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Authors(s)	Hyde, Abbey, Nee, Jean, Howlett, Etaoine, Butler, Michelle, Drennan, Jonathan
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abbey.hyde@ucd.ie

The Ending of Menstruation: Perspectives and Experiences of Lesbian and Heterosexual Women

Abstract

This article aims to theorise how a sample of menopausal women, lesbian and heterosexual, construct the ending of their periods, and what the experience means for them. Findings indicate that for most of the lesbian participants (who were in a sizeable minority), emotions of loss at the ending of periods were simultaneously expressed alongside positive feelings, and they engaged in greater introspection around the issue than did heterosexual women. However, lesbians did not all take up a singular subject position in relation to menstruation, indicating that there is fragmentation and plurality in how the body is experienced across a group.

KEYWORDS: *Ireland, lesbian; menopause; menstruation; qualitative methods.*

INTRODUCTION

In this article, we present an analysis of how a sample lesbian and heterosexual women experienced the ending of their periods at menopause and the meaning of this experience for them. Menopause itself has been the subject of social science research in recent years, with the very notion of what constitutes menopause, that is, what it is and what it means for women, being interrogated. Much of this

research arose as a corrective to the heavily biomedical version of menopause that prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s that reduced the meaning of menopause to a biomedical event, namely, the permanent cessation of menstruation, or the last menstrual period. However, over the past two decades, a body of qualitative research on the topic has built up that proposes that, from women's perspective, menopause is much more than this.

This growing literature includes themes such as women's understanding of their own bodies (Boughton, 2008; Dillaway, 2005a, 2006a; Harrison and Becker, 2007); encounters between menopausal women and biomedical professionals (Banister, 1999); women's perspectives on hormone therapy (Ballard, 2002; Stephens et al., 2002; Kolip et al., 2009); coping strategies and managing symptoms (Im et al., 2008; Lindh-Åstrand et al., 2007; Kafanelis et al., 2009); menopausal women's views on ageing (Banister, 1999; Dillaway, 2005b; Hvas, 2006); the impact of menopause on social roles (Dillaway, 2006b); and on sexuality (Winterich, 2003; Dillaway, 2005b). Much of this scholarship emerged from a feminist perspective with writers responding to (and usually resisting) the biomedical notion of menopause as a hormone deficiency disease leading to dwindling femininity, loss of womanhood, sexual redundancy, empty nest syndrome and clinical pathologies. The conventional wisdom emerging in a good deal of this new wave of research was that, as far as women experienced it, menopause in its wider sense was not the dreaded experience that it had been previously made out to be, but rather was variously experienced, and indeed had many positive aspects. Thus, although the challenging dimensions of menopause continued to be acknowledged (for the most part) in this new wave of social research, a revised discourse of menopause was coming to the fore – menopause as positive or at least as acceptable and natural (see Dillaway, 2005a 2005b; Winterich, 2003; Hvas, 2006; Kafanelis et al., 2009).

As this literature has indicated, and as we found in the wider study of which data to be presented in this article are a part (Hyde et al., 2010a, 2010b), social aspects that mediate the experience of menopause are wide-ranging, and one of the key issues to emerge in the interpretative studies of menopause referred to just above is that it must be understood in the context of women's lives rather than narrowly in biological terms. It is perhaps for this very reason, though, that relatively little attention has been paid to the precise issue of how women view the bodily experience of the ending of menstruation. How do women feel about no longer having periods and what does this mean for them? While passing reference has been made to the ending of reproductive capacity in some studies, with Dillaway (2005b) dealing most directly with the issue, specifically what the ending of menstruation means for women has not hitherto been the subject of analysis. In concentrating on the cessation of periods, our intention is not to revert back to the biological determinism of the biomedical notion of menopause; rather we are concerned with understanding the meaning that this bodily experience held for women. In addition, since our sample included both lesbian and heterosexual women, our analysis aims to offer insights into how women whose identities were defined around a particular sexual orientation (lesbian or heterosexual) constructed menstruation and its cessation. Let us now briefly consider the theoretical literature in relation to menstruation, womanhood, sexuality and motherhood, because it is against this theoretical background that we attempt to make sense of data later in the paper.

Menstruation has been steeped in meanings about fertility and womanhood in popular culture, and while most folk myths about menstruation have largely dissipated in Western culture, an enduring theme in contemporary literature is that menarche signals the transition to womanhood and the capacity to become a mother (see Chang et al., 2010 for a systematic review on experiences of

menarche). In turn, motherhood is enmeshed with notions of femininity (Chodorow, 1989, 1990; Glenn, 1994), and viewed as a natural and desirable role for women (Abbott et al., 2005). Indeed in a review of scholarship on motherhood, Arendell (2000, p. 1192) noted that scholars in the field have observed that 'womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience' and women's gender identity is buttressed by mothering. Thus, despite competing ideologies of motherhood in contemporary feminist literature, the ideal of heterosexual motherhood still dominates in societal discourses, with alternative arrangements such as lesbian motherhood viewed as deviant (March and Miall, 2006). Indeed, the status of lesbianism in relation to womanhood itself has been contested, problematized and variously theorized.

The complexity of lesbian identity in relation to womanliness has long been at the centre of tensions between heterosexual and lesbian feminists. From the historically significant storming of the stage in 1970 at the 'Second Congress to Unite Women' in the USA by radical lesbians, womanhood and identity have been a central concern in relation to lesbianism. At that rally, radical lesbian leaders distributed a 10-page manifesto that drew attention to the way in which lesbians were not considered 'real' women, because of the view that "the essence of being a "woman" is to get fucked by men" (Radicalesbians, 1970, p. 2). The manifesto lashed out against the 'female role', against the confines of heterosexual and family functions, and against femininity that created anguish, 'emptiness' and 'numbness' for women. It stated:

As long as we cling to the idea of "being a woman," we will sense some conflict with that incipient self, that sense of I, that sense of whole person. (p.4)

While the intervening decades have seen debate and discussion about lesbian identity and politics in relation to womanhood (de Lauretis, 2003), particularly with the strong influence of post-structuralist theorizing from the 1980s, and a baby boom (otherwise known as the 'gayby boom') (Chabot and Ames, 2004)

among lesbians, lesbian identity around womanhood continues to be problematized. Teresa de Lauretis (2003), who is credited with conceptualizing the notion of queer theory (a development of third wave feminism that purports that identities are not fixed – they cannot be categorized and labelled since all meaning is believed to be constructed through discourse) writes of lesbianism and womanhood:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation (“forced residence,” domestic corvée, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children, etc.), a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual. (p. 20)

If menstruation is symbolically linked to womanhood, and lesbianism occupies a nebulous status in relation to womanhood, our analysis that includes how lesbians relate to the ending of their periods has the potential to throw some new light on understanding lesbian identities. In addition, comparisons with heterosexual women will shed further light on how a diverse range of women make sense of the permanent cessation of menstruation.

METHOD

While our focus on this article is on how a sample of women at menopause made sense of the ending of menstruation, the wider study from which data presented here form a part was a qualitative analysis of the experiences of menopause among a sample of women in Ireland. Other aspects of the study, namely, how hormone therapy was constructed during medical encounters, and how women’s health identities were produced through medical legitimation of menopause are published elsewhere (Hyde et al., 2010a, 2010b). Approval for the research was

processed through the Human Ethics Committee at the university where the research team was based. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, and pseudonyms are used in presenting data.

The inclusion criterion was that the woman identify herself as menopausal, either at the time of recruitment to the study or up until the previous year. Participants were selected both purposively (to ensure that a variety of socio-economic groups were included) from a range of woman's community organizations likely to interface with middle-aged women, and by snowball sampling. The process of selection was as follows: a letter and identical email were sent to the administrator of the organization requesting that members be made aware of the research (an information flyer was supplied for this purpose). A follow-up telephone call was then made to the administrator to develop rapport and determine if any of the organization's members were indeed willing to participate. The interest and enthusiasm of the administrator were central in the recruitment process as the degree to which members were made aware of the research rested predominantly with her. Potential participants were requested to allow the administrator to pass on their contact details to the Researcher Director. It is not known how many women were made aware of the research, but all those who submitted their details agreed to participate and were subsequently interviewed. Of the 23 organizations contacted, 8 yielded participants; the remaining 15 either did not return calls, had no regular administrator or otherwise did not engage with the research. Overall 23 participants were recruited to the study via the women's organizations, 12 via snowball sampling, 3 via a Traveler (white nomadic Irish ethnic minority group) organization and 1 via the research funding body, comprising a total sample size of 39 women. This sample size allowed for data saturation and for a diversity of experiences to be captured, and included 8 women recruited from a lesbian organization that linked members

throughout the country. A variety of socioeconomic groups were represented (18 working-class, 18 middle-class and 3 Travelers), and 17 participants lived in rural areas. The age range for the sample as a whole was 42-63, with a mean age of 53.5 years. Table 1 details socio-demographic information of the sample.

Data were gathered in 2007, and once-off individual in-depth interviews were conducted, except in the case of the 3 Traveler women who requested to be interviewed together. Interviews were conducted at a location deemed most convenient for the participant, and the range of interview locations included the participant's home, a room at the women's organization or at the university where the research team was based, cafes and a hotel lobby. An interview guide was used to loosely structure the interviews, but this was used flexibly to allow for the emergence of unforeseen issues. Topics ranged from how women came to define themselves as menopausal, their understanding of the body and bodily experiences, their help-seeking behavior, and their perspectives on midlife and aging. Interviews were conducted by two team members (AH and JN) who were both highly experienced at in-depth interviewing. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed, and interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes.

The analytic technique for managing the large quantity of data generated followed the steps of analysis of Thematic Networks as proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001). Thematic Networks borrows from earlier developments such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and argumentation theory (Toulmin, 1958) and involves the construction of, 'web-like illustrations (networks) that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text' (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 386). Rather like content analysis, thematic networks analysis endeavors to reveal the themes within qualitative data at varying levels, and to structure and present these themes in a logical manner. We followed the steps of thematic networks as follows: initially basic themes of the lowest order variety were extracted, and

these were later abstracted into organizing themes, that in turn were brought together as global themes. This process of managing data was facilitated using the software package NVivo, and the various levels and themes precipitated the construction of subsequent 'trees' and 'branches'. However, the guidance of thematic networks and the use of a software package can only go so far in the analysis process; it is the mediation of the intellectual discourses available to the researchers with the raw data that determines the degree of conceptual depth of the analysis, and we found that teasing out interpretations of data continued long after the global themes were identified.

RESULTS

Women's accounts revealed a great deal of diversity, with both positive and negative feelings expressed about what the permanent ending of periods meant for them. In addition, many women occupied a middle ground insofar as they did not engage in any introspective dialogue with themselves about what all of this meant for them, while others were far more contemplative about the experience. Furthermore, as we go on to explore in more depth, individual women often expressed a range of sentiments. For presentation purposes, we first consider accounts whereupon the ending of periods was accepted either without emotion, or where it was seen as a positive development in one's life. We then move on to unpack data that suggest that for some women, periods stopping brings with it feelings of sadness, loss and grief.

Accepting the ending of periods

For virtually all of the heterosexual women, and only a minority of the lesbian women, the ending of periods themselves was met with indifference or was interpreted in a favorable light. For these women, they reported that they did not want any more children, and menstruation in itself held no special place in their sense of identity. However, a few heterosexuals who reported an emotional apathy about the ending of periods *per se* simultaneously experienced a sense of wistfulness that they would never give birth again; it was the closing of the doors to pregnancy and birth that they reflected on rather than the absence of periods. (We revisit this issue later in this article.)

While the wider effects of the menopause in its broad sense, particularly the vasomotor symptoms, impacted heavily on the lives of many participants, the bodily experience of the permanent termination of menstrual bleeding itself tended to be accepted passively and unemotionally. Even when prompted by the interviewer as to whether they experienced an element of sadness about the ending of menstrual bleeding as a feature of their bodily experiences, virtually all claimed that they did not. As was found in Dillaway's (2005b) study of heterosexual women, most participants reported that they had fulfilled their childbearing role several years before the onset of menopause, and this appeared to mitigate any sense of sadness.

Interviewer [I]: So there is no sense of sadness that you won't have [periods] anymore?

Participant [P]: Not at all Girl, the job [of childbearing] is done! [Martha, heterosexual].

P: I just didn't want to have any more children at that stage, no sense of sadness, I always suffered terribly with my periods. (Toni, heterosexual)

Two participants experienced such long gaps between periods that they assumed that menstruation had finished, only to experience another period that was unwelcome in both cases. One, who described herself as an advocate of natural over biomedical healing, describes her disappointment at the return of

menstruation, and even considered requesting a hysterectomy (a biomedical intervention) to halt difficult periods.

I: How did you feel about the stopping in the first place, and then I'll get to [periods] the re-starting?

P: That was nice.

I: You were happy enough?

P: Happy enough.

I: No grieving?

P: No grieving . . . I am ready for the next stage of my life . . . I am comfortable being a mature woman.

I: And then when the periods came back in January, how was that feeling?

P: Quite a disappointment, quite upsetting, came back very, very heavy and enough to impinge on life. So that has been quite difficult . . . I have said to a doctor in the past about a hysterectomy or something it has been "Oh well you are nearly 53, they will stop sometime soon." (Rhona, heterosexual)

For the above participant, menstruation was a functional impediment that 'impinge[d] on life', and this was the case for many women, both lesbian and heterosexual. In this vein, the ending of periods signaled a freedom from bodily leakages that impeded everyday functioning and possible pain (although lesbians, as we go on to explore, tended to contemporaneously experience grief and loss). Positioning oneself within positive freedom discourses was particularly the case where periods had been painful, heavy, or otherwise problematic.

P: I just felt so free. I thought that was absolutely marvellous. . . . I felt great freedom. Swimming. Wearing clothes. Because I always had to have a period, and the bed would be always stained, and . . . they were very painful. (Alice, heterosexual)

P: All this sorta stuff that's associated with having a monthly, you know, period. That's all gone. So there is this sort of freedom; that you're free of all that. (Fiona, heterosexual)

One lesbian participant, who differed markedly from some of the other lesbians in this regard, registered no sadness or grief at the ending of her periods because she viewed them as physically uncomfortable, psychologically altering and an obstacle to everyday activities.

P: Because it's messy, it's a hassle, it's not nice to have cramps when you have it, it's not nice to be moody. . . . you can't even do your exercise routine because you've got these. (Cliona, lesbian)

She went on to describe menstruation as a pointless bodily function that might only be useful of one wanted to conceive (a notion that she had toyed with coming into her forties as we consider in a later section):

P: And let's face it, other than the fact that as long as you're having periods you feel like you could have children if you wanted to...obviously if you're in your twenties and thirties and thinking about having children, you wouldn't not want to have a period. But if it's of no use to you anymore, there's nothing [trails off] (Cliona, lesbian)

A couple of women indicated that their indifference to the ending of periods was associated to their simply being too busy or stressed to engage in any introspection about what the ending of periods really meant for them. Older participants, most of whose fertile years occurred in the era before the legalization and easy availability of contraception in Ireland, referred to the release from the fear of pregnancy that the ending of periods heralded.

The ending of periods mediated by feelings of loss and grief

Some women, predominantly lesbian participants as indicated earlier, described more equivocal feelings about their periods ending. The research team members who (independently initially) coded data agreed that these accounts 'stood out' from the rest in view of their richness when describing the impact and meaning of menstruation itself, and the spontaneous way in which these participants spoke of the issue. Thus, while just 8 of the 39 participants were lesbian, virtually all

narratives of grieving for periods and of menstruation holding meaning in their lives emanated from lesbians. This was the case among lesbians who had birth children of their own and those who had chosen not to have children. While some were glad that the negative elements of periods no longer had to be endured, a sense of grieving at the permanent ending of menstruation dominated their accounts.

The cessation of periods as a change in identity

One lesbian, Peig, and one heterosexual participant, Maryanne, spoke spontaneously about their sense that the bodily experience of menstruation had become part of who they were, part of their identity. (Maryanne, it should be noted, was far more vocal than the other heterosexual women about the meaning and significance of menstruation in her life.) Menstruation itself was articulated as an aspect of themselves that was quite separate from any yearning to become pregnant. Peig describes her sense of grieving for periods in the following quotation.

P: I did feel a sense of loss and a grief for that part of me that would never be like that again . . . that part of me that was gone. . . I never did really, fundamentally, want to be pregnant. . . . your periods are with you from...I started quite young. (Peig, lesbian)

Elsewhere in the interview, Peig spontaneously revealed that she had been sexually abused as a child and reported that she considered pregnancy to be an invasion on the body that she had no wish for, yet she constituted her identity through the body function of menstruation. Maryanne similarly describes the sense of loss with a previously familiar aspect of her life.

P. There is a bereavement at the end of it anyway, even if you never wanted a baby in the sense that this is a part of your life ... I feel bereaved that some part of my life that you have had for so long is gone. (Maryanne, heterosexual)

Cessation of periods as a loss of womanhood

Yet another of the lesbian participants, Harriet, referred to a sense of loss of womanhood associated with the ending of periods. For her, menstruation in and of itself signaled womanhood, and what comes through in the narrative is the participant's own sense of disapproval of her equating a 'real' woman as a menstruating woman.

P. I was really unhappy about being menopausal. . . . I would have internalised all those feelings that you're aware of and disapprove of, you still internalise them, about not being a real woman any more. . . . And I actually grieved for my periods. (Harriet, lesbian)

Harriet went on to explain that she was always glad to experience her periods because she had suffered from premenstrual tension that made her feel bloated and unwell. However, as she progressed in her narrative, she returned to the issue of womanhood and the sense of power that menstruation gave her. In addition, she indicated that she had no yearning for another child.

P. So I associated it [menstruation] with these pleasant feelings. Really I think it's much more to do with the fact that powerful adult womanhood is a menstruating womanhood. And it's somehow about a loss of power. I never really wanted another child. . . . So I didn't feel that it was not having the chance to have any more children. (Harriet, lesbian)

Menstruation as a boost to creativity

Another lesbian participant, Winifred, whose only child was 18 years, and who also indicated that did not want another (although she would have liked that choice to remain open), reported that she tried to postpone the ending of menstruation by using a flower remedy. This she did because she found menstruation to be a very creative and powerful time, and revealed that she missed her periods terribly.

P. I miss them [periods] terribly. . . . And I hadn't any plans to have any more children. I mean, I don't like having no more options. . . . I think menstruation is a very creative time. It's a very powerful time. It's a time of magic and creativity, kind of thing. (Winifred, lesbian)

The theme of associating menstruation with power is an interesting dimension of the narrative.

Menstruation as a signifier of youth/feeling good

While Harriet, as indicated earlier, associated menstruating with pleasant feelings and the release from PMT, Maryanne, the heterosexual woman referred to earlier (who had one young child and reported that she yearned for another), also had positive things to say about menstruation. Although Maryanne had had a history of very heavy and difficult periods that required her to use sanitary pads designed to manage incontinence among adults, she associated having periods with energy and youth as the following quotation suggests.

P: But in a way I miss them [periods], . . . , I know they are very heavy and they are troublesome but that energy you used to have with them is gone. I feel there is a certain youthness gone in your life. . . . So even if you left the baby thing aside, you feel that this just happens to people who are ancient. (Maryanne, heterosexual)

Constructing the ending of periods as closing the door to motherhood

Many women had made a decision to conclude their childbearing some years before the start of their menopause, so the ending of menstruation did not present itself as a definitive marking point in the ending of their fertility. One lesbian woman became aware of her infertility in her twenties and grieved about this well before menopause. A few women who had chosen not to have more children nonetheless referred to a sense of sadness that the childbearing phase was over.

However, across the whole sample, just three women (two lesbians and one heterosexual) elaborated in some detail their thoughts specifically on what the cessation of menstruation meant in terms of closing their options to become pregnant.

The two lesbian women were Cliona and Anna, neither of whom had children, and both spoke of their indecisiveness about whether to become mothers in the lead up to the menopause. One imparted that her realization that the possibility of having a child was coming to a close brought with it a sense of sadness. For her, coming into the menopause triggered a process of deliberation about the possibility of becoming a mother, something that she ultimately decided against but with a recognition that her decision would bring occasional sadness.

P: I think that realization that you definitely will not have any children of your own is just kind of a loss in some ways. . . .Coming, I think from 40 on up, say from 44-46 I thought about it. I already said to myself that I would not try if I got to be 46 ... I'm thankful for a lot of the stresses [to do with children] that aren't there in my life. But I think that probably always in my life I will occasionally be sad about it. (Cliona, lesbian)

Nonetheless, she simultaneously described the delight that she felt at not having periods. These, she held, amounted to the release of unnecessary hormones in to the body each month, disrupted one's mood and physical capacity, and aside from enabling the possibility of children during the childbearing years, were not something to laud. The second lesbian woman, Anna, described a sudden urge for a baby when she realized she was in the menopause, which, she reported was short-lived.

P1: I never wanted to have a child until I started going through the menopause. . . . I got this . . . this tremendous rush to go and get pregnant, actually. . . . It was the early stages [of menopause symptoms].. . . Apparently your hormones are saying, 'Alright, it's your last chance, Love! Get in there now if you need to.' But I soon got over that one anyway. (Anna, lesbian)

By contrast, the heterosexual participant, Maryanne, who had experienced two miscarriages in her forties described her continued longing for a second child, a yearning that she believed influenced her feelings about periods and the menopause.

P: But the reason why I can't say anything positive about it is because I want another child. I have tried and tried and tried and it didn't work out and you always have that in the background anyway, somewhere back in the back of your brain. So from that point of view I probably wouldn't see it as positive,. . . the baby hunger, they call it.

(Maryanne, heterosexual)

When data are considered as a whole, lesbians were more likely than heterosexual participants to give spontaneous and lengthy accounts of grief and loss although commonly interspersed with feelings of freedom.

There was not a linear link in participants' narratives between associating womanhood with menstruation and menstruation with motherhood. Some participants grieved for periods without linking this grief to the yearning to mother, whilst others indicated a contempt for menstruation as a bodily function in itself, yet experienced a sadness that giving birth would be permanently closed off for them.

DISCUSSION

Our analysis suggests that, for the majority of participants and in particular heterosexuals, the ending of menstruation did not evoke strong feelings, with most expressing a blasé acceptance or a sense of freedom from the morbidity and inconvenience of periods. In this sense, our findings reflect the findings of other studies (Dillaway, 2005b). Since a woman never knows with certainty that her last period really is the last one until some time has elapsed, the heightened emotions associated with definitive awareness of closure and change associated with some

other life transitions (such as a woman's last day in paid employment or her child's last day at secondary school) may have affected the nature of women's responses. Nonetheless, for most of the lesbian participants who were in a sizeable minority, emotions of loss were simultaneously expressed alongside positive feelings, as was the notion that they had thought about what menstruation meant for them and were able to articulate this in the course of the interview. Let us unpack two key issues that have emerged in the analysis of this data: first, why lesbian participants might have been more expressive about the meaning of the ending of their periods compared to heterosexual woman; and second, how the substance of what they had to say relates to theorisations of menstruation in the literature.

To return to the first issue – why lesbian more than straight women drew on discourses around menstruation that imbued feelings of loss and grief when periods ceased – may be associated with the fact that lesbians are likely to be exposed to a discursive community that encourages debate and dialogue about the lesbian body, given its nebulous status in relation to womanhood, identity and image. A rejection of socially constructed norms of femininity has been an important aspect of lesbian political resistance historically and this may lend itself to a heightened awareness and literacy about the body, and especially about exclusively female bodily functions. That heterosexual women conform to normative standards of femininity (at least in relation to their sexual identity as heterosexual and possibly in other ways of thinking and interacting as well) may have meant that there was no need for them to engage in much introspection about what menstruation meant for them and no identity issues to work through and defend. Female bodily functions for straight women may have been taken-for-granted, and thus met with nonchalance and indifference peppered with relief and positive emotions.

The other factor that must be considered is that 7 of the 8 lesbian participants were middle-class, and the cultural capital that this conferred upon them is likely to have a role in the language and critical capacity available to them to connect with and articulate their embodied experiences. However, this is a weak explanation, given that 11 of the heterosexual women were also middle-class and apart from one exception, these did not place the same emphases on the meaning of menstruation as did most lesbian participants. Included among the straight women were a few who positioned themselves heavily within the 'natural' discourse (very strong advocates of alternative medicine, home birth, and natural healing), and even these reported no feelings of grief at the ending of menstruation.

Let us turn now to the second issue that our analysis has thrown up, namely, the substance of what participants revealed about conceptual notions of menstruation. As indicated at the start of this article, menstruation has historically been linked to womanhood, and womanhood to heterosexuality and motherhood. For those women who expressed grieving at menopause, menstruation meant a diverse range of things. While womanhood was indeed a dimension for two women (one lesbian, one straight), this was not the case for all those who experienced the ending of periods as a loss. As has been found in other studies (Pitman, 2000), lesbian women can be influenced by the very discourses that they experience as restrictive, and this was found in our study in relation to Harriet who equated menstruation with powerful womanhood, in spite of her disapproval of this conceptualisation. Menstruation also constituted an aspect of identity that was not explicitly or at least primarily linked to motherhood for some, but was nonetheless an important component of biographical identity. For others, menstruation was experienced as a time of heightened creativity, or a signifier of youth and power. For two lesbian participants, the loss of fertility brought broodiness as their

opportunity to conceive was being closed off. However, for most women who reported experiencing loss and grief about the ending of periods, menstruation had meaning for these women that did not necessarily encompass the capacity to bear children, or at least this was not foregrounded as a factor in their sadness.

That one heterosexual woman was particularly strong in articulating feelings of loss at the cessation of menopause (as was another, albeit to a lesser extent) suggests that grieving for periods was not exclusively a lesbian experience. That there were various reasons as to *why* lesbian participants grieved at the loss of periods suggests that lesbians did not all take up a singular subject position in relation to menstruation, lending support to Queer Theory (see Butler, 1999), the post-structural development of gender theory that purports that there is fragmentation and plurality in how the body is experienced across any group (gay or straight) and to Koller's (2008) notion that lesbian identities are fragmented and dynamic. In drawing attention to broad (though not definitive) differences between heterosexual and lesbian women in their responses to the ending of menstruation, our analysis might appear to challenge the deconstruction of the gay/straight dualism. However, while sexual orientation as an entirely social product is contestable, our explanation for such differences, as indicated above, suggests that these arise by virtue of the discourses with which some women engage and which they invoke and the subject positions they take up.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited because of the small sample size, and we are thus in no way suggesting that the differences that we found in relation to a woman's sexual orientation are generalisable. In addition, given that comparisons are being made between heterosexual and lesbian women, a further weakness of the study is that

the number of participants of each sexual orientation is 'uneven', with a far higher number of heterosexuals in the sample. We recommend that future research on the topic addresses these weakness, and uses both a larger sample size and a more balanced representation from each group.

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Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

	Hetero- sexual (N=31)	Lesbian (N=8)
Marital status		
Married/co-habiting	n=25	n=0
Single (never married)	n=3	n=0
Single (previously married (separated/divorced/widowed)	n=3	n=0
Co-habiting same-sex relationship	n=0	n=8
Employment status		
In paid employment	n=11	n=6
Not in paid employment	n=19	n=1
Mature student (further or higher education)	n=1	n=1
Socio-economic status*		
Socioeconomic groups 1-3 (professional non-manual, middle-class)	n=11	n=7
Socioeconomic groups 4-6 (Manual, working-class)	n=17	n=1
Traveller (ethnic minority group)	n=3	n=0
Age range		
40-44 years	n=4	n=1
45-49 years	n=3	n=3
50-54 years	n=10	n=2
55-59 years	n=10	n=1
60-64 years	n=4	n=1
Geographical location		
Rural	n=15	n=2
Urban	n=13	n=6

Nomadic	n=3	n=0
*Note: Socioeconomic status is measured by current or most recent occupation according to the scale developed by O'Hare et al (1991).		