

Impurity and Routinization of Menstruation in *New Girl* and Mead's Samoa
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Margaret Mead's study of coming of age norms and how a Samoan woman's menstruation is received exposes practices that lie in stark contrast to Jess' menstrual experience as a central character in the popular TV show *New Girl*, which chronicles the daily goings-on of a girl living with three male roommates. Mead (1961) observes that for the menstruating woman she encountered in Samoa, "[t]here is no contamination in her touch or look" (p. 81). Jess' roommates in *New Girl* could not feel more differently. Early on in the "Menzies" episode, Jess comes storming into the kitchen, upset that the hot water in her shared apartment has been turned off. This means she cannot shower before her big interview, and her PMS causes her to react more strongly than she normally would have. One of her roommates responds to her anger by shrinking back in fear against the kitchen counter and shouting, "Witch! What have you done to my body?" (Meriwether, 2012).

On the other hand, an interaction like this would be highly unlikely in Samoan cultural relations as depicted by Mead. This popular media version of American responses to menstruation conforms more closely to Mary Douglas's description of the Nyakyusa in *Purity and Danger* (1966) where, "Contact with menstrual blood is dangerous to a man" (p. 177). The difference in how Jess responds to menstruation compared to Samoan women is further exaggerated by the horrified reactions of the characters around her, which highlight an American taboo on the open discussion of female reproductive processes. This in turn maintains gender hierarchies in the popular culture of the United States. Periods cause a menstruating woman to generally be viewed

as distasteful or incapable of the same tasks that men perform, which reinforces male dominance through concepts of impurity.

Mead asserts that when the menstruating Samoan female experiences abdominal and back pain, she does not allow it to interfere with her daily routine. While a Samoan woman ignores any discomfort she experiences so that she can continue with her work, we see Jess laid up on the sofa in her pajamas, clutching a heating pad to her body and eating junk food. The dissimilarity in response to physical symptoms reflects two very different attitudes: for Mead, Samoans absorb menstruation into their lives while for the *New Girl*, Jess feels that she cannot function. Samoan females do not pay particular attention to their physical symptoms because their cultural concepts do not categorize them as something that should be hidden.

Jess, conversely, perceives her symptoms as negative and impure in conformity with American cultural concepts about menstruation, and she does not want to offend her roommates, friends, and other Los Angeles residents by “contaminating” them. When she leaves her apartment to interview for a teaching position she tears up at a picture of the interviewer’s puppy in an oversized teacup due to her heightened emotions. The interviewer expresses acute signs of discomfort with the manifestation of Jess’ PMS symptom: she shifts in her seat, avoids eye contact with Jess, and does not give Jess the job. Before Jess leaves the office, she tries to make an excuse for her behavior: “I’m sorry, um... I’m sorry I got this... I don’t know what’s wrong. So weird. Never happens to me” (Meriwether, 2012). Jess realizes that the interviewer is uncomfortable with the physical manifestation of her period via her heightened emotional state, and Jess

desperately tries to justify her behavior so as not to be perceived as mentally unstable or unfit for the job.

While a Samoan woman, according to Mead, neither expects nor receives additional care while menstruating, Jess attempts to channel her roommates' discomfort with her situation into preferential treatment. Samoans feel that since menstruation is a natural and normal process for women, it is undeserving of extra solicitation. Jess, however, announces her PMS as reason for her roommates to overlook her inability to contribute to the monthly gas bill. She is used to men feigning inability to cope with the reality of her period and so announces her current situation as a way of discouraging them from badgering her. She is successful in her endeavor with two of her roommates, who try not to anger her. She lashes out; asking them which one is going to tell her to get a job so she can pay the bill. They avoid making eye contact with her, afraid that she'll target whoever meets her gaze, and remain silent in the hopes that Jess doesn't follow through with her threat of kicking "the testicles clean off their body" (Meriwether, 2012). Jess's third roommate Nick, however, renounces her period as an excuse for her not to pull her weight and act irrationally angry every month, which Jess interprets as a minimizing of her inherent femininity. Just as the tired stereotype of PMS and aggression is the source of the joke in the previous quotation, Nick references it as well. It results in a reinforcement of cultural expectations or assumptions rather than a reversal of those expectations, exposing the screenwriter's attempts to capitalize on the trite association between PMS and aggression for comedic value.

While the male characters in *New Girl* respond to Jess' period with a display of obvious aversion, there is no such distaste on the part of men in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. For Mead, Samoan men have no qualms about hearing of a woman's menstruation, and she writes, "There was no sense of shame connected with puberty nor any need of concealment" (p. 145). Jess' roommates, by contrast, have no interest in learning of her troubles. When Jess announces her period, she and her roommates are gathered around the kitchen table going over the monthly gas bill. She announces that she's PMSing, and all three of the male characters respond by turning away from her, covering their ears, and groaning. One of them even goes so far as to exclaim, "Yuck!" (Meriwether, 2012).

The male characters' reactions could not be more at odds with the announcement of a woman's period in Samoa. Mead's study reveals that men respond to a woman's first menstruation in the same way as they do hearing of another woman having a baby, or a pig being killed by a falling rock: with a casual lack of concern. The men in *New Girl*, though, refuse to listen to Jess's complaints and effectively quash all discussion of menstruation. One of her roommates claims he has "sympathy PMS" and calls off work and his charade creates a mocking pantomime of a woman's menstrual symptoms through mimicry (Meriwether, 2012). This powerful act of "comedic" mimesis puts the men in a position of dominance over Jess, as it sends the message that her period is the focal point of a bad joke about a woman's impotence via her own body. In other words, her impurity justifies the need to call off work or craft an elaborate guise that conceals a woman's inability to fully contribute to society.

In comparing Mead's description of menstruation within Samoan culture to menstruation within American popular culture as depicted on episodic television, the taboos placed on the menstrual experience in the States are highlighted through the *New Girl* male characters' exhibition of their inability to cope with their roommate while she has her period. Mead's Samoans, conversely, view periods to be as natural as breathing and the menstruating woman enjoys complete cultural normalization. Jess cannot bother the outside world with her impure symptoms, so she stays in on the couch. Because her male counterparts are so virulently uncomfortable when forced to hear about a woman having her period in their proximity, Jess is able to dodge financial obligations until Nick refuses to acknowledge the cultural and material consequences of a woman's monthly cycle that causes mockery and enforces silence. This reactionary cartoon of American impurity contrasts starkly with the harmonious routinization of menstruation in Mead's Samoan ethnography. This marked cultural contrast highlights the obvious vulnerabilities of American patriarchal orders that are sustained by tired comedies of impurity where a menstruating woman is distasteful and dysfunctional.

References

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