Blood Rites - Reconnecting with the Innate Feminine: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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This study explored women’s experiences of menarche and menstruation as they developed a deeper understanding and relationship with their bodies through ritualised menstrual practices of communing with Earth over three consecutive menstrual cycles. The qualitative methodology of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used, and data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews with three participants. The interview transcripts were analysed adopting a strategy of line-by-line analysis and specialised software was used to identify emergent themes and patterns. Four superordinate themes emerged: negative beliefs, relationship with menstrual cycle, transpersonal correlations of menstrual cycle, and connection with the Feminine. The findings showed that through ritual practices of collecting blood and giving it to the soil, all three women were able to transform previously negative attitudes and redefine their relationship with their menstrual cycle, blood, bodies and minds. They became more aware of their bodies’ cyclical and relational nature, making transpersonal associations and connections with the Feminine thereby demonstrating the power of healing through rituals.

Keywords: ritual, blood, menstruation, relationship, the Feminine

Whilst menstruation is a defining occurrence in a woman’s lifetime, most women perceive it negatively as something shameful and inconvenient (Fedele, 2014; Martire, 2006). Centuries of patriarchy and negative sociocultural menstrual beliefs dating from Aristotle’s time (Fedele, 2014; Héritier, 1996) have fuelled women’s feelings of...
inferiority and of negativity towards menstruation. This promoted a disconnection from their bodies and a fragmented psyche and way of living (Bertlesen, 2002). Shameful perceptions around menarche, which is the first occurrence of menstruation, and menstruation can also be seen in developed countries (Golub, 1992; Houppert, 1999) and where ambivalent attitudes towards menstruation have further reinforced these negative attitudes.

Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) present an anthropological and cross-cultural span of menstrual taboos and myths both positive and negative. They highlight theories that view these taboos as a source of female oppression: menstruation as pollution, as evidence of neurotic complexes, and menstrual blood being considered dangerous. One common menstrual taboo is that of separation from light, water and soil, isolating the menstruating woman (Buckley, 1988; Grahn, 1993). Gottlieb (1988) and Grahn (1993) wrote about the ancestral woman whose menstruating blood flow was not to mingle with that of Earth, to avoid falling into the chaos of pre-human consciousness. On the other hand, menstrual blood may be granted extraordinary power, being used for protection, medicine, increasing fertility, and viewed as a primary life force and generative principle (Grahn, 1993). Similarly, Yurok women understand menstruation as a powerful, positive phenomenon with esoteric significance, bringing a woman to the height of her powers, and presenting her with opportunities of self-development through conscious bodily awareness (Buckley, 1988).

Whilst several conscious encounters of experiences such as pregnancy, menopause, childbirth, menstruation and orgasm can lead to heightened intuitive awareness and spiritual power (Dinsmore-Tuli, 2015), this research focused on such opportunities delivered by menstruation. Menstrual power could symbolise access to the animal mind of our prehistoric ancestors (Grahn, 1993), or perhaps access to the wisdom of instinct. Pope (2001) reinforces a similar idea stating that women during menstruation have the capacity to catch a glimpse of an old knowing, the power of the Feminine. Menstrual synchrony between women also becomes a hypothesis for women’s potentiality to conjoin in a blood union transcending the boundaries of self (Knight, 1988). Whilst some studies contradict such phenomena (Strassmann, 1999), Buckley (1988) and Knight (1988) suggest an inner Feminine wisdom which enables a woman to align herself with another entity capable of organizing its functioning in cycles. Patel (1994) also suggests a mirroring between the female menstrual cycle and “the cyclical change of seasons as well as the orderliness in the cosmos” (p. 73). The orchestration of hormones governing each menstrual phase further accredits the inherent Feminine wisdom (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1988).

Fedele (2014) touches on these ideas in her analysis of pilgrims performing creative rituals to commune with “feminine Earth” (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1988). They collect menstrual blood and offer it to the soil to repair a social order which has diverged from the natural truth of female reality and experience. These crafted menstrual blood rituals appear to be central to Goddess spirituality pilgrimages and customs of “indigenous Mexican women” (p. 9), having their origins in practices of an “ancient pre-Christian
and pre-patriarchal cult of the Goddess” (Fedele, 2014, p. 3). Fedele (2014) highlights the importance of fostering an embodied relationship with the greater Feminine. The Feminine is defined by Pope and Wurlitzer (2017) as: presence, “the ineffable, invisible, intangible presence without which life is rendered soulless” (p. 26); a way of being which needs to be cultivated so that “She can be known and experienced” (p. 26); a process which fundamentally serves all life; wisdom anchored in cycles. This meaning has been referred to throughout this research when using the term “Feminine”.

Within the context of Shakta Hindu embodied religion, menstruation is considered a process inseparable from a holistic concept of woman (Patel, 1994). A similar perspective is postulated by Miller (1986) and Surrey (1991) who have suggested a reframing of psychological models to acknowledge women’s relational, cyclical natures that have been disengaged and suppressed (Gilligan, 1993; Martire, 2006). The relational models of women’s psychology place the psyche in the body (Gilligan, 1988), enabling women to reconnect to their corporeal experiences, rhythms and characteristics such as creativity and emotional connectedness (Miller, 1986). In addition, positive menarche experiences predict positive menstrual attitudes (Bishop, 1999) and may transform the menstrual experience for women (Aubeeluck & Maguire, 2002). This could bring acceptance of their sexuality (Rempel & Baumgartner, 2003) and occurrences of transpersonal unitive peak-experiences (Maslow, 2013). Negative aspects, such as hate and anger, are also part of the “Dark Feminine” instinct which, if reclaimed, could bring wholeness to a woman’s psyche (Harding, 1971). Furthermore, Martire (2006) argues that wholeness can be achieved through a sacred marriage of Self which may translate into acknowledgement and acceptance of all female cycle phases working harmoniously, as all of its rhythms stimulate and present different facets of one’s nature (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1988).

The literature identified a social problem: the culturally ingrained, negative perceptions of menstruation that coerce women to experience disconnection from their bodies and natural rhythms. It also suggests a potentially powerful connection between menstrual blood rituals to commune with Earth (Shuttle & Redgrove, 1988) and psychosocial identity and growth within relationship to their own bodies (Gilligan, 1988; Martire 2006; Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1991). The main aim of this research was to explore women’s lived experience of menstruation as they developed a deeper relationship with their bodies through ritualised menstrual practices. An additional aim was to examine any perceptual transformations resulting from the practice (Harding, 1971, Miller, 1986).

**Method**

This research was undertaken using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach to research that enables a detailed analysis of participants’ lived experience (Smith et al., 2012). This approach was chosen to enable an exploration of participants’ perceptions and understanding of their experiences of menarche and menstruation during engagement in ritualised practice over the course of three
consecutive menstruations. Participants were required to collect their menstrual blood and then offer it to the soil whilst communing with Earth (Fedele, 2014). Participants were invited to add their own elements and to create a ritual of personal significance to them.

The study employed a small sample of women, for whom the research question was meaningful, with an openness to engage fully with the practices. The selection criteria included healthy menstruating women of 18+ years of age, with no artificial hormonal interference with their cycle, who were new to the practice. Participants were recruited using social media to provide an information leaflet. Ethical approval was granted for the study by the Professional Development Foundation and Alef Trust Research Ethics Committee. All participants were informed of all ethical aspects of the research and their right to withdraw at any time.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quan Yin</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Yoga teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persephone</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Art historian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Writer, yoga teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews consisting of 11 open-ended questions. Each interview lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. The questions were formulated based on academic literature, personal experiences of ritualised practice and published guidelines on interview development (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The questions were developed to allow inquiry into participants’ current and past perceptions of the menstrual cycle and blood, their experiences of menarche and its impact, and their overall relationship with menstruation. They also aimed to investigate the transpersonal synchronistic aspects of the female cycle and unitive experiences within the context of menstrual rituals.

Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and then manually transcribed verbatim. In order to explore potential changes in perception, all participants were interviewed before and after they engaged with menstrual rituals, to minimise potential participant and researcher personal biases. Each interview was analysed individually, adopting a strategy of line-by-line analysis of experiences and understandings of each participant. Research software was used to identify a set of initial nodes, which were then used to form emergent themes (Smith et al., 2012). The identification of the emergent patterns identified both convergence and divergence. Commonality and nuance was undertaken for single cases, and then the process was repeated across cases.
Results

The data analysis resulted in four superordinate themes relevant to the research question: negative beliefs, relationship with menstrual cycle, transpersonal correlations of menstrual cycle, and connection with the Feminine. Figure 1 presents them alongside their subthemes. Subthemes where changes in perception were identified were highlighted in light orange; details of changes are explicated in following respective sections.

Figure 1
Emergent Themes from Data Analysis

1) Negative beliefs
This master theme arose from various existing cultural negative beliefs and their impact on participants’ journeys through womanhood.

1a) Cultural negative beliefs
All participants had been exposed to negative cultural perceptions of menstrual blood using phrases such as: “bad blood” (Persephone, Quan Yin), “dead blood” (Persephone), “an
unpleasant thing” (Quan Yin), “pain” (Diana, Persephone, Quan Yin) and “uncleanliness” (Persephone). Persephone and Diana were also exposed to views of menstruation being a “punishment” (Persephone) and a “shameful aspect” (Diana) that should be kept hidden.

1b) Past-held negative beliefs
All participants had negative attitudes towards menstruation. The menstrual blood had a “repellent smell” (Diana, Persephone, Quan Yin) and was perceived as “bad” (Persephone, Quan Yin) and “shameful” (Diana), “unclean” (Persephone) and “inconvenient” (Persephone). Persephone and Diana acknowledged women’s rejection of tampons understood as a “violation of their body” (Persephone). Both Diana and Quan Yin rejected their femininity due to ingrained negative beliefs. Diana, for example, said: “I was a child, not wanting these breasts, not wanting my femininity”. Persephone in contrast had always been “proud of” her menstruation.

1c) Impact at menarche
All participants recognised the importance of menarche in a woman’s life as a gateway into womanhood, describing it as “a change that needed acknowledgement” (Quan Yin), “a rite of passage” (Persephone), “something to be celebrated” (Quan Yin). Persephone had a positive initiation into womanhood: “When my blood came [...] I remember mum making a cake, and she called [...] her two closest female friends [...] gave me the sense of community”. However, she experienced negative attitudes when her mother’s friend equated menarche to “knowing of pain”, and struggled to understand the menstrual process as a whole. Diana’s menarche arrived early and her mother was a “bit shocked” leading Diana to reject menstruation and puberty. Quan Yin felt relief at menarche because she was previously exposed to the idea of painful menstruation.

1d) Impact on the female experience
Quan Yin and Diana experienced a sense of disconnection from the menstrual process and their bodies due to negative menstrual attitudes. Diana was unaware of her right to “have time and space for [her] body” and blamed society for not explaining the complexity of female cycle “to girls and to boys”. She later experienced relationship problems when menstruating. Less exposed to negative cultural attitudes, Persephone was aware of the impact such perceptions have on women: “Female sexuality that is not connected to fertility, has been traditionally demonised in most cultures”.

1e) Men and menstruation
Diana and Persephone acknowledged men’s lack of knowledge of the complexity of menstruation stating: “men are uncomfortable with it” (Persephone) and “my ex-boyfriend had nearly no idea at all about menstruation” (Diana). Both of them also experienced male rejection of menstrual processes and female intensity at premenstrum. Persephone equated male rejection of menstruation with men’s life inexperience.
1f) Deconstruction of negative beliefs
All participants experienced a deconstruction of negative beliefs. Quan Yin was exposed to positive views in femininity workshops resulting in new perceptions of menstruation. Through significant absence of menstruation, Diana and Persephone’s bodies signalled that some attitudes needed to change. Diana realised that menstruation should be accepted by society as it would have helped “to talk about this thing”, and “if everyone was a bit more appreciative”. Through ritualised practices, Persephone acknowledged the importance of menstrual blood which improved her relationship with her menstrual cycle and her openness in “talking about it to people”.

2) Relationship with menstrual cycle
This theme emerged from the physical, emotional and behavioural aspects of participants’ menstrual experience, and their current perceptions of menstruation.

2a) Past disconnection
Diana and Quan Yin experienced a strong disconnection with the menstrual process, describing it as “a thing that happened to me” (Quan Yin), “not connected to it” (Diana), “total chaos” (Quan Yin), “nobody explains what’s happening” (Diana). Male rejection of menstruation within relationship also fuelled Diana’s disconnection. For both Quan Yin and Diana, past use of contraceptives amplified their disconnection. Diana said, “it was not a real menstruation”.

2b) Past irregularity
All participants experienced some form of menstrual cycle irregularity. Quan Yin had a chaotic experience during early years causing confusion and incorrect assumptions about her fertility. Persephone had a very regular cycle initially with a recent experience of complete absence making her feel “less perfect”. Diana also experienced a complete absence of menstruation “for over a year” and associated this with rejection of her femininity.

2c) Pain and discomfort
All participants experienced menstrual-related pain at some point. They also experienced a range of other discomforts such as “headaches” (Diana), “mood swings, migraines, sore breasts” (Persephone), “dizziness” (Persephone) and “lower back pain” (Quan Yin).

2d) Regularity
All participants had a regular cycle at the time of interviews. Quan Yin’s cycle evolved from the initial chaotic state to a regular state as she learned to “track her ovulation”. She linked regularity to health and normality. Persephone also associated regularity with normality and order, and with “belonging to the tribe”.

2e) Body
Participants had their own ways of distinguishing menstrual phases. Ovulation was clearly recognized by participants, mentioning feelings in their ovaries, pain, tension and
a specific type of vaginal fluid. Persephone liked “to feel the connection with the body because it responds differently in those days” and loved her womb which she equated to the Feminine. Some participants also experienced hunger, breast tension, water retention, and malfunctioning digestion during premenstrum.

2f) Emotions and behaviours
Quan Yin did not experience emotional fluctuations throughout her cycle. Persephone and Diana felt restored with the arrival of menstruation after experiencing high intensity mood swings and sadness during premenstrum. Diana also experienced “very vivid dreams” prior to menstruation. All participants felt the need to slow down during menstruation, liked to keep warm, feel comfortable and indulge in various food cravings. Menstruating seemed to bring the participants closer to themselves and invited more self-nurturing: “I manage to bring myself closer to me, closer to home” (Quan Yin).

2g) Currently held perceptions
Exposure to positive menstruation attitudes and ritualised practices facilitated a deconstruction of shame and an appreciation of Feminine processes in all participants. Realising the importance of menstruation, participants regarded menstruation as “a wonderful and beneficial thing, healthy [...] that defines us in a certain way” (Quan Yin). Persephone and Diana expected their periods with joy and Diana felt that the rituals helped her make peace with the past: “Giving blood to the Earth... it felt like making peace with all this.”

2h) Increased menstrual wellbeing
The ritualised practice reduced menstrual pain and discomforts for Quan Yin and Diana: “As a result of the ritual practice period [...] last couple of menstruations I did not experience any pain at all” (Quan Yin).

2i) Increased awareness of menstrual phases
Engaging with menstrual rituals increased awareness of the body in relation to menstrual phases for all participants and reinforced their relationship with their cycles as exemplified by Diana: “I now feel that my body mirrors the part of the cycle.”

3) Transpersonal correlations of menstrual cycle
This master theme formed from participants’ reflections on the alignment of their menstrual cycle patterns to other women’s cycles, to moon phases, and to the seasons of nature.

3a) Menstrual synchrony with other women
All participants experienced menstrual synchrony with other women. This occurred in the context of living together and personal closeness with friends and family. Persephone’s view was that similarly to some primates, females in a group have tendencies to “synchronize with the alpha”. Diana and Persephone felt that it is not only the physical changes that synchronise, but also the emotional and psychological states.
3b) Correlation with moon phases
Participants acknowledged a similarity between their cycle and the moon’s phases. Quan Yin and Persephone had a similar rationale supporting associations between various stages. Ovulation and new moon was “a potential for creating something new” (Quan Yin), whilst during menstruation and full moon “things get to a maximum” (Quan Yin) and there is “release” (Persephone). Diana felt her alignment with the moon fluctuated, experiencing menstruation during both full and new moon.

3c) Correlation with seasons of nature
Quan Yin and Diana mapped their cycles to the seasons of nature, associating the premenstrum with autumn “as it gets really stormy” (Diana), menstruation with winter, and ovulation with summer and creative energies. Quan Yin acknowledged the similarities between her cycle and nature’s seasons, as “a cycle that starts somewhere, grows, and then returns to the point where it started”.

4) Connection with the feminine
This master theme emerged as participants strengthened their relationship with the Feminine through ritualised practices.

4a) Engagement with blood
In the past, Quan Yin collected her menstrual blood and created a menstrual blood painting, (Figure 2 A) but negative beliefs about the smell of blood made her hesitant. As she transformed these negative beliefs she desired to engage more with blood and made another menstrual blood painting (Figure 2 B). She kept this on her desk, representing “a womb heart from which everything springs.”

Figure 2
Menstrual Blood Paintings by Quan Yin

Persephone’s ritualised practice made her enjoy collecting blood and scheduling her life routines around menstruation. Witnessing blood in significant amounts led her to important realisations: “You have a cup of blood [and] everything else that is in there.”
You see that there are parts of you in there”. Diana found a new connection with her blood during her first communion with Earth: “I was really connecting with my blood. Because I saw it there, and poured it on Earth. I really started to like my blood. It’s red, it’s beautiful red.”

4b) Empowering perceptions of blood and menstruation
Through ritualized practices, all participants acquired empowering perceptions of menstrual blood. Menstrual blood was perceived as part of themselves, present and integrated. All participants associated their womb with their ‘centre’, from which their essence springs. Quan Yin associated blood with power, considering it an ally and a connection to the world around her. Persephone became fond of her blood, considering it intimate and powerful, bringing awareness of “one’s life and mortality”. She equated menstrual blood with “raw nature” and “the connection with the other side”, bringing recognition of innate regenerative capacities. Diana viewed her menstrual blood as “magical”, and “a defining element of humanity”. Menstrual blood held the power of letting go and of continuation, and the power of women to speak up and set healthy boundaries.

4c) The ritual
Diana and Persephone recognized the power of ritualised practice to reshape perceptions and enable a connection with menstrual blood. Persephone considered her ritual “sheer power” and “very feminine in its essence”. Ancient concepts like sacrifice and offerings further imbued it with the power of creation, as her ritual experience was “electric” and “supercharged”. Diana acknowledged the ritual’s ability to revitalise the connection with the whole. Quan Yin discovered creative potential in her blood, a “source that nourishes a new life” through union with Earth.

4d) Emergence of Feminine aspects
Participants experienced an emergence of self-caring and self-nurturing aspects during menstruation. All participants got a sense of feeling closer to themselves and being more receptive to their bodies. Quan Yin and Persephone made use of intention setting during rituals. As Quan Yin put it: “Let my blood be used to further create and nourish life. I ask mother Earth to use it as She best sees fit, so that creation and life can carry on.”

Diana and Persephone experienced negative aspects during premenstruum. For example, Diana experienced rage at being rejected by her ex-boyfriend whilst menstruating. She acknowledged it as a consequence of suppressing another aspect - looking after oneself by setting firm boundaries, which she fully embodied during the final interview.

4e) Experience of interconnectedness
Quan Yin experienced a powerful sense of becoming one with the soil and a feeling of interconnectedness with the whole of nature during the ritual. Persephone’s existing relationship with Earth reinforced her feeling that the Earth expected the menstrual blood. She considered this an expression of balanced give and take dynamics: “It felt
like I owed it to Earth”. She also experienced a degree of interconnectedness with her surroundings: “I’m giving my blood back to the Earth. And the moon is watching [...] It was like everything around me felt it.”

Persephone further tapped into “the symbolism of Earth being a giant womb for everyone”. Diana also perceived interconnectedness with the Feminine, which seemed to direct her cycle, acknowledging aspects of oneness with Earth: “We are Earth in a way”; and a source of “power and wisdom.”

4f) Sacred marriage of self
Participants acknowledged the dynamics between the whole and its constituent components. Quan Yin became aware of some neglected aspects of herself: a part that wants to “enjoy life” and play, a more nurturing aspect, and her unlived “sexuality”. Persephone acknowledged various aspects of the Feminine, both positive and negative, and deemed them equally important within the complexity of the whole:

Knowing that you can create, and you can fail, and you can heal, and you can, if you want, destroy. And all of these things are part of the whole. And the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Diana recognised the important ability to discern what is right for oneself. She also acknowledged the innate wisdom of the hormonal system, “it always works itself out”. She applied the rhythms of nature to her creative writing which now “feels natural”. She then extended it to a completely new way of living harmoniously within the complexity of self: “Living your natural life in your rhythm with your body and your mind and your emotions. All working together, because this will bring the best outcome.”

Discussion
The results detailed the participants’ experiences and feelings during their menstrual rituals over three consecutive menstruations and provided rich data for analysis and comparison with academic literature.

Negative beliefs and relationship with menstrual cycle
Two participants experienced negative emotions towards menstruation at menarche leading to a greater degree of disconnection from their bodies and experience of early womanhood. Both identified a lack of support in being prepared for menarche, which suggests the impact of enculturation in a patriarchal society that promotes menstruation as a taboo and a symbol of female inferiority (Fedele, 2014; Gilligan, 1993; Héritier, 1996). Gilligan (1993) acknowledged that exposure to patriarchal negative attitudes about menstruation may lead young women to supress important aspects of their female consciousness, resulting in a fragmented experience of self and
a disconnection from instincts (Grahn, 1993). One participant recognised society’s inability to accommodate women’s cyclical changes including pain and discomfort, blaming “our culture’s patriarchal values of stability and consistency” (Martire, 2006, p. 229). These results reinforce Fedele’s (2014) findings of a social order that has diverged from the natural truth of female reality.

Both participants felt shame about menarche and menstruation (Golub, 1992; Houppert, 1999) and experienced rejection of their transforming bodies. This disconnection was amplified by a use of hormonal contraceptives, which according to Shuttle and Redgrove (1988) diminish a woman’s access to her natural rhythms. The participant who had a more positive initiation into womanhood experienced a lesser degree of disconnection from her femininity, body, menstruation and sexuality. This aligns with Bishop’s (1999) and Rempel and Baumgartner’s (2003) claims that positive menarche experiences lead to positive menstrual attitudes, and the exposure to positive menstrual attitudes brings comfort with one’s sexuality. All participants acknowledged the impact of negative sociocultural attitudes about menarche that continued to affect their lives, their relationship with their menstrual cycle and intimate relationships, particularly with men. Men’s lack of awareness and rejection of menstrual changes were attributed to a prejudiced society. The women in this study, through a convergence of various factors such as cycle irregularity, were prompted to enact change. They oriented themselves towards positive information about femininity which enabled a deconstruction of ingrained negative beliefs. Aubeeluck and Maguire (2002) postulate that exposure to positive menstrual attitudes can reframe the menstrual experience for women. This deconstruction of acquired attitudes was initiated but incomplete at the beginning of this study. Initially, some participants struggled to accept their menstrual blood and its odour. They still felt shame about menstruation and were still regarding periods as inconvenient.

Transpersonal correlations of menstrual cycle and connection with the Feminine
The ritualised practices enabled participants to acquire empowering perceptions of their blood, menstruation and the Feminine. Two participants acknowledged the capacity of menstrual rituals to develop menstrual consciousness and to reframe their perceptions enabling a connection with the menstrual blood. They also mentioned experiencing increased menstrual wellbeing and reduced premenstrual symptoms and pain. All participants reported an increased awareness towards their bodies in relation to their menstrual cycle, supporting the idea that for women the development of self occurs within relationship and conscious awareness of the body (Buckley, 1988; Gilligan, 1988; Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1991). Participants viewed their menstrual blood as imbued with the power of creation and power to connect to the whole, which aligned with the Yurok women’s belief that menstruation brings a woman to the height of her powers (Buckley, 1988). One participant’s perception of menstruation was enabling her to set healthy boundaries for herself, which were previously not set. Through the use of ritual, the participants were able to conceptualize menstruation as a natural and normal bodily process, which is crucial to their female empowerment (Fedele, 2014).
The practice of communing with Earth through blood enabled participants to foster an embodied relationship with the greater Feminine (Fedele, 2014; Shuttle & Redgrove, 1988). A range of Feminine aspects emerged such as: self-nurturing, allowing them to slow down; receptiveness towards their bodies (Haddon, 1988); creative aspects and interconnectedness (Miller, 1986); as well as some darker aspects such as aggressiveness and rage, which were equally important in restoring wholeness (Harding, 1971). The personalised meaning attributed to the ritual by each participant enhanced its potency to bring them closer to their innate Feminine nature as they brought into focus something important to them. This supported de-conditioning of patriarchal beliefs and enabled transpersonal unitive experiences of the Feminine. It also provided a more personal and organic experience of menstruation and femininity (Maslow, 2013). In addition to these unitive experiences of interconnectedness with the Feminine, participants also experienced interconnection with other women through menstrual synchrony, a phenomenon explored by Knight (1998). All participants experienced this on physical, emotional and psychological levels, bringing a sense of camaraderie.

The emergence of an authentic relationship with their innate rhythms was further facilitated by transpersonal associations drawn between participants’ menstrual cycle and nature’s cycles, such as the cyclical phases of the moon and the recurrent succession of natural seasons. Two participants experienced a strong alignment between the full moon and menstruation, and the new moon and ovulation, contradicting some literature which states that the light intensity of the full moon has an impact on the timing of ovulation (Buckley, 1988; Graham & McCrew, 1981; McClintock, 1984; Stern & McClintock, 1990). Two participants were able to draw personal analogies between the sequence of menstrual events and the succession of seasons (Patel; 1994; Shuttle & Redgrove, 1988).

The ritualized practices, empowering perceptions of blood and the experiences of interconnectedness led all participants to acknowledge menstruation as a holistic process which can neither be separated from the concepts of woman and the Feminine, nor from what is cultural, psychological and biological (Patel, 1994). This brought recognition of neglected aspects of themselves such as sexuality, the desire to enjoy life, creativity, ability to set healthy boundaries, and the ability to discern what’s best for oneself. Acknowledging the complex interactions between all parts of a given system and the inner Feminine wisdom of menstrual cycle (Buckley, 1988; Knight, 1988) empowered participants to find new ways of living according to their natural rhythms, minimizing the gap between their inner and outer worlds (Grahn, 1993).

Implications and applications
This study contributes to existing literature on the menstrual cycle by adding to the qualitative research of women’s experiences of menstruation, and by reorienting the focus towards internally lived experiences (Walker, 1997). It also adds a small but important contribution to current literature concerning issues of gender-specific psychological models, confirming that women develop a sense of identity and continue to develop and grow in relationship
(Martire, 2006; Miller, 1986; Surrey, 1991), through a reconnection with their menstrual blood, placing the psyche back into the body (Fedele, 2016; Gilligan, 1988). It also provides further evidence of negative sociocultural issues surrounding menarche and menstruation, and highlights the need for further menstrual research to support calls for change.

**Limitations**

There are potential limitations within qualitative research that may have impacted the results. The small sample size and short time span meant that only a snapshot could be possible. Personally, I engage with this ritualised practice, which could bring bias to the interpretation of results, although I was careful to remain impartial, transparent and truthful throughout the research. The findings may also have been impacted by participants’ previous exposure to positive information about menstruation and femininity. One participant had already performed one ritual before the pre-interview, making it difficult to determine the changes that directly resulted from her participation in this study.

**Conclusion**

This study contributed to feminist research identifying the detrimental impact of negative sociocultural patriarchal beliefs and attitudes regarding menstruation on women. The study also highlights the need for change within women’s lives and within society. The data demonstrated the capacity of menstrual rituals to facilitate the reframing of the negative relationship women have with menarche and menstruation. The impact of the rituals supported the development of new and empowering perceptions of menstrual blood and femininity; increased menstrual wellbeing; and an increased awareness of their cyclic functioning through transpersonal associations and interconnections with other women, lunar phases, seasons of nature and Earth.

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**References**


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Mirela-Lucia Sauca holds an MSc (with Merit) in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology. She is passionate about the transpersonal, about nature, about body movement and dance, and about working with women – currently she runs a monthly support group for women living with endometriosis. In the years to come she wants to pursue a Transpersonal Coaching Psychology course and an MA in Dance Movement Psychotherapy.