

THE CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
WOMEN AND SEX ROLES

Newsletter

The City University Graduate Center

33 West 42 Street, New York City 10036 212 790-4435

Work in Progress

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MENSTRUATION, BIRTH AND MENOPAUSE

If one were deliberately to seek out a topic in psychology that is controversial, hard to research, and even harder to conceptualize, one could not do better than to study, as I do, the psychology of menstruation, birth and menopause. At the most interesting level of difficulty--that of conceptualization--these are the topics which absolutely require a serious scientist to take into account interactions among biological, psychological and social processes. Most topics in psychology, however, have been defined by research traditions that emphasize one or at most two of these processes; the genuine complexity of human experience too rarely obtrudes into the theories, methods, and data of these traditions. The same is true of research traditions outside psychology where psychological aspects of female reproduction have been studied (obstetrics, psychiatry, psychophysiology). Conceptually, then, the topics are wide open, and they are intriguingly related to work on other topics at the interfaces among some of the social, biological, and medical sciences.

For a long time I was naive enough to believe it would be possible to focus on the intellectual challenges of the problem area I had chosen: to work on ways to articulate women's experiences within a scientific framework, and to explore these experiences both in their present forms and in those forms potentially available under different social and cultural conditions. It is of course possible to maintain a focus on the intellectual challenges, and I will describe some of my efforts to do it here. But the context within which such work has to be done needs at least to be mentioned, a context of disciplinary provincialism (it is astonishing to discover the range and importance of psychological topics that do not "belong in" academic psychology) and of a peculiar mixture of very deep feelings that men have about women (when a colleague blushes when talking about your research, you suspect something more than the application of universal standards of objective merit is involved when he votes on your tenure). Although this context, which hovers to some extent around all feminist scholarship, has made my work exhausting at times, it is also reassuring in its suggestion that we are perhaps on to something real and important (a view I have elaborated in a recent review essay on psychology in the Autumn, 1979 issue of Signs).

After clearing the underbrush of unpromising approaches to the study of the psychology of the menstrual cycle, I have been developing two lines of work. On the one hand, I want to identify whatever psychological changes do seem to occur throughout the menstrual cycle when the socially shared beliefs about these changes have not been made salient by the research procedures. If such changes have a biological basis, they should be found as well (and to greater extent) during pregnancy, where their meaning may be patterned by ethnic background. My goal, then, is to identify any biologically-based psychological changes--evidence suggests they are found in and only in basic sensory and motor processes--and to put them in the context of other

psychological rhythms. I have, therefore, examined menstrual rhythms in the context of the psychological rhythms (perhaps biologically-based) in men, and have looked at the relationship between such rhythms and the more thoroughly explored 24-hour rhythms. In this research approach, I have now redefined the question of psychological changes over the menstrual cycle as one aspect of the more general question of the nature and causes of rhythmic phenomena in human experience. This means that cycles with social origins (such as the week) are causal processes equally as relevant as biological cycles--for both women and men.

The other line of work I am engaged on is the exploration of the development, nature, and significance of socially shared beliefs about menstruation. Many people believe that women experience debilitating and socially maladaptive psychological changes during the premenstrual phase of the cycle. Some groups of people (adolescent, middle-class males, for example) believe this more strongly than do others and there are significant individual differences as well. Women have been found to attribute their moods and behavior to the menstrual cycle under some conditions and not others; men do this too -- under different conditions. Since I haven't gotten a handle on a theoretically satisfactory way of thinking about these phenomena and questions, however, I have been focusing in my research to date on the way the emotional component of the beliefs is communicated nonverbally in face to face interactions, and on the ways in which beliefs about the debilitating effects of menstruation are related to people's attitudes and beliefs about women and their "appropriate" social roles. In my heart I guess I believe that if you push even a well meaning liberal to the wall in an argument about social justice, he will invoke his beliefs about the psychological consequences of women's reproductive biology as an explanation and justification for oppression. I am much less convinced than I was that genuinely scientific evidence will ever affect these beliefs, the argument or women's power in society. But for some inexplicable reason, I still want to know whatever science at its best can tell us about our experience and the circumstances under which it arises.

Mary Brown Parlee

Director, Center for the Study of Women & Sex Roles

WORK IN PROGRESS:

THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF WOMEN AND WRITERS

Gaye Tuchman is preparing a social history of women writers and artists, trying to identify the principles that have governed the structure of opportunities for women to enter cultural milieux, to create culture, and to receive sufficient critical attention for their novels and paintings to become part of the western cultural heritage. Tuchman is proceeding on three tacks. First, she is gathering data on the social background characteristics of women and men writers, working in the United States and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in order to learn how their backgrounds differentially influenced their access to cultural milieux. Differences in formal education, the social class of family of origin, marital status, liaisons with other writers, sponsorship by powerful men, and the age at which a writer first published are being examined. Additional biographical research about selected writers shows how individual women confronted, overcame or succumbed to the social forces and career problems they faced.

Second, with Nina Fortin, a sociology graduate student, Gaye Tuchman has been exploring the impact of the rising status of the novel upon women's chances of having their work accepted. Using the original ledgers and copybooks recording the disposition of all fiction and non-fiction manuscripts submitted to Macmillan and Company (London) between 1867 and 1917, Tuchman and Fortin have established that as the novel became the predominant "bourgeois" literary form, as writing professionalized, and as publishing bureaucratized, men's submissions of novels rose more

rapidly than women's. Although before 1887, women were more likely to have their novels accepted than were men, starting in the late 1880's, men's novels were more likely to be accepted than those of women. In essence, the "high culture novel" became defined as a man's specialty and so the chances for women of all social backgrounds to achieve lasting literary reputation diminished.

Third, using available secondary sources, Tuchman is trying to apply the principles identified for women writers to women artists--to show how the need for expensive and frequently inaccessible training made even more problematic successful careers for women artists. Ultimately, Tuchman hopes her work will serve two purposes. It will tell us more about the conditions faced by women artists and writers. Equally important, such information will necessarily enable revision of theories about the relationship between consciousness and infrastructure since these have traditionally been based upon the activities of men. So far, this research has resulted in two papers, one on "edging women out" of high culture writing and on the novel as displaying the "empty field phenomenon" (forthcoming in Signs) and another more theoretical working paper on culture as material resource.

Gaye Tuchman's work is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation, NIH, and the Professional Staff Congress/Board of Higher Education. She is an Associate Professor at Queens College and the Graduate Center.

Thursday April 24th

4 PM

RAYNA RAPP

will speak on

"Thinking About Sex
As A Social Relationship"

Rayna Rapp is an Associate Professor on the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research. She is the editor of Toward an Anthropology of Women and the author of numerous articles on feminism and family history. Rayna Rapp is also active in the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse.

Third Floor Studio
CUNY Graduate Center

JOBS & FELLOWSHIPS

Proposals for fellowships to support postdoctoral research using existing data in the social sciences will be accepted in the Fall 1980, by the Henry Murray Research Center of Radcliffe College. The Center was designed to become a national repository for social science data on the changing life experiences of American women and men, and to serve as a catalyst for scholarly research on the impact of social change on women's lives. The Center holds over forty data sets which are freely available to professional and student researchers for secondary analysis. In April the Center will sponsor workshops describing their holdings on Alternative Family Patterns; Pregnancy, Childbirth and Child Care; Women in Business and Volunteer Work; and Career Patterns in Adult Women. For information on the data, the workshops or the fellowships, write Henry Murray Research Center, Radcliffe College, 77 Brattle Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

A part-time position for an unemployed sociologist with interest in women's health and occupational issues is available immediately. For more information call Barbara Katz Rothman, 725-3289.

The Wellesley Center for Research on Women seeks a post-doctoral Research Associate to work half time with two principal investigators as a member of a research team studying fathers' family roles in relation to children's sex role development and half time developing proposals for her or his own future research at the Wellesley Center. Write or call Grace Baruch, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts 02181.

Announcements

Julia Kristeva will speak on "Psychoanalysis and Linguistics: The Speaking Subject in Question" on Friday, April 18 at 4:45 in the Rotunda of Lowe Library at Columbia University. For details, call 280-1980.

Laura Gordon has received a small grant from the Business and Professional Women's Foundation for her research on sex integration in blue collar industrial occupations. Gordon, co-author of The Sociology of Gender, is spending this year at the Center as a Visiting Scholar, on sabbatical leave from Montclair State College. In giving us this information for the newsletter, she wanted us to add that she first learned about this opportunity from Martha Nelson, Administrative Assistant at the Center.

The Hispanic Women Learning Resources offer career workshops in neighborhoods in New York City. Any group of 20 Hispanic women can select a career workshop topic and ask the Hispanic Women Learning Resources to hold the workshop at a neighborhood site. For information write: Hispanic Women Learning Resources, 153 East 116th Street, New York, NY 10029.

Asian American Women's Conference

On March 14, 15 and 16, one hundred fifty Asian/Pacific American women and friends attended the conference on Educational Equity co-sponsored by Asian Women United, the Center for the Study of Women and Sex Roles, and the Women's Educational Equity Act Program. Organized by Bonnie Wong and Goldie Chu, and co-ordinated by Angie Cruz, the conference was one of three regional events which will culminate in a national convention in Washington in August. The goals of the conference were to identify educational problems faced by Asian/Pacific American women and to develop strategies for working with the nation's educational systems to solve those problems.

At the opening reception representatives from Mayor Koch and Governor Carey presented proclamations designating March 10-16 as Asian/Pacific American Women's Week. Keynote speakers, including Liz Holtzman, Bella Abzug, Jewell McCabe, Setsuko Nishi, Gloria Chung, and Joanne Lee, emphasized the need for Asian/Pacific women to organize and be counted, to work not only on obstacles to education, but on other problems as well. The speakers marked the conference as the first significant step in that direction. At the national conference in Washington, the New York group will present the resolutions from the New York event, and report on the steps being taken to bring about improvements in the educational system.

Announcements

On April 11-13, the Women's Studies Program at SUNY, New Paltz will hold a conference on "Women at Work: Creating Personal and Social Change". The conference will explore how women can enter the 80s and maintain, develop and fight for meaningful work. For more information on the event, contact Nancy Schniedewind, or Sue Gambill, Women's Studies Dept., SUNY, New Paltz, New York 12562, or call (914) 257-2273.

The data file on over 110,000 working women who responded to a National Magazine Survey of Working Women is available from the National Manpower Institute's Center for Women and Work. The cost of the data file is \$200. Write to Ivan Charner, National Manpower Institute, 1211 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Participants at the Summer Institute in Women's History at Sarah Lawrence College have suggested that the week containing March 8, International Women's Day, be designated Women's History Week. The Sonoma County (California) Commission on the Status of Women also put together a basic organizing kit for Women's History Week. It is available for \$2.50 from Women's History Week, Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women, 2403 Professional Drive, Suite 101, Santa Rosa, CA 95401. The group wrote to President Carter asking for an official proclamation, and Representative Barbara Mikulski introduced a resolution for the proclamation of Women's History Week. For more information on this project, write to the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women, or to Sandi Cooper, College of Staten Island, CUNY, 130 Stuyvesant Place, Staten Island, NY 10301.

A new journal titled Women and History is being published by the Institute for Research in History. Manuscripts and review copies go to Eleanor Reimer, Editor, Women and History, Institute for Research in History, 55 West 44th Street, NY, NY 10036.

APRIL 1980

- Tuesday, April 1 11:45-1:15: Tuesday Noon Lunch, 18th Floor Dining Room.
Meet in Room 1400 before going upstairs.
- Tuesday, April 8 11:45-1:15: Tuesday Noon Lunch, 18th Floor Dining Room.
Meet in Room 1400 before going upstairs.
- Wednesday, April 9 2:00 p.m.: Meeting of the Feminist Students' Organization.
8th Floor Lounge.
- Tuesday, April 15 11:45-1:15: Tuesday Noon Lunch, 18th Floor Dining Room.
Meet in Room 1400 before going upstairs.
- Friday, April 18 3:30 p.m.: Ronna Kabatznick and Christine Taylor will
present the results of a recent survey on
"Onlooker Reactions to Joggers in City and
Suburb." Room 1401.
- Tuesday, April 22 11:45-1:15: Tuesday Noon Lunch, 18th Floor Dining Room.
Meet in Room 1400 before going upstairs.
- Thursday, April 24 4:00 p.m.: Spring Lecture Series: Rayna Rapp will speak
on "Thinking about Sex as a Social Relation-
ship." 3rd Floor Studio. Reception follows.
- Friday, April 25 3:00-5:00: Women and Health Group. Roberta Satow, Pro-
fessor of Sociology at Brooklyn College, will
speak on "Therapy with Hispanic Culture Women";
Susanne Schad, psychotherapist, will discuss
"Feminist Issues in Psychotherapy: Sado-Masochism"
Anna Marie Valerio of Rockland Research Institute
will speak on "Ethnicity and Mental Health."
Room 1712.
- Tuesday, April 29 11:45-1:15: Tuesday Noon Lunch, 18th Floor Dining Room.
Meet in Room 1400 before going upstairs.

Upcoming:

- Friday, May 9 3:00-5:00 Feminist Methods of Inquiry Seminar. Topic:
"Unveiling Lesbian Content in Women's Writings."
Speaker: Frances Doughty; slide show presented
by the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Room 1712.
For further information call Trudy Berger,
780-5476.

We would like to remind you that the Tuesday Noon Lunches are designed to provide an opportunity for all who are interested in the work of the Center to meet on an informal basis. Please come!