

**THE TROUBLE WITH WHITE PANTS:
MEDICALISATION AND AGENCY IN THE CONTEXT OF
MENSTRUAL SUPPRESSION**

Jessica Shipman Gunson

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the
Discipline of Gender, Work, and Social Inquiry
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Adelaide
December 2006

Contents

CONTENTS	II
TABLES, FIGURES & ABBREVIATIONS	V
SYNOPSIS	VI
DECLARATION	VII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	VIII
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 <i>Menstrual Suppression and Medicalisation</i>	2
1.2 <i>What's in a Name? Introducing Seasonale</i>	3
1.3 <i>Outline of the Thesis</i>	4
2 CONTEXTUALISING MENSTRUAL SUPPRESSION	7
2.1 <i>Shifting Stories of Menstruation</i>	7
Ancient Greek constructions of menstruation	7
Post-'Enlightenment' – shifts in constructions of menstruation	9
Shifting the goalposts – constructing menstrual suppression and ECOC	16
2.2 <i>Shifting Stories of Medicalisation</i>	18
Theories of medicalisation.....	18
Collaboration, complexity and texture – contesting medicalisation	22
2.3 <i>Negotiating Neo-liberalism – risk and choice</i>	28
Risk and self-regulation	28
Appropriations of choice	31
2.4 <i>Destabilising Dichotomies</i>	35
Destabilising the essentialism debate	35
Medicalisation and agency after Foucault	36
2.5 <i>Medicalisation Across Fields</i>	37
2.6 <i>Summary</i>	41
3 RESEARCHING THROUGH PLURALITY	44
3.1 <i>Emergent Theories</i>	44
3.2 <i>Multiple Methodologies</i>	47
Feminist methodology	47
Ethnomethodology	50
Poststructuralism	52
3.3 <i>Pluralities in Practice</i>	53
Research questions	55
Sourcing data	55

Method of analysis	60
Rigour	61
3.4 Summary.....	61
4 BIOMEDICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF MENSTRUAL SUPPRESSION	63
4.1 <i>Overview of the Articles</i>	64
The Role of The Association of Reproductive Health Professionals	68
4.2 <i>Constructing Suppression and Blood ‘Types’</i>	73
‘Is Menstruation Obsolete?’ – biomedical negotiations of Coutinho	76
4.3 <i>The Role of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research</i>	80
4.4 <i>Neo-liberal Relations – ‘service’ providers’ and ‘consumer needs’</i>	83
Managing managers: practitioners and the notion of ‘counselling’	83
‘What women want’ – attitudes, economics, and choice	86
4.5 Summary.....	91
5 THE MANUFACTURING OF NATURE: SEASONALE.....	93
5.1 <i>Seasonale Website and Brochure</i>	95
5.2 <i>Seasonale Television Commercials</i>	102
Pink and white – shades of femininity	102
Shades of grey – multiple femininities	107
5.3 <i>Choice and ‘Balance’ – news-media responses to Seasonale</i>	111
Overview of newspaper articles	111
5.4 Summary.....	118
6 VIRTUAL RELATIONS IN MENSTRUAL SUPPRESSION.....	121
6.1 <i>Mapping the Multiple Faces of Barr on the Internet</i>	122
6.2 <i>‘Cyber-Consultations’</i>	127
6.3 <i>Bloggging and Fisking – contesting menstrual suppression on the Internet</i>	130
6.4 Summary.....	135
7 NEGOTIATING NEO-LIBERALISM: WOMEN’S NARRATIVES	137
7.1 <i>South Australian Narratives of Menstrual Suppression</i>	138
7.2 <i>Internet Commentaries on Menstrual Suppression</i>	139
7.3 <i>Negotiating Risk and Choice</i>	140
Choice and ambivalence	142
Reconstructing risks	151
Risk and fertility	159
7.4 <i>Negotiating Nature</i>	161
Resisting maternity	164
Evolutionary cycles	166
Resisting nature	168

Menstruation as a 'vital sign'	171
Oral contraception as 'neutral'	173
7.5 Summary.....	175
8 CONCLUSION.....	178
APPENDICES	185
<i>Appendix 1: Study Information Sheet</i>	<i>186</i>
<i>Appendix 2: Complaint Information Sheet.....</i>	<i>187</i>
<i>Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form.....</i>	<i>188</i>
REFERENCES	189

Tables, Figures & Abbreviations

TABLES

TABLE 1 <i>English language medical journal articles on ECOC published between 1999-2005 by type of journal in which published, N = 42</i>	65
TABLE 2 <i>English language medical journal articles on ECOC published between 1999-2005 by country of origin, N = 42</i>	66
TABLE 3 <i>English language medical journal articles on ECOC published between 1999-2005 by main focus of article and country of origin, N = 42</i>	67

FIGURES

FIGURE 1 <i>Map of fields engaged in contestation of menstrual suppression</i>	40
FIGURE 2 <i>Seasonale television commercial No. 1, 2004</i>	104
FIGURE 3 <i>Seasonale television commercial No. 2, 2005</i>	108

ABBREVIATIONS

BARR	<i>Barr Laboratories Inc and Barr Pharmaceuticals Inc</i>
DURAMED	<i>Duramed Pharmaceuticals Inc – subsidiary of Barr</i>
ECOC	<i>Extended Cycle Oral Contraception</i>
FDA	<i>United States of America Food and Drug Administration</i>
OC	<i>'The Pill' / Oral Contraception</i>
SMCR	<i>Society of Menstrual Cycle Research</i>

Synopsis

This thesis is concerned with the multi-sited construction of meanings associated with the use of Extended Cycle Oral Contraception (ECOC), a practice that results in the extended or continual suppression of menstruation. In particular it centres on the public debates surrounding the United States of America Food and Drug Administration approval of the first ECOC called *Seasonale* in 2003. Rather than framing ECOC as simply a forward trajectory of biomedical technologies, or as a medical 'take-over' of another aspect of women's bodies, it examines the ways in which the significances of ECOC are negotiated through discursive practices within and across fields. This thesis is primarily concerned with reviewing the sociological concept of 'medicalisation' in such a context.

This thesis examines the concept of medicalisation in the cultural moment of neo-liberalism. In framing medicalisation as a contest I assert that dominant meanings of ECOC and menstrual suppression are constructed across the fields of biomedicine, pharmaceuticals, the news-media, and through the vast and continually shifting space of the Internet. The 'common sense' neo-liberal discourses of 'risk' and 'choice' are invoked in order to shift understandings of 'nature' and provide reasons for menstrual suppression to be seen as a rational choice for women. I argue that the phenomenon of ECOC constitutes medicalisation and inseparably produces the possibility of agency. I do this by exploring the experiences of a group of South Australian women who extended or eliminated their menstrual cycles with hormonal contraception, and comments on an Internet message board about menstrual suppression. Through these women's narratives this thesis explores the multiple ways in which women demonstrate forms of agency and simultaneously contribute to the medicalisation contest.

Agency was demonstrated in the ways women transformed the publicly contested meanings of ECOC and menstrual suppression through their everyday experience. The discourses that laywomen brought to the debate both accommodated and contested the rhetoric of choice, risk, and nature, and frequently challenged gendered norms of femininity. For interview participants, deciding to suppress menstruation had occurred in Australia where ECOC is not available for general use. The Internet message board comments were posted during 2003 when the first ECOC was released in the United States of America. Consequently, this provides a unique case study of the innovative ways in which agency operates in relation to medicalisation.

This thesis draws on feminist, poststructuralist and Bourdieurian theory to review the concept of medicalisation in the context of debates about ECOC. In doing so it offers not only an extension to the Sociological and Gender Studies fields but also puts forward a new way of understanding the concept of medicalisation that may assist in establishing interdisciplinary discussion about the complex ways in which biomedical knowledges are generated and contested across multiple fields.

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis being available for loan and photocopying when deposited in the University Library.

A version of Chapter 5 initially appeared in *Feminist Media Studies* 6 (2), June 2006.

JESSICA S GUNSON

DATE

Acknowledgements

Firstly, and most importantly, I would like to thank the women who participated in interviews. They made this study enjoyable as well as possible.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors Margie Ripper and Megan Warin. Margie's enthusiasm and good cheer struck me long before I met her in person and our shared passion for 'blood' fostered a warm friendship from the beginning. With great perception and dedication, Margie has encouraged me to ask vital questions of my work and has had continual faith in my theoretical development. Megan was unfazed by the challenge of joining this project more than halfway through. Her fresh eyes, insightful suggestions and unwavering support have been wonderful. I am enormously thankful to both Margie and Megan for their intellectual brilliance, and especially for their friendship, patience, and understanding when, with only months to go, the thesis came to a halt for a little while.

I am indebted to Dr Melinda Gunson and Pedro Gunson for providing thorough and astute comments on key chapters of this thesis. I thank them both for their commitment, time and patience.

I would like to acknowledge the wonderful community of researchers that make up the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research. They have fostered in me a faith that interdisciplinary feminist debate is alive and has a productive future. The capacity of SMCR members to think outside their respective fields produces a unique and generative environment, particularly through their biennial conference, which provides a rare space where it feels perfectly normal to talk about all things 'period'.

Financial support for this project was provided by an Adelaide Scholarship International Award and Research Abroad Scholarship from the University of Adelaide, postgraduate funds from the Discipline of Gender, Work & Social Inquiry, and Associate Professor Margie Ripper. An essential trip to the USA to interview members of SMCR was funded by the 2005 Brenda Nettle Award, from the South Australian branch of the Australian Federation of University Women. I would especially like to thank Brenda Nettle and the SA-AFUW for their support and enthusiasm for my project.

Thank you to Marg Allen, Margie Ripper, Di Rudd, and Megan Warin for the opportunity to teach in their courses. I am grateful to the students on those courses for their fresh and fruitful feedback on my research and teaching. Thanks to Kathie Muir, Margie Ripper, Susan Oakley, and Helen Masterman-Smith for additional research experience on exciting projects. I also wish to acknowledge the wonderful brainstorming and mentorship of Rebecca Albury, Sheryl de Lacey, and Margie Ripper during our *New Reproductive Decisions* sessions and subsequent presentation at the 2004 TASA Conference.

I am grateful to all members of the Discipline of Gender, Work and Social Inquiry who I have had the pleasure of being amongst over the last 4 years, including but not limited to: Marg Allen, Roz Averis, Verna Blewett, Chilla Bulbeck, Sam Franzway, Ingrid Hofmann, Claire Howie, Sonja Kurtzer, George Lewkowicz, Sonya Mezinac, Kathie Muir, Yuko Nakamura, Goldie Osuri, Lara Palombo, Pam Papadelos, Ros Prosser, and Kay Schaffer. Thanks especially to Thalia Palmer for administrative support and help with a string of problem computers, and to Sarah Fairhead, Alia Imtoual and Roz Averis for advocacy as postgraduate representatives. Thank you to Ken Bridge for providing cake and humour every Wednesday morning. The weekly morning tea was an essential source of collegial support.

I started this PhD when I first arrived in Adelaide and so, looking back on its gestation, I also look back on the development of friendships that have grown in parallel. Christine Knight has become a dear friend who I feel I have known forever. I am grateful for her support, and for the opportunity to get to know her while simultaneously getting to know Adelaide's finest cafés and restaurants! Stacey and Hamish Burley have been wonderful friends and have provided many evenings and

weekends of enjoyment and recuperation over the course of the PhD. Similarly, Sue Hill and Russell Stanley have been a constant source of fun and support and I am deeply thankful to them for making both Pedro and me feel part of their family.

Without doubt, the most profoundly transforming friendship I have been blessed with in Adelaide is that of Dr Alia Imtoul. For the most part we travelled the PhD roller coaster together. Our personal challenges were so vastly different and yet we were able to draw constant support from one another. Alia has taught and inspired me more than she will ever know. Thank you also to Dr Sue Oakley for being a mentor as well as a friend, and Dr Tomoko Hidaka for her sincerity and optimism.

There are also friends who have supported me from afar: Helen Webster, Dave Brown, Debby Smith, Ben Harding and Nick Young.

At the same time that I started the PhD I also gained an extended family. I am forever grateful to Jenny and Paul Gunson for the love they have given me from the first moment I arrived in Adelaide. They have been generous and supportive beyond belief. Thank you also to Marcus, Melinda, Meg, Aaron, Tamika and Zashka for welcoming me as a new sister and aunt.

The hardest part of writing this thesis was being 10,000 miles away from my 'original' family, who are also my dearest friends: Sarah Connell, John, Joe, and Jake Shipman, Lyn Holmes, Paula Singleton, and my life-long best friend Beccy Shipman. Not having them close by for me, but also not being close by for them, has seemed simply illogical at times, and overwhelmingly difficult at others. Nevertheless, all of us have found innovative ways to support one another over the last few years. Their continuous and diverse modes of loving and encouraging me are too vast to put into words.

I have drawn much inspiration from the strength and intelligence of my grandmothers, Mary Connell and Margaret Shipman, and I dearly miss my Grandpa, Stan Shipman, who passed away earlier this year. I especially thank the three of them for their unconditional acceptance of me being so far away from them.

This thesis is dedicated to my partner Pedro.

Amado Pedro:

Muchas gracias, compañero de mi vida. Esta tesis es dedicada a ti porque ¡tú me ha sostenido por los tiempos duros y vitoreamos juntos en los picos!

JSG
December 2006