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### Making sense of the body

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## 5. MAKING SENSE OF THE BODY

### 5.1. PANIC AND PRACTICES

In all of the materials-produced by women who were interviewed, those who participated in the memory work group, those who wrote letters to the medical advice columns and the doctors who answered-there was one dominant mode of talking about menstruation, the negative attitude also familiar from previous studies on menstruation (see Chapter 2.2). There are other ways, too, of describing feelings towards menstruation. Some express pride and excitement in the context of the first period. Another way of depicting the experience of a menstruating body is the practical view that denies any special feelings. Interestingly, the two latter attitudes towards periods have not been objects of theoretical interest by feminist scholars, who often focus on the negativity

Here I will try to find a common framework for all these different representations-the positive, the negative, and the practical-within the gender system of Finland (Rantalaiho 1997) in this period of time. I will argue that it is the institution of *normative heterosexuality* that informs the young girl and society on how menstruation can be understood and related to. In a Nordic welfare state such as Finland, heterosexuality is inherent in its *gender equality* politics and in the construction of *class* (Chapter 5.2). The framework, however, also creates points of resistance. The accounts of this material that stress *practicalities* instead of meanings of menstruation are argued to be a

form of subversive resignification of the polluted woman (Chapter 5.3). My interpretations of young women's bodily activities are then related to the wider theories of the body, gender, and subjectivity in sociology, especially the questions about structure and agency (Chapter 5.4).

## 5.2 ACCOUNTS OF NEGATIVITY: THE CRASH!

The discourse that depicts menstruation as something negative is evident in all materials of this study, even though it is not the only one. In all materials there were descriptions of a variety of negative feelings: panic, disgust, grief, and so on. In the memory work stories about the first menstruation negative feelings are common:

The first period was a surprise to her. Nobody has warned her that it could start any time. It was panic, the blood in the underpants. At school she had heard about it before and her older sisters had it too, but she. She did not want to have it; nobody in her class had it. The feelings varied from fear to sadness. (1st Period Story I; II, 80)

Negativity cannot be characterized as only a girls' private feelings about her body, but as a cultural message that the girl must deal with, like in the following excerpt from a group discussion:

Mia: I can remember that, the other 's-well, boys'-reactions. We were at a birthday party and, I must have been in the 7th grade because I had just started to have periods, and I happened to have my period right that day of the party. It was a kind of childrens party, we ate cake and played. Elisa: Well, you were still children.

Mia: Sure, children, but as a matter of fact I did have my period then. It was something like the boys starting to chat, and I dont know how it came to that, like a competition in who had experienced the most disgusting thing. Well, the one who won was a boy who had seen his mother's bloody pad. Laughter

Mia: And I remember me standing there like "Oh that must have been terrible" and, really, "Hope it doesn't show..." (Group discussion on 1st periods, 12)

The letters sent to medical advice columns echo the same negativity. The following citation from a letter to a medical column describes the experience of uncontrollability when having an irregularly bleeding body, a rather typical attitude towards menstruation in the column material:

Hi Doctor! My problem is my periods, they're really irregular. They come any time. Sometimes the flow lasts one day, then nothing for weeks, and then again flow for a solid week. I can't stand this thing. Is there no way of getting rid of them altogether? You see, I am not going to have children. Pseudonym Bonne Annee -77. (I,56)

In this chapter the focus is on the negative accounts in the memory work material. The memory work stories include very negative accounts in which a clear "crash" in the girls sense of selfhood is described (cf. Thorne 1993, 170). Often in these stories the writer wonders what the appearance of bloodstains really *means* to her as a person. Suddenly both the body and the self have become a mess, and the message brought by the changing body is not good news. The group discussed the rapid changes in the body and the confusion of the time period. The following extract is from a group discussion in the very beginning of the memory work project. A story about a happy summer photo is being discussed:

Annika: My photo was taken at a time when I thought everything was somehow good. It was a time just before the worst teenage years, it was the summer that was the best of summers and then, everything turned to shit [laughter] It was then that I felt I had this body and I liked it. I, yes, I liked my body. And then afterwards it took I don't know how many years to like it again. That it was first perfectly right, just before it became like Ulrika said,

looked ugly and felt terrible and disgusting and all that. Exactly this-that there were all the others, the tough girls, in the class. Before that it was totally different, totally different. That's why I chose this photo, it was a precise turning point when everything still felt wonderful. It felt wonderful, I think I was thirteen.

Laura: What do you think happened?

Annika: Well I think, if I remember right, I think it was the winter I got my period, so after I even got my period, then everything went [laughter] Maybe I'll remember more when we write.

Laura: But you think it was something that happened to your body, or was it something that happened in the surroundings?

Annika: I can't say, I don't remember. I think I had, I think it would be difficult to say it was only the body. But it did have something to do with it, because I thought it was so awful to get a period. So it did affect me in many ways.

Ulla: I also thought when we chose these themes that its interesting that there's this period of time - I thought about this-how one changes. When a girl is, like, eleven, twelve, very pleased with herself. I remember I thought I was better than many others. Then one becomes, like, fourteen-and altogether down. Like how does this change happen I don't know-its a limited theme, but it seems to happen with most people. And its such a huge change, within a year or so. (Group discussion on the body stories, 6 -7)

A similar "crash" can be found in the WHO childrens health study (Välismaa 1999, 75) in which Finnish girls at the age of thirteen report more negative self-image than either eleven- or fifteen-year-olds. In my analysis of the "crash" described above I wished to go beyond the focus on menstruation and blood as such, following the idea of a radical deconstruction of bodies and gender as discursive systems of power (II). The conceptual device used in the analysis was the "Woman" (de Lauretis 1984). "Woman" refers to a cultural image, a dominant representation of stereotypical femininity - an image that every "real-life" woman has to relate to through identifications and rejections (Braidotti 1994, 162). In Butler's interpretation the

discursive reality is the "law" from which the personal embodiment and identity come to be materialized, even when the narrator expresses only alienation from an image. Thus, I wished to examine which images of Woman could be identified in the stories, and how the writers positioned themselves in relation to these imaginary Women.

In the stories of the first period, the most obvious Woman is the *Reproductive Woman*, or the *Mother* (II, III), as indicated in earlier research on menstruation (e.g. Lee & Sasser-Coen 1996). Often the Reproductive Woman is first mentioned and then rejected, like in the following example from a story of the first period: "All this about the period and being able to have babies was just theory. The girl did not picture herself as a future mother. She was not at all interested in such things." (1st Period Story 3). What I will argue here is, however, that there is another Woman involved in the girl's gender construction, namely the *Sexy Woman*, an image that is more ambivalent and confusing than the Mother. My argument is based on what could be called a loud silence about sexuality in the materials. I maintain that sexuality is present in the talk about the female body, but through avoidance and silencing rather than explicitly (see Chapter 4.5). I argue that the Sexy Woman is the "foreclosed", the constitutive outside that secures the borders of the girl's self. This heterosexualized Woman is argued to be the constitutive point of reference in the gender construction (see Chapter 3.3). Heterosexualization here refers to presentations of self in the front region (Goffman 1959/1971), or a normative reality that defines all subject positions within the "matrix" (Butler 1990).<sup>15</sup> In this chapter I hope to substantiate this claim and contextualize it in the situation of these girls in Finland in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s. In this study (II) the context was specified as a mixture of normative heterosexuality, Nordic equality politics, and middle-class culture.

### **Smart Girl: style, heterosexuality, and cultural capital**

In the stories about first periods the issue of *sexual* development of the body is effectively ignored. The actors who appear in most of the stories are the girl herself and her mother. The imperative to tell the mother, however reluctantly, is mentioned in most stories (II). The changing, maturing female body is not an issue to be celebrated at home; rather, the atmosphere of the home could be characterized as a neutral and undramatic silence. The negativity stories, more or less explicitly, describe embarrassment and avoidance in contact with others, as in the following:

But now it feels only frightening and uncomfortable. She just isn't up to telling her mom, but in a mother's way her mom eventually understands that her youngest daughter has got her period, and provides her with sanitary pads. There is a mutual understanding between the mother and the daughter (relief-Mom understood and I didn't need to say anything!) but the subject was never brought up for discussion, (1st Period story 2; III, 268)

The following extract is an exception, since it explicitly addresses the sexual body, but also this story follows the script of sexuality as something strange, not-me:

When she sits down on the toilet she sees it. A bright red stain in her pants. She stares at it for a long time, she knows exactly what it means. Then she rushes back to her room, throws herself on the bed and starts to bawl. Her older sister comes and sits down beside her on the bed and asks her what's the matter. The little girl can't utter the ugly word menstruation, so she says that she has a stomachache and wants to be left in peace. Her sister walks out after a while.

The little girl is shocked. I'm just a little child, she thinks. I don't want to be sexually mature yet, I don't want to have periods, I don't want to start with all that bothersome stuff. Only toward the evening the little girl brings

herself to tell her mom what has happened. She gets a packet of pads. The little girl just wants to forget the whole thing. When older sister comes home, she gets to know what's happened. My condolences, she says kindly. So the trouble has started for you too. (1st Period story 7)

What I interpret as happening in the stories can be called passing on cultural, or physical, "capital", to borrow Bourdieu's term (Bourdieu 1984, Shilling 1990 on "physical capital"). In these stories an *asexual-but-heterosexual presentation of self* is valued physical capital. To be both comfortable and credible in one's presentation of self, it is not enough to know the values of gender equality ideology-career, education, and independence but the values also have to be embodied (Goffman 1959/1971). Bodily capital includes the right make-up, clothes, and body postures-and the practices around menstruation-that signal the required disembodied, asexual heterosexuality.

The avoidance of the theme of sexuality is necessary because the respectable *Equal Woman* is in binary opposition to the *Sexy Woman* (cf. Widerberg 1995). The stigma of the stereotypical Woman taking advantage of her sex appeal is so strong that in the presentation of self on the front stage sexuality has to be denied. A woman who wants to be taken seriously has to show that she is above the sexual game in her public presentation of self (even though sexuality for middle-class women certainly also is a more complicated matter, with very different imperatives on different front and back stages). On the basis of this material, in the middle-class home the *Smart Career Woman/Whore* dichotomy has replaced the traditional Madonna/Whore dichotomy often described as the essence of women's oppression (Lloyd 1989) (II).

It was good to be normal but nothing more than that. She avoided all associations with womanhood. It was somehow *ridiculous* to change and develop. She remembers how her cousin, who was a bit naive and very open,

was ridiculed because she had told our uncle that she was 'half-adult', she was maybe 12. Grandmother and my mom found the cousin stupid, being so open. We weren't either supposed to talk about boys and such. Anything called puberty was unstylish and we were supposed to have style. (1st period story 8; II, 83-84)

For the girl, the problem with this idealized Smart Woman is that the changing body keeps the girl firmly within the heterosexual matrix as a part of it. The denial of openly performed sexuality leads, according to this material, to at least two strategies available for the girls in their presentations of self: first, passivity in sexual encounters; and second, the imperative of strong self-control (Rudberg 1995). Both strategies are problematic from a feminist point of view. The girl, who is left passive but involved in the heterosexual world, is at the mercy of others. Other studies on young women in sexual encounters have shown how problematic and even dangerous "respectability" can be (Holland et al. 1992, 1994b, 1998; Frith & Kitzinger 1998). Honkatukia convincingly demonstrates that the idea of the strong Finnish woman is connected to the fact that Finnish girls are supposed to tolerate sexual harassment in the name of equality politics (Honkatukia 2000).

Strong self-consciousness and control are problematic from the perspective of Goffman's *competence* in social interaction (III, more in next Chapter). Competence is not only learning the rules, but also *not* having to think about them. In order to be able to make a plausible presentation of self it is crucial to be able to forget oneself and one's presentation. The young woman who constantly needs to be in control to avoid embarrassment is deprived of the sense of competence that a social actor should embody. Self-consciousness limits her social credibility in all areas, even ones that are not explicitly defined by heterosexuality.

As mentioned earlier, the stories do not elaborate on sexuality at any length. For example, the group recollected attempts to challenge

the middle-class somatophobia and ideal of disembodiment, for example by sleeping naked and "connecting with ones body" (Group discussion on the body stories, II; II, 85). It is illuminating that the challenge was not extended to involve sexuality - the women in the group did not present themselves as sexual rebels. This could be interpreted to mean that the "asexual-but-heterosexual ideal" in gender equality ideology is present even in this feminist discussion group. Can my insistence on addressing sexuality then be motivated by the material of this study? The immediate reason for addressing a question that the stories actually did not problematize is the vulnerability of the "smart girl" when she is inevitably materialized through heterosexualizing practices. The denial of the framework of heterosexualization as the reality in which the girls necessarily exist and that defines them as gendered beings leaves the girls very much alone without any tools in the "battle" against the "gaze" (II). If the feminist strategy, rather, would be to recognize that there is no way of stepping outside the socially constructed "real" (Butler 1990), the girls could be encouraged to invest in subversive, resignifying repetitions and perhaps position themselves as competent actors.

According to Butler's idea of "subjection", subordination is intrinsic in the process of becoming a subject (Butler 1997, 2), meaning that there is no way of being a subject outside the social system-here, the heterosexualizing order.

This is a "girl", however, who is compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no "one" who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a "one", to become viable as a "one", where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (Butler 1993, 232)

Faced with the "crash" in one's sense of self, the girl needs new positions to occupy. The available "Women"-the Sexy Woman and the Mother-do not attract the girl, neither is she encouraged by her environment to identify with these. The offered solution, just to leave the Sexy Woman in history and celebrate the Smart Woman, may appear tempting *but* it constructs the body as an enemy. The image of the Smart Woman is based on a denial of the body, especially the maturing sexual body. The image of the Smart Woman does not erase sexualization, but silences the girl from addressing the problem. Subjection as a constitutive force is subsequently denied.

### **The Sexy Woman, a matter of class**

In addition to the problem of sexuality for the "smart girls" of the memory work, another problem with the "asexual-but-heterosexual" ideal is the question of class. On the basis of the memory work material I argue that feminist scholars should be seriously concerned about the issue of class *in* feminism (II). As mentioned, the goal of the cultivation of one's bodily appearance is a look that is required for a certain social-class position. To grasp this aspect of performativity, a move from Goffman to Bourdieu is helpful.<sup>16</sup> By style one expresses one's place in the social order-an act that simultaneously reproduces the social order and its boundaries:

Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste. (Bourdieu 1984,190)

Assuming the right style is social and cultural competence for the middle-class that has few other ways of showing status. Appearance as more or less "sexy" is a crucial "class cue", according to the American sociologist Wagner (1997, 106). Identity work through boundaries among women has been shown to be especially true for teenage girls (Saarikoski 2001, Hey 1997). There is a strong tradition in British sociological literature on boys (e.g., Hebdidge 1979, Willis 1981), and more recently also on young women (Walkerdine 1990, McRobbie 1991, Skeggs 1997), that highlights the class dimension in gender identities. Neither in the Nordic nor in US feminist research on girls has the issue of class been emphasized<sup>17</sup>.

The connection to class is apparent in the memory work stories where sexuality is discussed especially through the image of the cool or tough<sup>18</sup> girl. The tough girl is defined as the "other" through which proper femininity can be discussed and negotiated (Saarikoski 2001). The tough girl offers a possibility of measuring what impact embodied style has: She is the one making a visible statement about (hetero)sexuality (Epstein & Johnson 1998, 108), even though that statement is directed at other women and girls. Paradoxically, then, the differences among women are created in normative heterosexuality. The image of the tough girl is a social marker against which the middle-class girl can claim non-identification in the two institutions-heterosexuality and class. The stories, however, also describe ambivalence towards the tough girl's attractiveness:

In the class there are some fashion dolls everybody admires, including myself. Chrise is the best looking, the best dressed, and the most experienced with boyswell, not only boys but also men. Her boyfriend is twenty-that is old. I don't have a boyfriend, will never get one either, the way I look. (Photo story 2; II, 82).

A mixture of distance and disapproval together with envy can be traced in the tone of the description. The writers are clearly aware that there are both serious gains and losses in being "Chrisse", but it is difficult to know which should be given more weight. Eventually, the middle-class girls construct themselves as superior to the girls who openly participate in the heterosexual game.<sup>19</sup>

Walkerdine (1990) argues that a lack of interest in sexuality, which is typical for gender-equality feminism, can lead young heterosexual women away from feminism because of the denial of their desires and realities. If young women's sexuality-as practices, life expectations, and identity-was discussed, instead of silenced in the name of "protection", not only would young middle-class women's needs be recognized but feminism might become a relevant movement for groups of girls and women who until now have remained rather untouched by the education and labor-market-oriented feminism.

### **Bodies that shouldn't matter -a question of Finland?**

This analysis of gender equality ideology, sexuality, and young women's confusion among different expectations is based on Finnish material. Is this a discussion relevant for Finland only? In Finland it certainly is important to consider the argument that the gender ideal of the Finnish equality politics perhaps is reproducing class society rather than weakening it. Nevertheless, the main issues identified as Finnish here are strangely familiar when one reads American feminist literature on young women. In the 1990s, American feminist literature showed a growing interest in young women and their bodies (e.g., Pipher 1994, Brumberg 1997, Bordo 1997, Wolf 1997). The major theme of this literature is a concern for how the media and consumer culture "seduces" young women into thinking of themselves and their bodies in a negative way. The conflicting messages of femininity, the

oversexualized media messages, and the individualized norm of makeability of the self are argued to be destructive for young women and girls of today. Calls for stronger adult authority against the dangerous oversexualized youth culture, or attempts to rehabilitate the "Victorian protective umbrella" (Brumberg 1997, 24) are not unusual.

The problems in this approach have recently been pointed out by Wolf (1997). She argues that feminist literature has traditionally ignored young women's own voices and concentrated on "bad" culture. Consequently, young women appear as passive outcomes molded by external culture (Wolf 1997, also Jackson 1999). Wolf (1997) addresses the contradictions and complexities in young women's lives, that in the "post-sexual revolution world" are surrounded by prudent silence, on the one hand, and inescapable explicitness and displays of sexuality in the media, on the other. David Wagner (1997) touches upon the class issue in American feminism, and argues that today's feminism can be seen as a part of a new temperance movement. According to Wagner, feminism has changed since its counter-culture days of the 1970s and joined the middle-class movement in a moral crusade (cf. Gusfield 1963) that attempts to distinguish itself from the "lower" layers of society.

In this respect, the career-oriented equality feminism accounted for in these materials is not very far from the American equivalent. By appealing to women to join in collective action to rescue young women from the dangerous influences of youth culture and showing them instead a respectable and healthy (that is, asexual) lifestyle, feminism is involved in building boundaries between the middle class and the lower classes. Heterosexuality still is a problematic issue in contemporary feminism (e.g. Kitzinger & Wilkinson 1993, Smart 1996, Richardson 1996). In summary, instead of denying heterosexualization, Nordic feminism of today should deal with it, address the still powerful



symbolic "gaze" that continues to divide women. The urgency is not only for the sake of the girls, but also to save feminism from becoming a part of a conservative movement.

### 5.3. "BUT THE CIRCUS MUST GO ON"- COMPETENCE AND CONTINUITY

However important it is to highlight the ambivalence and vulnerability of the girl in "battle" with the stereotypical images of the Sexy Woman and the Smart Girl, the results of this study point at other directions, too. The "battle" over meanings of femininity gives a limited picture of the bodily process of getting periods. Stereotypical images are connected to the negative *meanings* culturally given to menstruation and womanhood. As mentioned earlier, there are other ways of addressing periods, too. For example, there are accounts that recognize the discourse of negativity but state that the personal experiences were not that bad.

She was eleven years and seven months old. Some two months earlier she'd learned at school that there was something called "menstruation" and that all girls sooner or later would get it. She'd come home and in the toilet she noticed a blood stain in her panties. It felt totally natural: no panic, no fear, only a "well, this is it then". (1st period story 3, III, 270)

Here the writer just mentions that the period was no big deal. Too, those who describe panic in the beginning can mention that later on this attitude changed towards something more neutral, resembling the tone in the interview accounts (Chapter 4.5): "She does not think about it that much afterwards. It's something that comes, one has to wear a pad. That's it" (1st period story 7). Here the memory work material is somewhat limited: none of the eight participating women

express relief and explicit pleasure about her womanhood. The following writer, who clearly is proud and positive, writes rather about adulthood than womanhood:

It was mid-summer, some day in July. She was twelve years old. Suddenly she started to bleed. Her panties were thick with something red. Well, she'd read and heard about it earlier. But none of her friends had talked about it and actually no one had talked about their own periods. It was something written about in magazines-girls at that age get their periods. [...]

In a way it also felt good: that she now was a - if not adult, a half-adult person. That she had her own wonderful secret that nobody else knew about. Whom would she tell? Not her mother, no, but she wanted to tell her best friend. In fact she wanted to boast about it a little (so that it didn't show). Because it's not all twelve-year-olds that have periods. (1st period story 5; II, 85)

Other studies have shown that especially women who feel they start to menstruate later than others describe the first period in positive terms (e.g., Lee & Sasser-Coen 1996). Often this indicates the importance of being "normal"-with varying meanings attached to it-a common theme in all the materials of this study, too (I, III).

Being normal was of essential importance in the medical advice column material (I). Every second letter about menstruation asked whether the body in question could be considered "normal" and, according to the answers, it usually could. There is a two-way dynamic involved (I). The writer does not call for medical knowledge, as most questions do not require special medical expertise; but the girl needs someone, preferably someone at a distance, to mediate between her, her changing body, and social expectations, to reassure her that her body "passes" as normal (I, III). The medical answers utilize the vulnerability of the girls, and the columns construct an ideal, generic body that the medical expert knows. The writers' bodies are compared and measured against this ideal, reproducing medical authority (see Chapter 6).

While the discourse of negativity is present in the girls' letters and in the memory work stories, it is often transformed into "normality" and "passing" with both negative and constructive elements from the girls point of view. What is clearly negative is the reproduction of shame and silence of the public discourses on menstruation. Nevertheless, normality does not mean a simple one-way relation from social norms to passive girls wishing to fulfill any expectations. The notions of *competence* and *continuity* may specify what could be meant by "constructive normality" in menstruation accounts.

Both notions refer to the girl as a social actor in concrete situations. The social actor's having to avoid rapid changes and disruptions in identification is emphasized with the notion of continuity. First menstruation is a setting where continuity is threatened and it is difficult to appear as the competent actor. The "panic" accounts in the previous chapter (5.2) reflect a potential threat to the girl's ability to recognize and position her in the social world - a sense of lost continuity in her selfhood. But, more importantly, not all first period stories describe a sense of lost continuity. For example the following story - the entire story is displayed here - is illustrative and has lent its theme to the title of this chapter:

She is twelve, will be thirteen in the fall. Then she will start high school. It is summer, more specifically July. She stands in the neighbor's garage wearing her mother's ball gown with red and white stripes. She's a circus manager! She and her younger sister, together with the kids next door, have arranged a circus for all the children of the alley. For several weeks they've planned and rehearsed and now is the big day! They're half-way through the program and the intermission will soon come. It is then that she feels something strange: She's wet in her underpants. She doesn't have time to think about it right then. After all, she has a circus audience to take care of. In the intermission, when all the children in the audience are served soft drinks and cookies, she runs to the toilet. She pulls her panties down and sees a big

patch of blood. She's not afraid. She knows what it is. She understands that she now has her first period. She sits a while and wonders what to do, but there's not much time. The intermission is soon over and she has to do something about this. She decides that it's best to call for Mom. She doesn't have time to think whether she's ashamed. She only shouts "Mom" and Mom comes to the toilet. She shows her the patch in the underpants, and Mom only says something like "Well, now you got your first period". Then mom goes to get a pad. Now it feels strange. Above all it feels strange to walk about with a thick diaper in the pants! But the circus must go on. Hope nobody notices anything. But why would they? She has her long gown on, after all.

So, her period has started. She doesn't know if its early or late. She doesn't know if anyone else in her class has started. She doesn't really know that much, but she's not afraid. Sure, both Mom and the PE teacher have explained that it will soon happen, but she hadn't really expected it yet. Actually she has never had any discharge or spotting. And least of all has she had any of those dreadful stomach aches that she's heard you usually have. She hadn't felt anything before the patch turned up in her underpants! So everything did come rather unprepared. But now she really did have a period. The only thing she now thought of was that it was terribly uncomfortable with the pad and that it was okay that Mom knew as long as she didn't say anything to Dad. Even though she knew that Mom would tell Dad tonight. And actually it didn't matter either, as long as he didn't comment on it to her. *That* would be too embarrassing. (1st period story 6, emphasis in original)

There is a common feature in the memory work stories that do not depict any "crash" in the description of the girl's self-identity. The stories display continuity and activity. The girl does not contemplate the Woman or even herself, but the story describes practical action. Either the girl is engaged in some activity, like in the passage above, a circus play, or she transforms the newly found femininity into something to take care of. The same writer in another story described herself as an active girl with lots of friends and activities, who takes

issue with the picture of teenage girls altogether preoccupied with the body, looks, and femininity (Group discussion on the body stories, 12). The patch of blood does not change everything, but the girl holds on to a sense of continuity in her selfhood by continuing the circus, and her life, very much as it used to be. In addition to continuity, the practical attitude seems to be the key element in positive or neutral accounts. The management of the body provides work, something concrete to do, and in the accounts where this activity was central, the mood was notably less anxious.

Clearly both these attitudes, "panic" and "practice", are narrative conventions: two different ways of describing the multi-layered experience of having changing bodies. The "practice" accounts are, however, easily neglected by researchers because such accounts avoid conveying "meanings", which are data that researchers are often interested in (Chapter 4.5). In the most positive or continuity-oriented stories, menstruation as such lacked outspoken meaning for the girl. Instead she acted upon it. I suggest that through practicalities the girl may transform the meanings of the phenomenon she is acting upon. These acts could be described as a play of femininity that the girls are necessarily engaged in from the onset of first menstruation. It is not menstrual blood in itself that defines the femininity of this play but the acts. The earlier cited passage from Butler on lesbian identification (p. 30) could be translated to young teenage girlhood by changing "lesbian" to "menstruating female" and "femaleness":

To say that I "play" at being a menstruating female is not to say that I am not one "really"; rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that "being" becomes established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed. This is not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, *and this "I" does not play its femaleness as a role*. Rather, it is through the repeated play of this materiality that the "I" is insistently reconstituted as a female "I"; paradoxically, it is precisely the

*repetition* of that play that establishes it as well as the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes, (original Butler 1991,18)

Goffman's thinking on everyday life as practice, and Butler's performative gender as repetitive acts, help us understand what is going on in the accounts that resist the negative discourse on menstruation. The presentation of self in everyday life requires competence and skills in order to avoid embarrassments and ridicule, or oppositely in order to behave without feeling too ill at ease. A successful learning of body techniques and social competence allows the subject to function in concert with the requirements of the social environment without "having to think too hard or worry too much" (Crossley 1995, 140). These embodied and often unconscious social skills can be described as competence. Continuity and competence are bodily characteristics that help the fragmented self survive day-to-day life as a social being. Butler in a similar vein argues for the necessity of subjectification "within" the gender order.

Thus, in contrast to earlier feminist literature on body practices, especially the feminist critique of the imperative to conceal menstruation (Chapter 2.2), I suggest that the question is more complex than a simple declaration that women should be free to bleed. The practice-oriented accounts show that body management can also be a resource of women's subjectivity. The activity with menstrual products and hygiene can help the girl to gain a feeling of competence at least with one aspect of the embodied adolescent self. Body practices are an embodied way of reformulating the stereotypical Woman to something more personal, and, it is to be hoped, something different, more constructive.

Butler's argumentation clarifies the problematic connection between femininity and menstruation evident in feminist literature. *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990) starts with a claim that feminist politics

do not require a fixed point-for example the female sex-to have political legitimacy. Feminism does not fail even if it does not reside in biology. "There would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction" (Butler 1990, 141). If "gender reality is created through sustained social performances" (Butler 1990, 141), the feminist longing for a true female body and a menstruation that women would embrace and celebrate is also a fantasy, and not anchored in any material fact of menstruating bodies. Neither is it anchored in many women's wishes, according to the material of this study. Rather, after the panic of the first period, the women in the present study did not make a connection between the blood in itself (which no doubt figures on a monthly basis) and their gender performativity. The blood does not have any true, one, real meaning but gender is created through sustained social performances of, for example, practices around menstruation, acts of normalizing and managing.

#### 5.4. CONCEALING MENSTRUATION: CONFORMITY OR SUBVERSIVE REPETITIONS?

At issue in this exploration of the heterosexualization of the girl and menstruation practices is the question that in a sociological vocabulary could be called the question of structure and agency (Chapter 2.4). The structural perspective in this case could mean a feminist critique of the patriarchal culture that devalues women's bodily functions and imposes practices of concealment and control on the female body. An agency perspective has been advocated by feminist writers who wish to defend and understand women's actions (Chapter 2.5).

The debate between the two "camps" is on whether we should focus on the cultural conditions or on women's ways of coping despite oppressive structures. Here I suggest, inspired by Butler and

Goffman, that the real issue is not which one to choose, but how to interpret the role of the social actor who is, so to say, doomed to agency. While a social being by definition exists only in relation to others, there is no such choice as to be left in peace as, for example, Bordo (1997) wishes. What social research needs to study are cultural meanings as they are transformed through peoples daily practices.

The agency perspective is problematic since it demonstrates empathy for individual solutions to social problems, but it does not offer a realistic backdrop for social change. Claims that we ought to call all women's agency equally feminist, as long as the women themselves say they feel empowered (Davis 1995) are naive. If the concrete actions of women are aimed at just fitting in within the gender ideals, thus reproducing the heterosexualizing matrix, why should they be defended? Feminist scholarship in the social sciences can go beyond private pleasures and rather consider "the concrete consequences of actions, trying to assess in what direction(s) they are moving (or reproducing) the institutions and practices of society" (Bordo 1997,188).

My reading of young women's practices in this study does not, I hope, echo the just-do-it agency of neo-individualism. The girls and women presented in the materials can be regarded as agents in various ways, both conformist and transformative. Some practices that seem extremely conformist can be understood as a way of performing the competent social actor. This is something I think feminist theory should grant young women. Often conformity is ambiguous: The young women's repetitive practices may be able to transform social meanings into something new. This, I argue, can happen with menstrual practices.

Through body management a girl can transgress the image of the polluted woman and fill it with meanings such as social competence and proper femininity. Similarly, through performative acts as sexy

women, girls might be able to resignify the Woman and transgress the power of the "male gaze". At least they are taking an active stance towards sexualization, even though they of course cannot control how their actions are read in social interaction.

To urge women to rejoice openly their menstrual blood is not necessarily more revolutionizing or a sign of greater personal resistance, as such acts are caught within the dualism of shame/pride of the dominant patriarchal culture. Following Butler's deconstruction of the body, there is no reason to assume a fixed meaning for a bodily phenomenon, in this case the menstrual blood's being essentially feminine and as such important to how women feel about their femininity. Rather, we need to find out about the meanings that come to be inscribed through mundane practices. In the depiction of menstruation in these materials, femininity is not inscribed with a pride connected to the blood, but pride connected to feminine competence of managing one's periods.

The issue of social change is important but complicated when female embodiment and menstruation practices are studied from a perspective of fragmented power that cannot be possessed (Foucault 1972/1980). Following Butler, there are no guarantees of "what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (Butler 1990,139). "What performance where will compel a reconsideration of *the place* and stability of the masculine and the feminine?", Butler asks (1990, 139, emphasis in original), but her project is not to give an empirical answer. My argument is that "effectively disrupting" acts are probably not performed by confused twelve-year old girls who worry about the normality of their bodies. Truly disrupting acts can be expected when the actor inhabits competence and continuity in her embodied presentation of self, her *body in practice*. The position of the parodic

rebel is granted to those who know the game, and have the competence to "cite" differently. Knowledge is a pathway to competence. Thus also in the context of menstruation an important question is which and whose knowledge is legitimate and empowering. In the next chapter, the issue of knowledge will be discussed.

## 5. Making sense of the body

<sup>15</sup>The article (II) employs the notion of the male gaze even though no actual men were spoken of in the stories. Gaze was chosen to describe the hazy feeling of being positioned, defined, identified-looked upon in an uncomfortable way-that the memory work group discussed as the very element of being a teenager. The group maintained that the defining gaze belonged to a diffuse others, often meaning other girls in the class. The notion of the male gaze was not chosen by the group. In retrospect, it perhaps was an unhappy choice, indicating something stronger than what was intended, as one participant later commented. What I sought was a term for the feeling of becoming involved in heterosexualization in very general terms. Following Butler (1990), heterosexuality is not a question of sexual encounters and couplehood only, but a constitutive grid for all social relations.

<sup>16</sup>Bourdieu has claimed to be greatly influenced by Goffman (Bourdieu 1997) but has developed Goffmans thinking towards a sociology that is more concerned with distinctions and power.

<sup>17</sup>This despite the strong Nordic tradition of feminist research on gender and class in, for example, labor market questions (Rantalaiho et al. 1997, see Widerberg 2000,415).

<sup>18</sup>There is no exact equivalent for the Swedish "tuffa flickan", or Finnish "kovis" in English as it apparently is a cultural category specific for this context. Here I choose to use tough girls instead of, for example, cool or fast (tack Helena!).

<sup>19</sup>"Bad girl's" own perspectives have been little researched, the recent Finnish study by Saarikoski (2001) making an awaited exception. Thorne (1993,156) suggests that openly sexy girls do have meaningful reasons for their presentations of self, for example, a wish to demonstrate independence from parental and school authority.