other women had gone through the menarche experience and how it affected them. I wanted to know what would help girls to have a positive experience. What I found was more than I had hoped. Each woman's unique experience contributed to this thesis, and my learning in its own unique way. Within the stories there were common threads that connect each experience and how one makes sense of it. Whether we use the experience to help define ourselves consciously or not, it is within us, and has influenced us, each in our own way.

As a result of this research, I am more informed about the process and how to help a girl to feel good about her self and her body as she begins to menstruate. I believe this will be helpful for me in my roles as parent-educator, counsellor, and parent.

In closing I would like you to consider for yourself, or for another woman you know, the words of Judith Duerk, from her book, *Circle of Stones*:

How might it have been different for you if, on your first menstrual day, your mother had given you a bouquet of flowers and taken you to lunch, and then the two of you had gone to meet your father at the jeweler, where your ears were pierced, and your father bought you your first pair of earrings, and then you went with a few of your friends and your mother's friends to get your first lip colouring; and then you went,

for the first time,

to the Women's lodge,

to learn

the wisdom of women?

How might your life be different?

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## Appendix A

### Letter to Women's Groups

Hello. First of all I would like to thank-you all for giving me some time to introduce myself and tell you about my study. My name is Kim Lawrick and I am completing my Master's degree in Counselling Psychology at the University of Victoria. My supervisor is Dr. Anne Marshall. I am doing a study on the influence of women's experiences of their first period on their view of themselves. I am looking for women who would be willing to share their stories with me.

Menarche or a woman's first period is one experience that most women share. Although menarche is a common experience and is a rite of passage for women, it is not a subject that is talked about very much. I would like to use my study as an opportunity for women to give voice to their experiences. I am interested in learning about the experience of your first period and what it meant to you to have this experience - your feelings, thoughts, and beliefs.

I believe this study will provide helpful information for counsellors and others who work with women and girls. It will help us to understand what it is like to experience this event and how menstruating influences our lives. If you choose to participate, I believe the experience will also increase your own understanding of the meaning of menstruation in your life.

I will be interviewing 6 - 8 women who are over 18, have experienced their first period and are interested in taking part in the study. Names and identifying information will be kept confidential. The time commitment will include an interview, which I believe will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes, and a follow up meeting that will take approximately 60 minutes. The follow-up meeting will give you the opportunity to ensure that your story has been recorded in a way that reflects your experience. The total time commitment would be 2 - 3 hours.

If you are interested in telling your story of menarche or if you would like more information about the details of the study, please contact me at 494-4947. If you know of any other women who may be interested in telling their story please give them my number. I will be leaving this information and my e-mail address for each of you. I will

also leave the name and phone number of my supervisor at UVIC and the Associate Vice-President of Research for verification of this study.

Thank-you for your time and attention.

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*The Influence of Women's Menarche Experience on Self-Concept:  
An Exploratory Study*

If you would be interested in taking part in an interview regarding the experience of your first period, please call Kim Lawrick at 494-4947 or e-mail at <klawrick@uvic.ca>. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Anne Marshall at (250) 721-7815, or the Associate Vice-President of Research at the University of Victoria at (250) 721-7968. If you think you might know someone else who might be interested in taking part in an interview of this nature please pass along this information. Thank-you.

## Appendix B

**CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY ENTITLED,  
“The Influence of Women’s Menarche Experience on Self-Concept”**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled *The Influence of Women’s Menarche Experience on Self-Concept*, that is being conducted by a graduate student, Kim Lawrick, in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies at the University of Victoria. If you have any questions or concerns about the project, you may contact either the student at (250) 494-4947 or e-mail <klawrick@uvic.ca>. As a graduate student, this research is part of the requirements for a degree in Counselling Psychology and it is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Anne Marshall. You may contact the supervisor at (250) 721-7815 or e-mail <amarshal@uvic.ca>.

The purpose of the study is to help people who work with women and women themselves, to better understand the meaning of menarche (a woman’s first menstrual period) in the lives of individual women and its influence on their self-concept. Research of this type is important to increase our understanding of women’s experience of menarche, how women make meaning of this event, and how this event influenced their concept of self. This study will provide an opportunity to learn about how menarche influences women’s lives, and their views of themselves.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 60 - 90 minute audiotaped interview with the researcher. You will be asked to describe the influence that the experience of your first period has had on your view of your self. A follow-up audiotaped meeting will be arranged to ensure that the transcription of your story is true to your experience. The follow-up is estimated to take 60 - 90 minutes. The total time commitment will be no longer than 3 hours.

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be given 10 dollars. It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. The potential benefits of your participation in this research include contributing to the knowledge base of women’s experiences and a greater understanding of how menarche influences women’s self-concepts.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to

participate, you may withdraw at any time, or refuse to answer certain questions without any negative consequences. In the event that you withdraw from the study, the data collected to that point will not be used in the study and will be destroyed.

Your confidentiality will be protected by storing interview audiotapes, and the transcribed data in a locked filing cabinet. Only the researcher will have access to the data. To preserve your anonymity, your name will not be recorded on the transcribed data, a code name will be assigned and used in place of your name. The key to the coded names will be kept separately from the interview data and stored in a locked cabinet. Signed consent forms will also be stored separately from any data.

The results of this study will be prepared for presentation at a special meeting with my supervisor, and my thesis committee members. The results of this study may also may also be published in a peer reviewed journal. An abstract of the study or a copy of the thesis will be given to you upon request. The audiotapes from your interview, the transcribed data and any notes taken during the interview will be destroyed within two years.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and her supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice President Research at the University of Victoria at (250) 721-7968.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to be given a copy of this thesis or an abstract when it is completed. Please circle:

Yes or No

**A COPY OF THIS CONSENT WILL BE LEFT WITH YOU AND A COPY WILL  
BE TAKEN BY THE RESEARCHER.**

## Appendix C

## Demographic Information

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Age at your first period: \_\_\_\_\_

Among your friends, were you an early maturer (got your first menstrual period before any of your other friends, a late maturer (were the last of your friends to get your first menstrual period), or in the middle (you were neither the first nor last to get your first period)? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have children? Yes or No

If yes, what are their ages and gender?

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## Appendix D

## Interview Guide

*Initial question:*

What was it like for you to experience your first period and how has this influenced your view of yourself?

*Possible further probes:*

1. What did the experience of your first period mean to you?
2. How did you feel about becoming a woman?
3. What emotions are you aware of?
4. What did you learn about what it means to be a woman at this time? How might socialization processes for women have influenced your learning?
5. How did your family members respond to your first period?
6. Were there any noticeable changes in your relationships with others?
7. What are some of the rules about menstruation and being a woman that you became aware of at this time?
8. What do you think about menstruation? How did you come to have this view? How has it influenced how you feel about women and yourself as a woman?

Appendix E  
Thank You Letter to Participants

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank-you for meeting with me in an extended interview and sharing your experience of menarche. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feelings, and the situation surrounding this personal event.

I have enclosed a transcript of your interview. Would you please review the entire document? Be sure to ask yourself if this interview has fully captured your experience of menarche or your first period. After reviewing the transcript of the interview, you may realize that an important experience(s) was left out. Please feel free to add comments, with the enclosed red pen, that would further elaborate your experience(s). Please do not edit for grammatical corrections. The way you told your story is what is critical.

When you have reviewed the verbatim transcript and have had an opportunity to make changes and additions, please return the transcript in the stamped, addressed envelope.

I have greatly valued your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your experience. If you have any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to call me.

Sincerely,

Kim Lawrick

Ph. 494-4947 or email: <klawrick@uvic.ca>



challenge minds  
change worlds

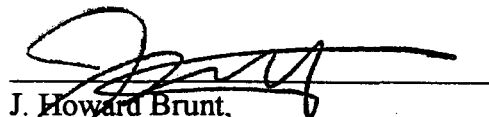
UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA - HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

**CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL**

<u>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR</u> <b>Kim Lawrick</b> Graduate Student	<u>DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL</u> <b>EDUC</b>	<u>SUPERVISOR</u> <b>Dr. A. Marshall</b>	
<u>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</u>			
<u>TITLE: The Influence of the Menarche Experience on Women's Self-Concept</u>			
<u>PROJECT No.</u> <b>192-01</b>	<u>START DATE</u> <b>5/12/2000</b>	<u>END DATE</u> <b>6/19/2002</b>	<u>APPROVAL</u> <b>6/20/2001</b>

**CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that the University of Victoria Ethics Review Committee on Research and Other Activities Involving Human Subjects has examined the research proposal and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects.

  
J. Howard Brunt,  
Associate Vice-President, Research

**This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. Extensions/minor amendments may be granted upon receipt of "Request for Continuing Review or Amendment of an Approved Project" form.**

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