

“You don’t want to mansplain their period”:
An Exploration of Men’s Menstrual Attitudes and Experiences in the UK

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Abstract

This thesis explores men's menstrual attitudes and their experiences as non-menstruators in the UK. Although there has been a recent surge of interest in research on menstruation globally and acknowledgement of the significance of men and boys, few studies have been interested in understanding their lived experiences. I draw on in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 cis male and non-binary non-menstruators and informal interviews with 11 cis female, trans male, and non-binary menstruators. I explore how men view menstruation, when and where men and boys learn about menstruation, and how men understand their role(s) in menstrual-related practices and issues. I examine how men and boys experience *practices of menstrual exclusion* and how these are constructed throughout the life course, starting in childhood, into adolescence and during adulthood. I propose that these practices of exclusion are gendered and are informed by and reinforce the notion of menstruation as a feminised and shameful event to be concealed; shape men and boys' negative attitudes towards menstruation; and can act as a hurdle in their communication about the menstrual cycle with each other, and with women, girls and people who menstruate. I explore how the conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity can be a useful resource when seeking to explain gendered practices around menstruation and offer '*Men as Menstrual Mortar*' as an analogy to visualise the position of men and boys (and women and girls) in a structure of menstrual shame, stigma, and taboo, and to consider the impact of the positive inclusion of men and boys in the social organisation of menstruation.

List of Contents

ABSTRACT	2
LIST OF CONTENTS	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	7
AUTHOR DECLARATION	9
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	10
1.1 Introduction	10
1.2 Menstruation Flowing in the Right Direction	13
1.3 Men and Boys: The Need for Inclusion	19
1.4 Notes on Language	25
1.5 Chapter Outline	27
1.6 Conclusion	28
CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	29
2.1 Introduction	29
Part One: Review of Existing Literature	29
2.2 Men and Boys' Limited and Inaccurate Menstrual Knowledge	30
2.3 Men and Boys' Negative Menstrual Beliefs and Attitudes	32
2.4 Men and Boys' Personal Relationships and Menstrual-Related Roles	36
2.5 Main Research Gaps	38
Part Two: Hegemonic Masculinity	42
2.6 Introduction to Hegemonic Masculinity	42
Part Three: Gender and Masculinities in the Contemporary UK Context	50
2.7 Changing Gender Context Since 1990	50
2.8 Conclusion	52
CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY	53
3.1 Introduction	53

3.2 Study Aims and Research Questions	54
3.3 Methods	55
3.4 Study Specific Ethical Considerations	62
3.5 Study Participants	73
3.6 Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic	75
3.7 Data Analysis	83
3.8 Conclusion	86
 CHAPTER 4 SCHOOL AND FORMAL EDUCATION	 87
4.1 Introduction	87
4.2 Exclusion from Menstrual Education	89
4.3 Biological Education v Lived Experience	96
4.4 Learning Beyond Lessons	101
4.5 Menstrual Jokes and Gibes	106
4.6 Conclusion	115
 CHAPTER 5 HOME AND FAMILY	 119
5.1 Introduction	119
5.2 Lack of Communication About Menstruation	120
5.3 Learning Through the Everyday	128
5.4 Mothers as Menstrual Educators	132
5.5 Role of Fathers in Menstrual Education and Support	136
5.6 Conclusion	149
 CHAPTER 6 INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERS	 153
6.1 Introduction	153
6.2 Sharing of Menstrual Status and Menstrual Experiences	155
6.3 Supporting Partners	162
6.4 Sex and Intimacy	172
6.5 Contraception, (In)Fertility, Conception, and Birth	181
6.6 Menstruators' Experiences	187

6.7 Conclusion	189
CHAPTER 7 PEERS, PRODUCTS AND POPULAR CULTURE	193
7.1 Introduction	193
7.2 Talking about Menstruation with Male Friends	193
7.3 Learning Through Female Friends and Work Colleagues	198
7.4 Menstrual Products and Policies	207
7.5 Making Meaning Through Popular Culture	217
7.6 Conclusion	225
CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION	229
8.1 Introduction	229
8.2 Menstrual Exclusion Throughout Key Stages of the Life Course	230
8.3 Hegemonic Masculinity	234
8.4 Mansplaining Menstruation	241
8.5 Men as Menstrual Mortar: Taking Down the Wall	242
8.6 Study Limitations	245
8.7 Recommendations	246
8.8 Reflections on Researching Men and Menstruation	249
APPENDICES	251
Appendix A Participant Demographics	251
Appendix B Interview Guide	256
Appendix C Participant Information Sheet	259
Appendix D Participant Consent Form	261
Appendix E Transcription Conventions	262
REFERENCE LIST	263

*This thesis is dedicated in loving memory of
my Grandma Betty and Auntie Pat.*



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Author Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Chapter 1 | Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This research was conceived shortly after my return from Uganda in 2016, where I had been investigating the impact of an education-based intervention on changing school-age boys' attitudes towards menstruation (Suggett, 2016). This was a project I undertook as part of my MA Global Development and Gender programme working with Irise International¹. My interest in menstruation as an academic topic to study came earlier than this in 2013, when I was faced with the freedom of a student-led assessment on a second-year module 'Development Practice', a core module on my BA International Development with Sociology programme. I had found myself particularly interested in studying poverty through a gender lens and used the assessment as an opportunity to explore an area I was yet to encounter in my studies. After some initial consideration of existing development programming in various contexts and driven by the initial unease I felt at the prospect of researching the sensitive and taboo topic of menstruation, I acknowledged the gap that few development organisations at the time were integrating into their work, thus focusing my assessment on designing a programme with the aim of engaging men and boys in the community in menstruation programming.

Fast forward to my postgraduate degree fieldwork in the district of Jinja in Uganda, where talking to male teachers and interviewing 12–18-year-old schoolboys about their experiences of receiving menstrual health education unearthed some personal discomfort, notably around my own menstrual experiences growing up. This encouraged me to reflect beyond my initial study aims and research questions. I was aware of my positionality as a white, western, university educated woman collecting this data as part of my postgraduate qualification, but these interviews stirred me to acknowledge how similar these boys' menstrual attitudes may be to the boys I had attended school with, and boys in UK schools more generally. This reflection continued after the research and MA programme, and I began to lay the foundations

¹ Irise International support the provision of menstrual products and menstrual education for young people, working towards social change around menstruation in East Africa and the UK.

for this study. Concurrently, in March 2017 there was a media frenzy of news stories documenting how girls were missing school in the UK because they did not have access to menstrual products, highlighted by Leeds-based charity Freedom4Girls² (Marsh, 2017; Olorunshola, 2017), soon referred to as ‘period poverty’. In response, children’s and girls’ rights charity Plan International UK released their report, *Break the Barriers: Girls’ experiences of menstruation in the UK*, which showed how key issues in the UK did not differ much from how menstruation is experienced in other global contexts. Findings highlighted how access to menstrual products, pain management and importantly, menstrual stigma and taboos, were universal issues being experienced by young people (Tingle and Vora, 2018). The research revealed a ‘toxic trio’ of period poverty in the UK: the cost of menstrual products; a lack of education about menstruation; the shame, stigma, and taboo of menstruation (Russell, 2018).

Driven by these new findings in the UK and an advanced interest in understanding menstrual stigma and experiences across different global settings, the framework for this research was formed. I set out to design and conduct a comparative study of men’s menstrual attitudes and experiences in a low-middle income and high-income context. Given Freedom4Girls’ work in Kenya and existing studies shining a light on the menstrual experiences of women and girls in Kenya (Jewitt and Ryley, 2014; Mason et al., 2013; Crichton et al., 2012; McMahon, 2011), I considered Kenya to be a suitable context to conduct comparative research with England. I was aware of how conducting this research could challenge the silence around menstruation in England, especially by focusing on men, but based on my academic background in Development Studies, I was equally motivated to turn in the direction of my birth and home country to disrupt the notion of the UK as a ‘developed’ nation in the Global North. Thinking about menstruation and British culture more specifically, I approached this research mindful of how Sophie Laws (1990, p.1) described the context:

British people nurture an image of themselves as tremendously tolerant and open-minded. Mention of social attitudes towards menstruation frequently produces discussions of vaguely-remembered stories about other cultures – behaviour and

² Freedom4Girls support the provision of menstrual products and education in East Africa and the UK.

beliefs among 'other' people, seen as exotic and perhaps primitive. There is often a slight tone of self-congratulation, and British culture is seen as balanced and reasonable by contrast, since the stigma attached to menstruating women comes to be seen as relatively mild.

Scholarship has critiqued the idea that 'development' is only relevant to the Global South, with issues such as poverty and social exclusion apparent in the Global North (Horner, 2019; Willis, 2005). Potter argues that those "interested in development must endeavour more readily to encompass issues and policies of development wherever they occur" (2001, p.425). This deconstruction of the developed/developing binary and calls to move beyond a geography of international development focused solely on the Global South, paired with increased acknowledgement and critique of white saviourism in humanitarian action and the 'white gaze' of development work (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021; Pailey, 2020; Wearing et al., 2018; Bandyopadhyay and Patil, 2017), continued to shape this change of direction in my research.

Furthermore, in her noteworthy contribution critiquing Menstrual Hygiene/Health Management (MHM) organisations and campaigns in their approach to the provision of menstrual products to schoolgirls in the Global South, Chris Bobel argues that MHM "promotes 'management' by producing the 'good' period – aka, the one we don't know about" (2019, p.7), and such interventions focus more on individual intervention than structural change. In drawing attention to how MHM is conceptualized, Bobel asserts that this "is a rich example of how certain representations reflect the Western imaginary of the Global South" (2019, p.7), in which a consumerist product-centred agenda reinforces the core problem of menstrual stigma. Bobel argues there is a need for research "that bridges menstrual and menopausal realities in the Global South and Global North, to substantively and responsibly explore not only the differences, but also the similarities in these spaces" (2020, p.5).

Due to Covid-19 restrictions introduced in March 2020, I was unable to progress with planned fieldwork in Kenya, however the necessary shift to focusing on the UK context meant the study could still focus on interrogating the narrative of the UK as a 'developed' nation in the context of menstruation, education, and women's health and rights.

My research aims to provide an insight into the following questions:

1. How do men view menstruation?
2. How do boys and men learn about menstruation?
3. How do men perceive their role(s) in menstrual-related issues and practices?

This chapter introduces the background of my research by firstly discussing menstruation in the global context and recent developments in the UK. The chapter then moves on to looking at the need to include men and boys in menstruation, both in research and in the everyday, drawing on existing studies of lived experiences of menstruation and through the introduction of 'Men as Menstrual Mortar'. Finally, the chapter closes with a discussion of the language used throughout the thesis, followed by an outline of the following chapters.

1.2 Menstruation Flowing in the Right Direction

Historically, although menstruation is a natural biological process experienced by many and a sign of reproductive health, cross-culturally it has been treated as a taboo subject cloaked in silence and shame (Gottlieb, 2020; Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). Menstruation is considered a source of social stigma, as menstrual blood is, according to Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2020), a “stigmatizing mark” (p.182) fitting the three distinct types of stigmas identified by sociologist Erving Goffman (1963): physical stigma; stigma of character traits; stigma of group identity. The female body has long been perceived as ‘leaky’ and a site of pollution, with menstrual blood viewed as a fluid with a likeness to childbirth and breast milk, in which the female body’s problematic unpredictability and uncontrollable rupturing of boundaries is to be feared (Ussher, 2006; Shildrick and Price, 1999; Shildrick, 1997; Douglas, 1996). As argued by Vora (2020), “the normal body is not a bleeding body [...] It is this cultural representation of a sticky, messy femininity that places menstruating women at the borders of social legitimacy” (p.33). The need to control the monstrous body (Ussher, 2006) and pass as a non-menstruator leads to women being in the ‘menstrual closet’ (Young, 2005). The management and concealment of menstrual blood and any indication of menstrual status is therefore necessary should menstruating women wish to avoid stigmatization (Young, 2005; Houppert, 1999) and “appear unencumbered by their menses” (Wood, 2020, p.328), in a patriarchal

society which upholds standards of femininity around women's clean and sexually attractive docile bodies. For Laws (1990), such social rules attached to menstruation are understood and termed as an 'etiquette'. Individuals and societies act as though menstruation does not exist, as "the lengths that women go to in order to keep their periods secret from men is matched only by the lengths men go to in order to avoid knowing about them", what Linton terms, "social amenorrhea" (2019, p.23).

Globally, menstruation has risen in its prominence as a topic to discuss, research, and advocate for over recent years. "Attention to menstruation has intensified and diversified", argues Chris Bobel (2020, p.2), viewing the many positive steps and events since 2015 - 'the year the period went public'³, as creating a significant shift in the relevance and value of menstruation as a category of analysis⁴. As menstrual activist, educator, and performer Chella Quint claims, "we're living through menstrual history right now!" (2020a). What was once primarily an issue in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector, menstruation is now a subject at the forefront of some key political debates and policy changes, with increased attention on how menstruation is experienced in high-income countries (Barrington et al., 2021). Initially referred to as menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in WASH, the shift to a focus on 'menstrual health' was a strategy to broaden the narrative away from the need to maintain cleanliness and recognise "the broader systemic factors that link menstruation with health, well-being, gender equality, education, equity, empowerment and rights" (UNICEF, 2019, p.8). Developed by the Terminology Action Group of the Global Menstrual Collective, "menstrual health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle" (Hennegan et al., 2021). Although not included in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) announced

³ Cosmopolitan Magazine highlighted the occasions where menstruation made it into the mainstream throughout 2015, including Rupri Kaur's Instagram post of a menstrual stain on her sweatpants being taken down twice, Kiran Gandhi free bleeding while running the London Marathon and Twitter responding to Donald Trump's comments about Megyn Kelly having "blood coming out of her wherever" with the hashtag #PeriodsAreNotAnInsult (Maltby, 2015).

⁴ '*Critical Menstruation Studies*', coined by Sharra Vostral for The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies published in 2020, "is premised upon menstruation as a category of analysis: asking how systems of power and knowledge are built upon its understanding and, furthermore, who benefits from these social constructions." Critical menstruations studies is "a coherent and multidimensional transdisciplinary subject of inquiry and advocacy" (Bobel, 2020, p.4).

in 2015, addressing menstrual health and hygiene (MHH) has been recognised as having the potential to make a crucial contribution to achieving the goals by 2030 (Babbar et al., 2022; Sommer et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2019). Most importantly, menstrual health is recognised as a matter of human rights and gender equality (Roche and Veerdonk, 2019; UNICEF, 2019), and there has been increased attention on menstrual equity (Weiss-Wolf, 2017), the taxation of menstrual products, and steps to address ‘period poverty’ around the world. There has also been a crucial shift in language and how menstruation is talked about beyond cisnormativity, with a greater recognition of who menstruates as to include the menstrual experiences and needs of trans, non-binary, and intersex people (Eisenberg, 2021; Wilson, 2020; Chrisler et al., 2016). Similarly, menstrual product advertising has been challenged for its use of blue liquid in visual imagery and its role in perpetuating menstrual shame and negative stereotypes, with some companies releasing more positive and inclusive advertisements showing the absorbency of red liquid⁵ (Selby, 2017), as well as depicting transgender men as menstruators⁶ (Truong, 2016). Although a step in the right direction towards a societal shift in ending menstrual shame and stigma, similar cases of ‘corporate period positivity’ have been criticized for continuing to promote menstrual shame and stigma by selling the need for menstrual concealment through their products (Harris, 2021).

1.2.1 Menstruation in the UK

Recent years have seen a much-welcomed rise in the visibility of menstruation as a topic of discussion and of social, cultural, and political change in the UK. The exposure of period poverty in the UK in 2017, later supported by Plan International UK’s report (Tingle and Vora, 2018), acted as a catalyst for increased activism and pressure on the government towards such change. Attention turned to the taxation of menstrual products as ‘luxury’ and ‘non-essential’ items, an issue feminist activist Laura Coryton and others had been campaigning on since 2014 (Lock, 2021). The

⁵ UK based brand Bodyform’s #BloodNormal campaign included a TV advert showing red liquid being poured onto a menstrual pad and ‘blood’ running down the inside of a leg under the shower, reportedly the first advertisement to do so.

⁶ E.g., U.S company Thinx, who launched a series of advertisements with transgender model Sawyer DeVuyst wearing their period underwear in 2016.

5% VAT, referred to as the ‘tampon tax’⁷, was removed officially as of 1st January 2021 at the end of the transition period from the EU VAT Directive, and as part of government action in their commitment and campaign to end period poverty globally by 2030 (HM Treasury, 2021). Alongside the increase in campaigning and awareness raising of tampon tax during this time, Amika George and her #FreePeriods campaign called on the UK government to introduce free access to menstrual products in schools, so no student would have to miss their education because of their period (Williams, 2022). In 2019, it was announced that the UK Government was introducing a period product scheme for schools and colleges in England from January 2020. The Government extended the scheme in 2021 up until July 2022, and, with data released in January 2022 showing schools are utilising the scheme with an increased uptake, plans for the next academic year are due to be announced at the time of writing (Department for Education, 2022). Meanwhile, although menstrual products were also funded in Scotland for school students, after much campaigning from Labour MSP Monica Lennon and activists, the Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Bill was unanimously approved in 2020, making Scotland the first country in the world to make menstrual products free for all through a Scotland-wide scheme (Diamond, 2020). Some progress has also been made in Wales, with funding from the Welsh government directed towards the provision of menstrual products in education settings and local communities (Welsh Government, 2021). Although Northern Ireland was late to introduce a pilot scheme for students, a bill aimed at addressing period poverty has recently been introduced to the NI Assembly (Campbell, 2021).

In response to period poverty in the UK, several charities and organisations such as Bloody Good Period and The Red Box Project focused on collecting and distributing donations of menstrual products to those who needed them, and university unions and campaigns pushed to get free menstrual products into universities, football grounds, public spaces. Initiatives to address period poverty have been introduced by supermarket chains such as Tesco, which was the first supermarket to cover the cost of tampon tax for customers in 2017. Discreet initiatives such as the ‘white

⁷ The VAT existed on tampons, pads, and menstrual cups.

envelope' scheme at Tesco and 'package for Sandy' at Morrisons allows customers to access free menstrual products in store by speaking to a staff member. Similarly, Lidl Ireland now offers free menstrual products to customers each month through their app. Likewise, Network Rail recently introduced free menstrual product dispensing machines to Leeds train station in late 2021. Beyond the experiences of young people experiencing period poverty highlighted by Plan International UK (Tingle and Vora, 2018), studies of menstruation in the UK have also documented experiences of women accessing foodbanks (Garthwaite, 2016), women from low-income households (Briggs, 2020), homelessness (Vora, 2020) and in the context of higher education (Ennis et al., 2020) and public spaces (Moffat and Pickering, 2019). More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted access to menstrual products for some people and there was an increase in women, girls and people who menstruate experiencing period poverty in the UK (Dickins, Streibl, and Hallam, 2022; Williams, Craddock, and Weckesser, 2022; Plan International UK, 2021: 2020). Rose Caldwell, CEO of Plan International UK, argues that "while access to period products is essential to tackling period poverty, it is only part of the solution", acknowledging how the 'toxic trio' is central to moving forward with improving these experiences through better education and pushing against the societal shame and stigma surrounding menstruation (Plan International UK, 2021).

In the fight towards addressing the lack of education on menstruation and tackling menstrual shame and stigma in the UK, activists celebrated the inclusion of menstruation as a topic to be taught in the Department for Education's introduction of compulsory education for primary pupils, Relationships and Sex Education for secondary pupils and Health Education for all schools from September 2020 (Department for Education, 2019). Since this was announced however, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the de-prioritisation of menstrual health education in primary and secondary schools (Williams, Craddock, and Weckesser, 2022). In 2019, the much-anticipated red blood droplet 'period emoji' was released by Unicode Consortium following a few years of work by Plan International UK, offering a way to normalise menstruation and reduce menstrual stigma in communication (Ho, 2019). Furthermore, there has also been some movement towards menstrual equality in the workplace and discussions of the feasibility of 'period leave' policies in the UK, with research showing the prevalence of period shaming in UK workplaces (ActionAid,

2018). This focus on the workplace extends to increased attention on menstruation in sport, specifically how the menstrual cycle impacts female athletes' performance (Geddes, 2021; Findlay et al., 2020), and just recently with a focus on NHS staff's lack of access to menstrual products at work (Baruah, 2022).

Alongside shifts in attitudes towards menstruation, there have been some broader societal shifts in how women's reproductive bodies are being discussed. Alongside a rise in menstruation awareness in the UK, there has been some movements in advocacy towards raising awareness of endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), and pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), as well as attempts to improve the attitudes towards and experiences of the menopause. In recent years, campaigns centred on busting menopause myths and encouraging open conversations on menopause symptoms experienced and its various effects on people's lives have increased and appeared on national TV. In the UK, the #MakeMenopauseMatter campaign led by not-for-profit Menopause Support, aims to introduce menopause education into the school curriculum for all children, to raise awareness within the workplace and for all employers to have menopause guidelines in place, and to improve menopause education amongst GPs. In 2019, it was announced that the menopause would be taught in UK secondary schools alongside menstruation and pregnancy, introduced as part of the revised curriculum for Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in 2020 (Menopause Support, 2019). Campaigners have also shaped significant steps made towards reducing the costs for women and people experiencing menopause to access hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in England (Menopause Support, 2021), and at the time of writing, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has launched a public consultation on proposals to make a local vaginal form of HRT available at a pharmacy, meaning a form of menopausal treatment can be accessed without a prescription (Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, 2022).

Although recent progress in the UK demonstrates some positive and constructive movement in the last five or so years, there is still a long way to go to improve experiences of the menstrual cycle, to ensure all women, girls and people who menstruate have access to the menstrual products they need, to improve people's knowledge and understanding of the menstrual cycle, and to transform negative menstrual attitudes, menstrual stigma, and stereotypes. The Covid-19 pandemic

further exacerbated menstrual shame and period poverty and as period poverty activist Amika George (2020) notes, “it feels like we have hit rewind on the progress we have recently made”. My research extends discussion by situating men and boys as non-menstruators at the forefront of this movement to enable future change around societal menstrual shame and stigma by offering an important contribution towards better understanding menstrual attitudes and experiences more broadly within the UK context.

1.3 Men and Boys: The Need for Inclusion

Patriarchal attitudes characterise menstruation as dirty and women as leaking and hysterical (Ussher, 2006). From a feminist perspective, “negative views of the menstruating woman are, at least in part, both manifestations of and justifications for a repressive patriarchal social structure” (Forbes et al., 2003, p.58). Furthermore, menstrual ideologies “both reflect and reinforce patriarchal social structures privileging men and boys” (Erchull, 2020, p.399). George (2019) argues, “the taboo around periods is a form of misogyny, emblematic of the broader subordination of women” and “not talking to boys and men about our periods means a quiet subservience, allowing separate, gendered spheres to exist, which validates the idea that anything outside the cis-male experience is abnormal”. Gloria Steinem drew attention to this power dynamic and the sexist social construction of attitudes towards menstruation in her satirical essay, ‘If Men Could Menstruate’, originally published in Ms. magazine in 1978, in which she critically reframes menstruation as being associated with men’s bodies (Steinem, 2019). Later, Sophie Laws’ work made a connection between the menstrual shame experienced by women, and the negative messages about women’s bodies in patriarchal cultures, present in men’s oppressive attitudes towards menstruation. Laws argues that “menstruation is understood by men within the context of the enforcement of heterosexuality upon women” and “is used in our culture as the basis, the excuse, for a flexible and changing set of ideas and practices which reinforce men’s power over women” (1990, p.109). Lara Owen notes, “the historic concealment of menstruation means that men tend to be particularly ignorant of its impact upon lived experience, and the bias they consequently have against taking it seriously may be unconsciously held” (2022, p.12). Meanwhile, Linton (2019) argues that “menstrual lore shapes male

values, beliefs and behaviour” (p.32), but men and women invent the meaning of menstruation through “an endless series of ‘menstrual transactions’” (p.1).

By focusing on the menstrual attitudes and experiences of men, this feminist study can consider “when the gender order works against men and when men’s and women’s lives intersect” (Letherby, 2003, p.137). The need for inclusion of men and boys can be understood by considering their interactions with menstruators, thus acknowledging their influence as non-menstruators on the menstrual experiences and psychological, social, and economic wellbeing of women, girls and people who menstruate. Additionally, their inclusion can be valued by understanding their potential to become menstrual allies, advocates, and agents of change around menstruation. This thesis addresses this need by exploring men’s menstrual attitudes and experiences throughout the life course, drawing on their exchanges and relationships with peers, teachers, family members, intimate partners, and work colleagues.

1.3.1 Negative Menstrual Experiences of Women, Girls, and People who Menstruate

Existing studies have documented the negative menstrual experiences of women, girls and people who menstruate in various global contexts, drawing attention to how men and boys contribute towards feelings of shame and negative experiences through their menstrual attitudes and everyday actions. For example, research in the UK, US, Tanzania, Taiwan, Rwanda, and Kenya, reveals how boys engage in period shaming and menstrual-related teasing, for example when they see girls possessing menstrual products or because of visible blood stains and bad odour (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020; Tingle and Vora, 2018; Girod et al., 2017; Newton, 2016; Jewitt and Ryley, 2014; Chang and Lin, 2013; Penakalapati, 2013; Allen, Kaestle, and Goldberg, 2011; McMahon et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006; Burrows and Johnson, 2005; Lovering, 1995; Prendergast, 1992). In the UK, girls share how they do not talk to boys about menstruation because of the fear of being teased or bullied about the embarrassing and awkward topic of menstruation, or at home because they had been told not to talk to their fathers about menstruation (Tingle and Vora, 2018). Likewise, in Kenya, girls consider that men and boys, including their classmates, teachers, fathers, and brothers, should remain unaware of menstruation so they do

not laugh at them (Mason et al., 2013). The need to hide menstruation from men and boys extends to minimising the risk of sexual pressure, harassment, and coercion for some girls, especially where menarche and menstruation is an indicator of womanhood (Sommer, 2009). Research indicates that women and girls report not talking to men and boys about menstruation as it would be considered as breaking a social norm. For instance, in Ghana, schoolgirls fear that talking about menstruation would be deemed inappropriate, thus they avoid communication about menstruation, particularly with their peers and male teachers (Rheinlander et al., 2018).

Beyond adolescence, menstruators in the UK continue to experience a lack of comfort in talking about menstruation with non-menstruators, for example research found that women are not comfortable talking about menstruation with male friends and their fathers (ActionAid, 2017). Similarly, recent research on UK workplaces (Bloody Good Period, 2021) highlights how male-dominated workplaces and cis male managers can mean people who menstruate do not feel that they can communicate about menstruation at work because of a lack of menstrual knowledge, support and empathy available in this context. Existing research highlights how in both adolescence and adulthood, menstruators are made to feel that menstruation is a silent issue which needs to be, and is best kept, a secret. It is no surprise that literature shows how women and girls often experience a general lack of support when it comes to menstruation from men in their lives, including from their fathers and partners. This includes a lack of emotional support, as well as access to menstrual products when men are the financial decision makers within the household (Tingle and Vora, 2018).

1.3.2 Men as Menstrual Allies, Advocates, and Agents of Change

Despite some progress around menstruation in the UK and globally, men and boys are still often disregarded and left out of the conversation as non-menstruators (Erchull, 2020). Yet, men and boys have been recognised as having the potential to play a key role in de-stigmatising menstruation and improving menstrual experiences for women, girls and people who menstruate. Understanding the menstrual attitudes and lived experiences of men and boys is crucial for improving knowledge, dispelling

myths and misconceptions, and challenging cultural norms and stereotypes. This is significant for moving forward towards a world in which men and boys can be menstrual allies, advocates, and agents of change.

As explored in the next chapter, men and boys' lack of knowledge and understanding of the menstrual cycle runs in tandem with their negative menstrual attitudes, beliefs, and actions (or inaction). Thus, the inclusion of men and boys in education around the menstrual cycle is central to challenging and changing existing ideas about menstruation (Standing, 2018a). Plan International UK outline six recommendations in 'The Menstrual Manifesto' based on their findings in the UK, one of which is to "ensure real world education for all" by including boys in integrated classes when being taught about menstruation, alongside space to talk about menstruation separately, and supporting parents to fill their own knowledge gaps so they can speak to and support their children comfortably (Tingle and Vora, 2018, p.51). Similarly, Babbar et al. (2022) propose four action points for achieving menstrual health for all, one of which is "a strong need to provide *an enabling sociocultural environment* for those who menstruate to manage their menstrual needs with dignity and comfort" by challenging societal norms through the inclusion of men and boys and reducing menstrual stigma in doing so. Men and boys may challenge menstrual myths and misconceptions, advocate towards issues such as period poverty, as well as challenge "practices that allow fear, shame and discomfort during menstruation" (Daniel, 2019). With the language to talk about menstruation, communication between men and boys can be improved, as well as with women, girls and people who menstruate (Scott, 2017). Erchull (2020) argues:

It is also seen as unimportant to educate men about menstruation in much detail because it is not something they are expected to deal with. This lack of knowledge can contribute to stereotypical beliefs, negatives attitudes, and general discomfort. This cycle needs to be interrupted...Knowledge can facilitate comfort, and comfort can facilitate open discussion, and openness can facilitate cultural positivity (p.403).

Men and boys can be essential and supportive agents of change for gender equality and menstruation (Patkar, 2020). In Mahon, Tripathy, and Singh's work (2015) examining the essential role of men and boys in effective menstrual hygiene programmes, they argue that men and boys can provide financial and emotional support to menstruators at school, in the home, in the community and in the

workplace, as husbands, fathers, partners, brothers, peers, teachers, and community leaders. For example, in the household and family context where fathers and husbands make decisions around finances, they can ensure access to menstrual products either by buying them or allocating money to it each month. Another example is within the context of school, where boys and teachers can ensure a supportive environment for menstruating students by not bullying and teasing them about a menstrual stain and not questioning them if they need to use the toilet during a lesson. What Mahon et al. (2015) argue here is just as relevant outside the context of MHM across different countries and societies. Not only does inclusion create and encourage more empathy in men and boys towards menstruation, but it can practically prepare them to become supportive adults and recognise their role(s) within menstrual-related practices and issues within both their personal and professional lives. This is echoed by Erchull (2020, p.403):

Even looking beyond the fact that some men menstruate and not all women do, men do interact with menstruators. They have mothers and sisters who do or did menstruate. They may have partners who menstruate. They parent daughters who do or will menstruate. They share communities with menstruators.

1.3.3 Men as Menstrual Mortar: Visualising the Patriarchal Structure

The need for men and boys' inclusion in menstruation leads us to consider how men and boys are currently positioned within the patriarchal structure of menstrual shame, stigma, and taboo. For this purpose, I propose my analogy of '*Men as Menstrual Mortar*'. I do not endeavour to present this as a theoretical concept, but rather a metaphorical tool and teaching aid to visualise and understand the issue(s), and most importantly, consider opportunities for change. Helping us to "make sense of nuance" by drawing on what people already know or have experienced, metaphors "function like mental maps that help people interpret and draw new inferences about the complex idea that is being communicated but in a way that is easier to grasp" (Thibodeau, 2021). An example of this is Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. Using the metaphor of a traffic intersection to explain how different types of discrimination interact, Crenshaw "wanted to come up with a common everyday metaphor that people could use" (Adewunmi, 2014). Here, I offer an

introduction to 'Men as Menstrual Mortar' and return to it in Chapter 8 for further discussion in the context of my research findings.

Typically, the structure of a built brick wall is made up of a concrete base and bricks are laid down on top of each other, bonded together by mortar. Aesthetically, to look at a built brick wall you can see the presence of hardened mortar filling the spaces between the bricks, both vertically and horizontally, surrounding the brick on each side. Structurally, each brick is held firmly in place by a mortar joint; there are several types, each differs in appearance but carries out the same purpose. Over time, the wall may slightly change in appearance, through weathering for example, but the mortar continues to provide a rigid structure to the wall. If the mortar however crumbles, the wall will become unstable and ultimately collapse. Rather than consider the process of building the wall, I want to focus instead on the structure of a wall. To look at the built wall as a patriarchal structure of menstrual shame, stigma, and taboo, in the same way as mortar surrounds bricks and provides strength to the built wall, men (constructions of masculinity) retain the position of the bricks (menstrual shame, stigma, and taboo) and thus, maintain order. In this research I argue that boys are mortar at its workable paste stage; malleable and adhesive, being comprised of a ratio of different materials, yet to become a hardened substance in a fixed structure as men with rigid held beliefs and attitudes.

Although this analogy may be helpful to understand the significance of men and boys in how menstrual shame and stigma operates and continues within a local/global context, it is particularly useful to consider the properties of mortar to change this structure with men and boys (and constructions of masculinity) at the centre. Mortar is a workable paste, typically made using a ratioed mixture of water, cement, and sand, with the ratio varying dependent on its purpose. Therefore, mortar is a product of other materials, a product which can differ in appearance, strength and use dependent on how it is made at the mixing stage of the process. Mortar does not exist as a soft and workable paste for long, with a limited period for curing to its final compressive strength and hardened position post application. Although mortar hardens to bind the bricks together, it is porous and can absorb moisture, and may erode and crack over time, weakening the overall structure of the wall. More significantly, an incorrect ratio of primary materials, or simply using a different

mixture of materials when trying to make mortar, can impact its adhesiveness to the bricks, and therefore also its durability within the structure of the wall. In exploring men's menstrual attitudes and experiences as non-menstruators, my research findings provide further context to the analogy of 'Men as Menstrual Mortar', and lead to consideration of how to demolish the wall of menstrual shame, stigma, and taboo through the greater and more positive inclusion of men and boys within menstruation practices.

1.4 Notes on Language

The language we use to talk about menstruation is important, especially given its many euphemisms and negative connotations. Chella Quint argues, "negative talk about menstruation can and does affect those who menstruate and has even conditioned those who don't to internalise those harmful messages as well" (2020a). The euphemistic term 'period' is commonly used in the English language to refer to menstruation, denoting 'the menstrual period'. Despite the many euphemisms for menstruation (Hampton and Osborne, 2021; Clue, 2016), nearly all participants used 'period' to refer to menstruation in their responses, even though I referred to it as menstruation in the initial interview questions. Thus, I use 'period' interchangeably with 'menstruation' throughout the thesis. Occasionally, some participants refer to their partners as having a period or menstruating, but within the context of the interview, they may have been referring to what would be deemed a withdrawal bleed - a 'period' when using the contraceptive pill (Druet, 2019), or lochia, known more commonly as postpartum bleeding. Some participants also refer to 'sanitary' products in their responses even though I referred to them as 'menstrual products' or 'period products' in the initial interview questions. This is presented verbatim from transcription, however when discussing their responses and throughout the thesis more generally, I refer to them as 'menstrual products' instead. As argued by Bobel (2019), words such as 'sanitary' and 'hygiene' can reinforce ideas about menstruation as something which is dirty, and that the vagina needs to be sanitized, thus suggesting that the use of such products is the solution to the 'unhygienic' problem of menstruation. This notion is central to Chella Quint's 'Period Positive Pledge', a framework for relearning menstrual literacy, which states "it's Period

Positive to say menstrual products” in place of sanitary or feminine hygiene products, “because periods aren’t dirty” (2020b).

Likewise, using inclusive language when talking about menstruation is key to ensuring transgender men, non-binary, intersex, and gender non-conforming people who menstruate are not further marginalised and stigmatised. Thus, it is important to note here that I recognise not all those who identify as women and girls menstruate⁸, and not everyone who menstruates identifies as a woman or girl. There has been a recent increase in the use of the term ‘menstruators’ as an inclusive gender-neutral term to describe and refer to all people who may experience menstruation as a biological function (Menstrual Health Hub, 2022; Rydström, 2020; Bobel, 2010). I recognise the complexities in this use of language, particularly in the case of those who reject the term ‘menstruators’ and argue that it erases the lived experiences of women, reducing “the negative experiences of menstruation to biology rather than the traditional and complex socio-cultural taboos around women’s bodies and sexuality” (Menstrual Health Hub, 2022, p.44). In the Menstrual Health Hub’s recently published Glossary for the Global Menstrual Movement, ‘women, girls and people who menstruate’ is recognised as being a term that is more fitting for global contexts where gender neutral language, such as ‘menstruator’, “may be considered alienating”, however it is also inclusive language which tends to be used “in conjunction with women’s rights focused activism” (2022, p.65). It is for this reason that in my research I use these terms interchangeably. I use ‘men’ and ‘boys’ alongside ‘non-menstruating participants’ and ‘non-menstruators’ throughout the thesis, although I recognise that some transgender men and boys experience menstruation. These participants have no experience of menstruating: in this study 23 non-menstruating participants are male and 1 is AMAB⁹ non-binary. I refer to participants with experience of menstruating¹⁰ as ‘women, girls and people who menstruate’, or as ‘menstruators’ or ‘menstruating participants’: in this study 9

⁸ For example, women and girls who are post-menopause, who have had hysterectomies, who are using contraception etc.

⁹ Assigned male at birth based on observation of sex characteristics (penis/testes).

¹⁰ Not all these participants were experiencing regular menstrual periods at the time of their interviews. For example, some had not menstruated for a few years due to taking the contraceptive pill or testosterone, one participant had not menstruated for six months due to unknown reasons, and one participant’s periods had temporarily stopped due to cancer treatment.

menstruating participants are female, 1 is trans male, and 1 is AFAB¹¹ non-binary. When referring to existing literature, I use the language used in the study. As noted by Erchull, “nearly all research in this area reflects an underlying assumption of a gender binary” (2020, p.395).

Finally, I wish to address the use of pronouns throughout this thesis. I welcomed the three non-binary and trans male participants to share their pronouns at the start of their interviews, as these participants had previously chosen to voluntarily state their gender identity at the recruitment stage when seeking to confirm their eligibility to participate in the study. I use the pronouns they shared with me in the analysis. I did not ask the remaining participants to share their pronouns with me at the interview stage, but now recognise that I could have and would in future research. Thus, I use assumed pronouns, or pronouns they used when talking about themselves in their responses, when I refer to these participants in the analysis. Based on the underlying assumption of a gender binary identified in most existing literature, I use the pronouns used by the authors in the secondary literature when referring to participants in these studies.

1.5 Chapter Outline

This thesis explores the menstrual attitudes and experiences of men in the UK and argues that men and boys experience practices of exclusion throughout the life course. Following this background introduction to my research, *Chapter 2: Literature Review* highlights the main themes from the limited existing literature on men and boys and menstruation and identifies the research gap to locate where this study sits. The chapter then moves on to introduce hegemonic masculinity and the contemporary gender context in the UK. In *Chapter 3: Methodology*, the chosen methods are presented and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the study is discussed. *Chapter 4: School and Formal Education* offers the first insight into learning about menstruation with reflections on exclusion in childhood and adolescence within the school context. Leading on from this in *Chapter 5: Home and*

¹¹ Assigned female at birth based on observation of sex characteristics (vagina/uterus/ovaries).

Family, I consider to what extent the childhood home and family members contribute towards learning about menstruation for boys and how exclusion continues here in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. In *Chapter 6: Intimate Relationships and Partners*, the analysis turns towards the relevance of partners and intimacy in how men and boys learn about menstruation in adolescence and adulthood, drawing on accounts of exclusion to consider how this differs between first girlfriends and 'casual' partners to long-term relationships and within the context of marriage. Adding a broader analysis to the three previous chapters, *Chapter 7: Peers, Products and Popular Culture* moves away from the life course structure to explore wider influences on men and boys' learning of menstruation in the background of school, home, and intimate relationships. The chapter explores the influence of male peers, female peers and work colleagues, the marketing of menstrual products, and forms of media. Finally, *Chapter 8: Conclusion* revisits the study aims and research questions and offers a broader discussion of the practices of exclusion men and boys experience throughout the life course identified throughout the analysis chapters. The thesis concludes with consideration of the study's limitations and recommendations for both policy changes and future research.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an insight into the background of both the research foundations and study context of my research, illustrating the increased focus on menstruation recently in the UK and consequent importance and need for greater inclusion of men and boys. The study seeks to explore and understand how men as non-menstruators view menstruation, learn about menstruation, and view their role(s) in menstrual-related practices and issues. 'Men as Menstrual Mortar' has been introduced to the thesis as a teaching tool to visualise men and boys in the patriarchal structure of menstrual shame and taboo, with further discussions to follow. Decisions around the language used in the thesis have been outlined, reflecting recent changes moving towards a more inclusive approach to menstruation and wider menstrual matters.

Chapter 2 | Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in menstruation as a topic for investigation. There is a growing body of literature documenting lived experiences of menstruation with a focus on women and girls, and some recent studies have included trans and non-binary menstruators (Frank, 2020; Frank and Dellaria, 2020; Lowik, 2020; Rydström, 2020; Chrisler et al., 2016). Despite existing research unveiling the often-negative influence of men and boys' attitudes on how women, girls and people who menstruate experience menstruation throughout their lives (Tingle and Vora, 2018; Fingerson, 2006; Burrows and Johnson, 2005), little attention has been directed towards exploring and understanding men and boys' attitudes towards menstruation and their lived experiences as non-menstruators.

This chapter is divided into three parts. It will firstly explore the findings from existing studies on men and boys and menstruation, drawing out the themes and contributions made by key authors. In doing so, it will highlight knowledge gaps in current research and demonstrate how my study has been shaped to make an important and necessary contribution to extant knowledge. Three main areas of focus were identified in existing studies: men and boys' menstrual limited and inaccurate menstrual knowledge; men and boys' negative menstrual beliefs and attitudes; men and boys' personal relationships and menstrual-related role(s). The review will consider where the studies were conducted, their research focus and discipline, the methods used, the age of participants, and the studies' theoretical frameworks. The second part of the chapter introduces hegemonic masculinity and highlights existing studies in the space of masculinities and female embodiment. The third part of the chapter offers an introductory overview of the contemporary UK context as the study's research site, with a focus on masculinities and key changes since the publication of Laws' study on menstruation with British men in 1990.

Part One: Review of Existing Literature

Given the limited number of studies on men and boys, both published, and some unpublished research has been included. It is noteworthy that most literature

included in this review was published in the last 10-15 years with a slow but accelerated rise in research interested in exploring men and boys' menstrual attitudes and experiences globally, with some studies having been published since starting this research in 2018 (for example, Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020). The following discussion looks at a range of international research on men/boys and menstruation.

2.2 Men and Boys' Limited and Inaccurate Menstrual Knowledge

Literature highlights how men and boys often hold limited and inaccurate knowledge about menstruation and the menstrual cycle, and considers where men and boys are exposed to, and excluded from, new and accurate menstrual knowledge. This limited knowledge paired with a lack of personal experience of menstruation is used to excuse menstrual-related teasing and bullying (Penakalapati, 2013). In the US, studies by Brooks-Gunn and Ruble (1986) and Allen et al. (2011) show how men received very little menstrual education and hold little and inaccurate knowledge about menstruation. Boys can become aware of menstruation or seek information about menstruation from female peers or female family members such as sisters and mothers (Fishman, 2014; Allen et al., 2011; Epstein and Ward, 2008), but this second-hand learning means men and boys will often hold incomplete knowledge and negative attitudes towards menstruation (Cheng et al., 2007). A qualitative study conducted in Taiwan with 27 male students aged between 10-12 years demonstrated how boys received little education about menstruation and held incorrect biological information about period frequency and conception. However, this study also indicated that boys do want to know about menstruation but are often restricted at home when their curiosity and questions are dismissed by their mothers (Chang et al., 2012). In Fingerson's US study (2006) with 26 girls aged 13-18 years and 11 boys aged 14-19 years, it was shown how boys learned about menstruation through overhearing discussions about menstruation between female friends and classmates, which meant boys were aware of menstruation but often held inaccurate knowledge and did not know any details. In Tanzania, research indicated that boys report receiving some information about menstruation from formal sources such as school curricula and health workers, and at times informal sources such as the internet (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020). In response to menstruation being treated

as a secret when growing up and receiving little formal menstrual education, men in Australia instead learned about menstruation through friends, by accessing the internet, reading magazines and as an outcome of engaging in dating and relationships (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017). Young men in the US did not have adequate knowledge about the biological process of menstruation, and some male university students did not think it was important for men to understand menstruation because they considered it to be a woman's issue (Rajak, 2015). Likewise, in Taiwan, research indicates that boys view menstruation as a female topic and issue and acknowledged it as something they often ignore because they believe it is not important to them (Chang and Lin, 2013; Chang et al., 2012). Similarly, in India, adolescent boys received little foundational information on menstruation, meaning they were mostly misinformed, lacked accurate knowledge, and had learned to distance themselves from menstruation as a woman and girls' issue. This study concluded that their understanding of menstruation is instead "formed through their experiences with menstrual taboos and silence (Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020, p.86). Similarly, college-aged men in the US received little knowledge from family members, but the sense of secrecy surrounding menstruation when they were growing up indicated that menstruation was not relevant to their lives (Fishman, 2014).

Literature demonstrates how boys may often associate menstruation with sexuality, sexual maturation, and sexual risk (Penakalapati, 2013; Chang et al., 2012). In Ghana, some schoolboys were aware of menstruation and described it as a natural process, yet they held inadequate knowledge about menstruation in relation to the biological processes involved and understood menarche as the time when a girl can now become pregnant (Mohammed and Larsen-Reindorf, 2020). Although boys may associate menstruation with the risk of unwanted pregnancy, their understanding of the menstrual cycle is often inaccurate (Penakalapati, 2013). In Kenya, some men aged 20 and over held inaccurate knowledge about the relationship between menstruation and pregnancy, specifically the idea of 'safe days' within the menstrual cycle (Diamond-Smith et al., 2020). This association with reproduction extends to men in the US, who reported learning information about menstruation from sexual and romantic partners, often to understand timing around partner conception (Allen et al., 2011).

2.3 Men and Boys' Negative Menstrual Beliefs and Attitudes

An analysis of existing research on men and menstruation indicates that men and boys hold uninformed negative and stereotypical beliefs and attitudes towards menstruation, drawn from limited and inaccurate knowledge. This is notable in studies with men and boys conducted in different global contexts, both in lower-middle income countries and higher income countries, for example, Taiwan (Chang et al., 2012), Tanzania (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020), US (Allen et al., 2011) and India (Mason et al., 2017). There are a range of menstrual beliefs and attitudes held by men and boys presented in the literature, which for the purposes of this literature review are explored here through four main areas of interest: menstrual silence and secrecy; menstrual blood; menstrual sex; pre-menstrual syndrome/tension.

2.3.1 Menstrual Silence and Secrecy

Existing studies document how boys and men have experienced silence and secrecy around menstruation. Given that boys in Taiwan viewed menstruation as a female topic they often ignore, they also considered that menstruation is something which should remain secret and thus, some boys believed girls should not discuss menstruation with boys (Chang et al., 2012). The need to keep menstruation a secret is a finding shared with Wong et al.'s quantitative study (2013) conducted in Hong Kong with 416 male and female undergraduate students across nine universities, in which male respondents argued that menstruation must be a secret topic and experience for the individual and should not be discussed with others. This menstrual silence and secrecy extended to Tanzania, in which data from a quantitative study using written surveys with 432 male and 524 female students across four co-educational secondary schools, showed how male students disapprove of and believe it is inappropriate behaviour for girls to speak to their male counterparts such as classmates, teachers and fathers about menstruation (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020).

2.3.2 Menstrual Blood

A common thread across some of the research is that boys and men hold negative attitudes and aversion towards menstrual blood. This is apparent in Macleod et al.'s study with 37 young men aged 16-19 years in South Africa (2022), and also in

Taiwan where research indicates that menstrual blood is viewed as dirty, smelly, and disgusting in Taiwan (Chang and Lin, 2013; Chang et al., 2012). In Chang and Lin's study conducted with 20 girls and 27 boys aged 10-12 years, boys shared how menstrual blood was used as a central point of reference for menstrual-related teasing and taunting through a game called 'menstruation virus'. One boy described how if you touch a girl when she is menstruating and then touch a boy, you are infecting the boy with the "dirty and untouchable menstrual blood" (Chang and Lin, 2013, p.14). Boys in Taiwan shared a general distaste towards the physical process of menstruation and its associated blood, viewing individuals who do not manage their periods with care as being unhygienic and lacking morality (Chang et al., 2012). Similarly, in Uganda, school-age boys associated girls' need for knowledge about personal hygiene in relation to menstruation with menstruating girls "having germs" and being "very dirty" (Suggett, 2016, p.29). In a U.S. study, a male undergraduate student expressed how he viewed menstruation as disgusting and is horrified by the thought of menstrual blood touching him (Allen et al., 2011). A qualitative study in India conducted with 85 boys aged 13-17 years across eight schools found few boys sharing explicitly negative attitudes towards menstruation, however some boys considered menstruation to be a disease which can spread dirt and uncleanness (Mason et al., 2017). In Tanzania, the visual markers of menstruation such as blood stains are understood as being the cause for boys' engagement in menstrual-related teasing towards girls because they consider menstruation to be embarrassing and unnatural (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020). Some men in Laws' UK study (1990) associated menstrual blood with being dirty, unclean, and different to 'normal' blood from the body. Menstruation was viewed as a cleansing process for some of these men, with associations made to impurities and sexual secretions, while some men in this study considered menstrual blood to be like other blood from the body. In the US, men experienced feelings of disgust and aversion towards menstrual blood, which at times impacted both their communication with women and their willingness to engage in sexual activity with a menstruating partner (Fishman, 2014). Research conducted in Australia with 48 men aged 18-69 years through qualitative online questionnaires offers a contrasting insight into men's menstrual attitudes, with some men in the study viewing menstruation, and thus menstrual blood, as normal and as natural as "taking a crap" (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017, p.119).

2.3.3 Menstrual Sex

In exploring existing literature on men and boys' menstrual attitudes, it is noteworthy how discussions around menstrual sex arise within the studies, often with a focus on menstrual blood. In the UK, jokes present in male culture show menstruation is primarily a sexual topic for men, specifically regarding sexual access to women (Laws, 1990). Studies with pubescent students in Rwanda, Taiwan and Ghana show how boys often connect menstruation with sexuality (Mohammed and Larsen-Reindorf, 2020; Penakalapati, 2013; Chang et al., 2012) and associate the onset of menstruation with sexual maturity (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020; Mohammed and Larsen-Reindorf, 2020). The qualitative study conducted in Rwanda with 31 school-age boys aged 9-17 years showed boys associate menstruation with sexual health, sexual risk, and unwanted pregnancy. Boys demonstrated inquisitiveness around 'safe days', highlighting how menstruation is often sexualised (Penakalapati, 2013). This is also apparent in Uganda with school-age boys, who associated the topic of menstruation with sexual behaviour and the need for knowledge on menstruation with the risk of pregnancy (Suggett, 2016).

Although there are few studies specifically looking at men's attitudes towards and experiences of sexual activity during menstruation, the research outlined here is significant for providing a foundational base to future studies on men and menstruation. In the US, male undergraduate students displayed a range of attitudes towards menstrual sex, most of which were negative. Perceptions differed between those who were sexually experienced and sexually inexperienced (Allen and Goldberg, 2009). Among the sexually inexperienced men, reasons for not wanting to engage in menstrual sex were largely based on the notion of (un)cleanliness in menstruating women, as well as the physical labour required to manage menstrual blood with ease after sexual activity. Some sexually experienced men stated that they would not engage in the practice of menstrual sex, making references to the odour from menstrual blood to support their reasoning, as well as viewing menstrual sex as shameful for menstruating women. However, men in this study who reported having sex regularly during menstruation viewed menstrual sex as an indicator of maturity within intimate relationships (Allen and Goldberg, 2009). In Kenya, Diamond-Smith et al. (2020) documented how men viewed a menstruating woman

as dirty, and therefore would refrain from engaging in any sexual activity with their partners when they were menstruating. In the UK, Laws' (1990) study presented a range of attitudes towards menstrual sex, with some men viewing menstrual sex as rebelling against the social rule by breaking the menstrual taboo, and as an act of gaining power by going against set standards and societal and cultural rules around menstrual blood. For others, their attitudes, and feelings towards the prospect of menstrual sex was closely linked to women's beliefs about menstrual sex and their feelings around embarrassment, messiness, and sexual decision-making (Laws, 1990). The relationship between menstruation and sex was also raised by men in Peranovic and Bentley's study in Australia (2017), with some men sharing how menstruation equated to a halt in their sex lives. As in the UK (Laws, 1990), some men in Australia were not opposed to engaging in sex during menstruation and acknowledged how it can be fun because it's taboo, in which case there's only the taste of menstrual blood to consider, commenting, "Tastes like copper earning your red wings, but there is no physical issues on my end" (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017, p.121).

2.3.4 Pre-Menstrual Syndrome/Tension (PMS/T)

Discussions on pre-menstrual syndrome/tension are present in some studies on men and boys' views and experiences with menstruation across different global contexts, including Brazil (Reberte et al., 2014), Australia (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017), the UK (Newton, 2016; Laws, 1990) and the US (Fishman, 2014; Allen et al., 2011). The literature presents men's perceptions of pre-menstrual syndrome/tension as being in line with dominant cultural constructions which pathologizes PMS/T, positioning menstruation and premenstrual cyclical changes as a disorder or illness (King, Ussher and Perz, 2014; Ussher, 2006). Allen et al. (2011) draw attention to the "sexist beliefs about women as emotional and undisciplined" (p.148) which seep from men's attitudes towards menstruation in their study in the US. Likewise, in Australia, men associated menstruation with women being "unstable, difficult, and demanding", which made living and working with them "unpredictable and precarious" (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017, p.120). An analysis of posts from the online discussion forum PMSBuddy.com highlights the shared perception among men of pre-menstrual syndrome/tension as a myth or excuse, with some men

viewing such symptoms experienced during this time as a choice, regardless of the impact of hormones (King et al., 2014). Similarly, in a study conducted in Brazil with 20 young men aged 21-29 years, some men expressed their belief that the symptoms reported by women are imaginary and others shared how before improving their understanding of hormones through long-term experience with their partners, they had initially believed that women used pre-menstrual syndrome/tension as an excuse (Reberte et al., 2014). In the UK (Newton, 2016), men and boys made strong associations between perceived changes in performance and bad moods with menstruation in female peers, partners, and work colleagues. Although some men shared their beliefs about the mental/emotional effects of menstruation in Laws' study in the UK (1990), it was not always viewed directly through the pathologizing lens of PMS/T and instead these attitudes towards such cyclical changes were formed and understood in relation to men's intimate relationships. Similarly, Fishman's study with men in the US (2014) identified a perception of menstruation as an undesirable experience, due to how women experience negative emotional changes, notably increased sadness and anger, alongside physical changes they understood as being negative.

2.4 Men and Boys' Personal Relationships and Menstrual-Related Roles

Some studies explore the various relationships and roles men and boys have and experience in relation to menstruation, considering their positions as fathers, sons, brothers, and partners and point to the ways in which boys and men learn about menstruation through these relationships. For example, in Peranovic and Bentley's study in Australia (2017), some men understood menstruation through their relationships and roles with partners, friends, and daughters. In this study, some men considered that they held an active role in relation to menstruation by providing practical support, such as by filling hot water bottles and buying menstrual products, as well as providing emotional support, for example by being someone their partners can communicate with about pain and experiences. Similarly, boys in Rwanda understood how they could reassure their sisters during menstruation and that they could purchase menstrual products for them if they were in the financial position to do so (Penakalapati, 2013). This is echoed in Uganda, where boys understood how they could support girls during menstruation in school, in their home, and in the wider

community through financial means by purchasing menstrual products, by intervening if their female peers were being teased about their period at school, and by offering advice if they felt they had more menstrual knowledge than a peer held (Suggett, 2016).

In the literature exploring the role of men in parenting there is some, albeit limited, consideration of how fathers communicate with daughters about sexuality, sexual health, and menstruation. For example, research in the UK and Australia shows that fathers often experience some embarrassment and awkwardness when it comes to menstruation (Hey Girls, 2019; Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Girling et al., 2018). In a study conducted in Australia with girls aged between 13 and 19 years and their fathers, most fathers claimed they were open to communication about menstrual health, however 19 per cent of fathers shared that they would be uncomfortable having a conversation about menstruation with their daughters (Girling et al., 2018). Men also demonstrated little understanding and knowledge of menstruation, including menstrual symptoms and potential long-term consequences associated with menstrual problems. Furthermore, fathers in this study underestimated the extent of pain experienced by daughters but reported being largely sympathetic of the pain and were concerned about their daughters' welfare more generally (Girling et al., 2018). In a different Australia-based study, some men acknowledged their need to hold some understanding of menstruation as this would enable them to play an active role in educating their daughters and sons about menstruation (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017).

In research with fathers in the UK (Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018) and in the US (Wilson, Dalberth and Koo, 2010; Wilson and Koo, 2010), men shared their experiences of discussing puberty, relationships, sexual risk and reproduction with their sons and daughters. Men in the UK reported their discomfort towards talking about sexuality and menstruation with their daughters, based on their lack of understanding about feelings experienced during menstruation (Bennett and Harden, 2019). They viewed this communication as the mothers' responsibility, demonstrating a gendered division of labour, which is like findings from the US, where fathers who considered that discussions about menstruation with daughters are handled better by mothers (Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson and Koo, 2010). Erchull

and Richmond's study in the US (2015) which used a survey with 110 fathers aged 18-74, shows how fathers are likely to approach discussions about menstruation differently with sons and daughters, and view female and medical sources of information about menstruation as being more important for girls than male sources of information, such as from fathers and brothers. The most significant finding across this literature with fathers is that within some UK and US households, fathers are engaging in sexual-risk communication and taking on roles as sexuality educators with their daughters based on their personal experiences and knowledge of how men think and behave (Wilson et al., 2010), yet fathers in these studies refrain from discussing menstruation with their daughters (Bennett et al., 2018; Wilson and Koo, 2010).

2.5 Main Research Gaps

While there is a growing, albeit still small body of research on men and menstruation, significant gaps exist within this research. These gaps are highlighted below, in which I draw on the geographical locations of the studies and their focus, methods used, age of participants, and engagement with theoretical analyses to situate my PhD study in existing research.

2.5.1 Geographical Location

While research related to men and boys' menstrual attitudes and experiences has been undertaken in several countries, there is a skew towards high-income contexts, especially the U.S. (Erchull and Richmond, 2015; Rajak, 2015; Fishman, 2014; Allen et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson and Koo, 2010; Allen and Goldberg, 2009; Fingerson, 2006). Other studies conducted in high-income countries include research undertaken in Taiwan (Chang and Lin, 2013; Chang et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2007), Australia (Girling et al., 2018; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017), Hong Kong (Wong et al., 2013) and the U.K. (Newton, 2016; Laws, 1990). The remaining studies were conducted in low-middle income countries, including Rwanda (Penakalapati, 2013), Ghana (Mohammed and Larsen-Reindorf, 2020), Uganda (Suggett, 2016), Tanzania (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020), Kenya (Diamond-Smith et al., 2020), India (Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020; Mason et al., 2017), South Africa (Macleod et al., 2022) and Brazil (Reberte et al., 2014). Despite the focus on higher-income

countries, there has been very little research on men and menstruation in the UK. Laws' work with British men (1990) is recognised as an important contribution to the field but was published over 30 years ago, followed by a more recent contribution by Newton (2016), however this study is not solely focused on the attitudes and experiences of men and boys. Some recent research carried out by organisations such as Plan International UK, vaguely touch upon men and boys in relation to menstruation in the UK (Always, 2021; Hey Girls, 2019; Tingle and Vora, 2018), but mostly through a focus on the experiences of women, girls and people who menstruate. Thus, following the publication of *Issues of Blood: The Politics of Menstruation* by Laws in 1990, there has been little academic attention paid to further exploring the attitudes and experiences of men in the UK that has directly engaged with men themselves. My study aims to offer an updated insight into men's menstrual attitudes and experiences in the UK.

2.5.2 Research Focus

Not all studies consulted in this literature review have a central research focus on exploring and understanding men and boys' menstrual attitudes and their experiences with menstruation. For instance, some studies are focused specifically on menstrual sex (Allen and Goldberg, 2009) or fathers as sexuality educators (Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Erchull and Richmond, 2015; Wilson et al., 2010), whereas others are centred on perspectives and accounts of pre-menstrual syndrome/tension (King et al., 2014; Reberte et al., 2014) and menstruation and fertility (Diamond-Smith et al., 2020). The remaining studies have a research focus on menstrual knowledge, beliefs, and sources of learning (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020; Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020; Mason et al., 2017; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Newton, 2016; Suggett, 2016; Fishman, 2014; Wong et al., 2013; Chang et al., 2012; Allen et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2007; Laws, 1990). From my research with non-menstruators, it was evident that men learn about menstruation throughout the life course, with school, families, relationships, and peers seen as key points of learning. My research adds to the existing literature by focusing on how boys and men as non-menstruators view and learn about menstruation, and how men perceive their role(s) in menstrual-related issues and practices as partners, fathers, brothers, sons, peers etc.

2.5.3 Methods

Existing research uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data from men and boys. Various methods were employed for data collection across the literature included in this review, including focus groups (Macleod et al., 2022; Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020; Mohammed and Larsen-Reindorf, 2020; Mason et al., 2017; Newton, 2016; Fishman, 2014; Penakalapati, 2013; Chang and Lin, 2013; Chang et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson and Koo, 2010; Fingerson, 2006), personal written narratives¹² (Allen et al., 2011; Allen and Goldberg, 2009), questionnaires/surveys (Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020; Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020; Girling et al., 2018; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Erchull and Richmond, 2015; Wong et al., 2013; Cheng et al., 2007), interviews (Diamond-Smith et al., 2020; Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020; Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Newton, 2016; Suggett, 2016; Rajak, 2015; Reberte et al., 2014; Laws, 1990) and a participant-led discussion¹³ (Laws, 1990). My research seeks to extend the qualitative analysis of men and menstruation by using individual in-depth interviews to extend analysis on men's lived experiences of menstruation as sons, brothers, friends, fathers, and intimate partners.

2.5.4 Participant Ages

A high proportion of the existing research has been conducted in the school context and with pubescent and adolescent boys (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020; Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020; Mohammed and Larsen-Reindorf, 2020; Mason et al., 2017; Suggett, 2016; Penakalapati, 2013; Chang and Lin, 2013; Chang et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2007; Fingerson, 2006), with few studies conducted with young men (Macleod et al., 2022; Rajak, 2015; Wong et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2011; Allen and Goldberg, 2009). Remaining studies are carried out with older adult participants or have a larger age-range across the participant pool, from adolescence and young adulthood

¹² Undergraduate students at a public university who were enrolled in a human sexuality course taught by Katherine Allen and Christine Kaestle were invited to complete a one-page personal narrative as an extra credit assignment. Students had a choice of 4-5 topics, one of which was 'experiences with menstruation' and this topic could be chosen by female and male students.

¹³ Sophie Laws was concerned she was "inhibiting" her participants by "limiting them to what could be said to a woman's face" (1990, p.8), so she had a 'men's group' tape a discussion they shared about menstruation without her present.

through to aged 40-70 years (Diamond-Smith et al, 2020; Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Girling et al., 2018; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Newton, 2016; Erchull and Richmond, 2015; Fishman, 2014; Reberte et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson and Koo, 2010; Laws, 1990). Despite this, not all these studies are focused *solely* on exploring men's attitudes towards menstruation and their experiences with menstruation, as previously noted. Within the scope of my research, my study seeks to offer an insight into the menstrual attitudes and experiences of men from young adulthood to what age may be deemed the start of middle age, with my youngest non-menstruator being 21 years old and my oldest non-menstruator being 42 years old at the time of participation. By moving away from the school context and younger participants, my research focuses on adults with an expectation that they will have more expansive and varied experience of menstruation through pinnacle life events and changes, such as living arrangements outside of the childhood home, intimate relationships, and childbirth.

2.5.5 Engagement with Theoretical Analyses of Masculinity

Most existing studies with men and boys on the research topic of menstruation are exploratory and do not engage with wider theoretical issues of masculinity. A very recent exception is Macleod et al.'s study (2022) on men and menstruation that critically engages with the concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyse male peer talk about menstruation amongst young men in South Africa. The study explores how male peer talk about menstruating women can be used to "discursively bolster hegemonic masculinities and denigrate women" (Macleod et al., 2022, p.1). Although not specifically focused on menstruation, Reberte et al. (2014) slightly touch upon gender relations and the construction of masculinities in their exploration of Brazilian men's perceptions and attitudes towards their partners experiencing pre-menstrual syndrome. The study comments on the "tensions between the emerging and traditional patterns of masculinity" (Reberte et al., 2014, p.145) in the context of coupled relationships and women experiencing pre-menstrual syndrome. Similarly, the work of King et al. (2014) discusses constructions of masculinity in the context of pre-menstrual syndrome in their analysis of men's accounts posted online on 'PMSBuddy.com'. The study recognises the "critical role of traditional masculinity in shaping men's negative constructions of PMS and their negative practices in relation

to premenstrual change” (King et al., 2014, p.14), however it also acknowledges how some men resist hegemonic constructions of masculinity “to take up a subordinate construction of romantic masculinity” as a ‘supportive partner’ (King et al., 2014, p.15). Although engagement with hegemonic masculinity was not set out in the aims of my research, it became apparent that hegemonic masculinity was a useful theoretical tool to explore further the data and extend on these menstrual-related studies’ critical engagement with masculinity theory. This thesis does not set out to be a theoretical exploration of hegemonic masculinity per se but puts my research findings into conversation with the concept of hegemonic masculinity. Here hegemonic masculinity is used as a resource to further explore and understand how men’s menstrual attitudes and experiences as non-menstruators are bound to social constructions of masculinity (and femininity) which underpin the gendered social order.

Part Two: Hegemonic Masculinity

2.6 Introduction to Hegemonic Masculinity

Viewed as “the driving force behind the expanding field of critical masculinities studies” (Messerschmidt, 2019a, p.8), Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity offers an understanding of how unequal gender relations are legitimated and justified, facilitating an understanding of masculinities as hierarchical, context dependent, historically constituted, and fluid (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 1995; 1987). Influenced by Antonio Gramsci’s Marxist theory of ‘cultural hegemony’, Connell’s application of hegemony to an analysis of gender presents hegemonic masculinity as an ideology that reproduces masculine domination and privileges some men in a hierarchal gender order (Connell, 1987). Connell’s formulation is derived from an understanding of gender as being socially and culturally constructed. As distinct from dominant and dominating masculinities (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018), hegemonic masculinity is “a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities” (Messerschmidt, 2019a, p.86). Hegemonic masculinity’s central features of relationality and legitimation rely on a form of

masculinity which is in unequal relation to nonhegemonic masculinities and 'emphasized (sp.) femininity' (Connell, 1995; 1987). To understand Connell's conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity, Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) argue, one needs to place it within Connell's broader analysis of gender, which emphasises "a dialectical relationship between structural constraint and human agency" in which "gender is revealed not merely as individual attributes or styles, but as collective agency, constrained and enabled by social structures" (p.36).

As Connell understood gender relations through power inequalities, emphasized femininity is a socially accepted form of femininity that positions women as inferior to men in which constructions of femininity serve male power, crucially linking configurations of hegemonic masculinity to patriarchy. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) acknowledge how the asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in the patriarchal gender order and the relationship between them has "dropped out of focus" (p.848) in some research on men and masculinities. They argue that a focus on femininities and emphasized femininity in particular, is necessary because gender is always relational and "patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) of femininity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.848). Connell and Messerschmidt's reformulation emphasised the need for research to pay closer attention to "the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities" (2005, p.848). As emphasised by Messerschmidt and Messner (2018), Connell's relational concept between hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, and non-hegemonic masculinities is a pattern of hegemony, "not a pattern of simple domination" (p.39).

Hegemonic masculinities shape a sense of what is (un)acceptable gendered behaviour as "configurations of social practice that produce simultaneously particular social relations *and* social meanings" (Messerschmidt, 2019a, p.90). The hegemonic position is one which is viewed and understood as the currently accepted cultural male ideal which men are socialised to achieve (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, hegemonic masculinity is not a 'type' of man, but how men position themselves and others; hegemonic masculinities define and represent successful and dominant ways of 'being' a man in a given society at a given time. Masculinity is regarded as something that must be proven. As Kimmel (1994) argues, "masculinity

must be proved, and no sooner is it proved that it is again questioned and must be proved again- constant, relentless, unachievable..." (p.122). In Western culture, prevailing ideals of masculinity are traits less often associated with femininity: stoicism; physical strength and sporting prowess; aggressiveness; risk-taking; courage and heroism. Similarly, heterosexuality, restrictive emotionality, performing manual work, being a breadwinner, possessing wealth, and not seeking health support can be viewed as masculine norms and behaviours which uphold dominant masculine ideals and promote male dominance. This hegemonic form of masculinity may not reflect the lived reality of all men's lives or be the most prevalent kind of masculinity, however this prescribed and idealised set of masculine norms guides expectations for boys and men. As Messerschmidt maintains, "hegemonic masculinities are expansively distributed as culturally ascendant prototypes of gender relations throughout local, regional, and global levels, they are part of normal, everyday life – they are customary all around us" (2019a, p.90).

Connell identifies four different types of nonhegemonic masculinities constructed in relation to hegemonic masculinity: complicit masculinities; subordinated masculinities; marginalized masculinities; protest masculinities. The notion of 'complicit masculinity', for example, describes the form of masculinity characteristic of most men who do not fully align within hegemonic masculine ideals and/or do not challenge hegemonic masculinity, but who benefit from the patriarchal gender order of hegemonic masculinity and the subordination of women and more subordinated and marginalized masculinities, whilst also helping to sustain hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity holds power over other forms of gender identities that do not represent the dominant ideal, including other masculine identities as these forms of 'being a man' are viewed as inadequate and inferior. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity enacts power over women and subordinates anyone or any trait perceived to be feminine or 'woman-like', as hegemonic masculinity places masculinities and femininities in an asymmetrical position in the patriarchal gender order. As Kimmel argues, "masculinity has been defined as the flight from women, the repudiation of femininity", in which "the notion of anti-femininity lies at the heart of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood, so that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than who one is" (1994, p.126). Subordination and marginalization occur within the gender order

when men do not practice a gender identity which is in line with the hegemonic system, for example men who cannot aspire to hegemony based on their race, class, (homo)sexuality and disability. As noted by Jewkes et al. (2015, p.113), “a core element of the construction of hegemonic masculinity is heterosexuality, and to a greater or lesser extent hegemonic masculinity is constructed as a gender position that is as much ‘not gay’ as it is ‘not female’.”

Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is open to resistance, subject to change and should always be considered in a context specific manner, considering the varying ways hegemonic masculinity operates in local, regional, and global levels. Hegemonic masculinity should not be seen as a fixed type of masculinity, but dynamic and historically contingent (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Coming “into existence in specific settings and under particular situations”, conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity also offer the “possibility of change toward the abolition of gender inequalities and the creation of more egalitarian gender relations” (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018, p. 38). Messerschmidt (2019b) notes how “counter-hegemonic social actions” can resist and challenge gender hegemony and “dismantle hegemonic masculinities” (p.26). Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) point to how *positive masculinities*, masculinities which are constructed in new and positive ways, “contribute to legitimating egalitarian relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities” (p.42). Non-hegemonic/positive masculinities are counter-hegemonic “because they actually are, or they have the means to become culturally conceptualized as legitimate and authentic alternatives to hegemonic masculinities” (Messerschmidt, 2019b, p.26). Both Demetriou (2001) and Bridges and Pascoe (2014) have pointed, however, to ways in which hegemonic masculinity is adaptable and resilient, at times successfully absorbing, adapting, and reconfiguring non-hegemonic masculine practices. Hybrid masculinities “refer to the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities” (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p.246). However, these ‘new’ and hybrid masculinities work to reproduce gender hegemony and preserve unequal gender relations and inequalities by disguising men’s access to privilege and power (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018). Nonetheless, core to Connell’s formulation of

gender and hegemonic masculinity is “the possibility of progressive and regressive social change in gender relations” (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018, p.37).

Caring masculinities “offer the potential of sustained social change for men and gender relations” (Elliott, 2016, p.240) as men must resist hegemonic masculinity to adopt opposing values and characteristics of care. In rejecting domination and integrating interdependence, positive emotion and relationality into masculine identities, caring masculinities can be viewed positively in opposition to hegemonic masculinity. Elliott (2016) claims that “caring masculinities can provide more nourishing and satisfying models of masculinity for men than hegemonic masculinity” as “the costs of hegemonic masculinity decrease while the benefits to men of caring increase” (p.253), enriching men in emotional, psychological, and physical ways. However, Elliott points out that ‘doing care’ means taking on a feminised identity given care’s subordinated feminine connotations and the need to relinquish power associated with traditional masculinity, ultimately “risking social ostracism by not conforming to expected masculine roles” (2016, p.254).

2.6.1 Masculinities and Female Embodiment

In terms of thinking through hegemonic masculinity in the analysis of men and menstruation, as acknowledged above, a recently published study in South Africa explored how young men construct and resist hegemonic masculinities in their peer talk about menstruation (Macleod et al., 2022). Within this group context, menstruation was viewed as separate from masculinity, with masculinity defined in contrast to anything resembling femininity. As argued by Macleod et al., “menstruation, as the female signifier, becomes a threat to these young men’s masculine identities” (2022, p.15). The study highlighted how young men distance themselves from menstrual talk and/or menstrual knowledge to retain and strengthen their position in the gendered hierarchy; to prove their masculinity and to legitimate unequal gender relations. More specifically, through the othering of the menstruating woman, the young men in this study avoided marginalization and subordination through discursive separation of feminine embodiment from hegemonic masculinities. The risk of subordination through association with menstruation was discussed by the young men, particularly in relation to questions about a man’s

sexual orientation as, for them, knowing about menstruation or talking about menstruation equated to homosexuality.

Macleod et al. (2022) highlight moments of resistance and negotiations of hegemonic masculinities within the young men's discussions when some participants take a "rebellious stance" (p.11) toward hegemonic masculinity and menstrual talk—an illustration of positive masculinities in practice. Examples of such discursive resistance in this interactive space were suggestions of men talking about menstruation with their girlfriends and sharing how they interact with intimate partners in caring ways during menstruation, which was met with ridicule and dismissed by other participants. Similarly, although some young men discussed the possibility of buying menstrual products for their girlfriends because they love and care for them, their responses demonstrated their acknowledgment of how their masculine identities would also be at risk in this scenario. Macleod et al. (2022) refer to this as being "caught in a double bind, an ideological dilemma, where two opposing ideals are being negotiated" (p11). Such resistant masculinities, as well as association with the bloody female embodiment of menstruation conflicts with hegemonic masculinity ideals. Interestingly, this is mirrored in the young men's discussions of engaging in sexual practices with menstruating women, where discursive distancing from the male sex drive repertoire and more positive constructions of male sexuality emerged. However, Macleod et al. (2022) discuss how this discursive distancing from hegemonic masculinity ideals is linked closely to the fear of contamination from menstrual blood and more broadly, the embodied femininity of menstruation. Although alternate positive masculinities emerged, the young men confirmed their positioning in the hierarchical gender order by demonstrating hegemonic masculinity ideals through discursive distancing from femininity, feminine practice, and homosexuality within the interactive group space. Macleod et al. acknowledge that had they interviewed the young men individually, "different and possibly kinder versions of masculinities may have emerged" (2022, p.15).

Beyond Macleod et al.'s use of hegemonic masculinity as a theoretical framework for exploring and analysing men's peer talk in the context of menstruation (2022), it is useful to highlight that some studies have critically engaged with the concept of

hegemonic masculinity in the wider context of reproduction and the menstrual cycle: pre-menstrual syndrome (King et al., 2014; Reberte et al., 2014); contraceptive decision-making (Dalessandro, James-Hawkins, and Sennott, 2019; Fefferman and Upadhyay, 2018); in vitro fertilization (Throsby and Gill, 2004); pregnancy and childbirth (Edgley and Roberts, 2021; Dolan and Coe, 2011). Although all studies are to some extent pertinent to my research, the work of Dolan and Coe (2011) in the UK can be drawn on to consider how hegemonic masculinities are negotiated and redefined in a primarily women-centred space and context, in this case, pregnancy and childbirth. In line with my research, it is a useful study to shape my application of hegemonic masculinities to the analysis of my data given its association to the reproductive cycle and female embodiment. As with menstruation more broadly, pregnancy and childbirth show to be “‘archetypal’ sites of male anxiety and vulnerability” (Dolan and Coe, 2011, p.1032).

Dolan and Coe’s (2011) research focused on first-time fathers’ experiences of pregnancy and childbirth and included consideration of how healthcare professionals construct masculinity in a UK maternity unit. Dolan and Coe (2011) identified that what men understood as being appropriate practice during pregnancy and childbirth was the opposite to traditional masculine values. This was largely shaped by the marginalised position men found themselves in once conceding power and control, and anxieties around childbirth were related to fears of leaky bodies and female reproductive functions. Lack of a voice and some exclusion from decision-making restricted their means to perform masculinity in the context of childbirth, though their lack of emotional expression represented dominant forms of masculine identity. Despite this, the study highlights how men can negotiate a range of masculinities and re-establish a sense of control.

The men’s re-establishment of control and displays of dominant forms of masculinity were central to how the fathers in Dolan and Coe’s (2011) study negotiated their masculine identities in the context of childbirth. Although marginalised and in a subordinating position, acknowledgment of being fertile (and having ‘fathered’ the baby) provided some men with masculine fulfilment – a central feature of the hierarchal gendered order. Similarly, men displayed stoicism and self-reliance during adversity in this context, which are both core masculine standards and markers of

dominant masculine ideals and practice. The first-time fathers demonstrated care and attentiveness which are traditionally considered feminine attributes, as well as being “willing recipients of ‘abuse’” from their partners during childbirth (Dolan and Coe, 2011, p. 1024). However, their acknowledgement and shift of focus onto the responsibility for others meant their subordinating position could be viewed in a courageous and heroic light in this context. An example of fathers fulfilling their responsibility in the context of childbirth was demonstrated in one man’s account of cutting his child’s cord, which showed “a sense of control and mastery over the situation” (Dolan and Coe, 2011, p.1028). Thus, once again, the first-time fathers were able to counter feelings of vulnerability and subordination in the context of childbirth by re-asserting their power and control in particular kinds of ways that re-affirmed their alignment with ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

The construction and navigation of masculinities presented in the studies discussed above suggests that hegemonic masculinity is a potentially useful theoretical resource for my research. Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) acknowledge how research in various global contexts on the relationship between unequal gender relationships and masculinities demonstrates how the concept of hegemonic masculinity remains significant. They recognise how such research “inspires additional gender research that further extends our knowledge in similar and previously unexplored areas” (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018, p.51-52). My review of the existing literature on men and menstruation points to the usefulness of further research to explore further the interrelationship between hegemonic masculinity and menstruation, given the relative absence of these discussions in current research in the field. Although it is not a straightforward binary divide of menstruator = female and non-menstruator = male, constructions of masculinity are central to the non-menstruators’ identities in my research. Thus, looking at menstruation in conversation with conceptualisations of hegemonic masculinity provides a space to further probe the ways in which menstruation is a gendered practice rooted in wider gendered inequalities.

Part Three: Gender and Masculinities in the Contemporary UK Context

2.7 Changing Gender Context Since 1990

As indicated above, Sophie Laws' research on menstruation with British men in *Issues of Blood* over thirty years ago remains one of the most significant pieces of research on men and menstruation in the UK. It is therefore important to consider the significant changes in the social relations of gender and forms of masculinity since its publication. Since 1990, there have been noteworthy cultural shifts in the UK. Richardson (2020) acknowledges how since the 1990s "a different understanding of sex and its relationship to gender has emerged" (p.12), moving away from the sex/gender binary, with a growing recognition of the diversity of gender identities beyond the male/female binary (transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid etc.). The Gender Recognition Act 2004 means transgender people in the UK can change their legal gender, and the introduction of the Equality Act of 2010 provided transgender individuals with protection against discrimination based on their gender identity. Following Kimberlé Crenshaw's popularisation of ideas of 'intersectionality' (1989), the importance of understanding how different forms of inequality and disadvantage interact (such as those at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and class), has also risen in prominence in recent years, informing both academic and policy-oriented practices.

Importantly, there has been greater awareness of the harm and limitations associated with traditional gender roles and stereotypes, particularly with regards to constructions of masculinity. In 2014, Anderson and McCormack argued that contemporary Britain was "undergoing a positive transformation regarding masculinity", acknowledging how younger generations in particular "eschew the homophobia and hyper-masculinity of their fathers" (p.126). It could be argued that there has been to some extent a shift in masculinity in the UK, leading to a somewhat more inclusive understanding of what it means to 'be a man' (Burrell, Ruxton and Westmarland, 2019; Robb and Ruxton, 2017). In recent years, this has gained traction through the acknowledgment and rejection of 'toxic masculinity'. As argued by Flood (2022), "the phrase emphasises the worst aspects of stereotypically masculine attributes", such as violence, sexual entitlement, and hostility to femininity,

which are 'toxic' for both women and men. In redefining norms of manhood and reconstructing a more positive model of masculinities, men and boys are encouraged to seek support for their health (especially mental health), express empathy, and demonstrate care and compassion. Some policy changes have taken place which may contribute towards removing barriers that restrict men's roles and confine them to traditional forms of masculinity. An example of this is Shared Parental Leave, introduced to UK workplaces in 2015, which enables eligible parents to have choice and flexibility around childcare. Alongside this, there has been some change in traditional attitudes towards gender roles in the home and norms of fatherhood have transformed in the UK, with more men sharing caregiving responsibilities and having an increased involvement with their children (Government Equalities Office, 2021). Data released from the Office for National Statistics in 2022 highlighted how the number of stay-at-home Dads in the UK had risen by a third since before the Covid-19 pandemic, marking a substantial cultural shift in societal expectations and gender roles (Burgess, Goldman and Davies, 2022).

Despite these cultural shifts, it is crucial to recognise that gendered inequalities persist in the UK. Violence against women and girls (domestic abuse, sexual assault, stalking and harassment, for example.) is widespread across the UK (EVAW, 2022). Recent data from the Office for National Statistics (2022) highlights how the gender pay gap continues, with women still earning less on average than men. Furthermore, there is a gendered division of domestic labour with women carrying out more unpaid work in the home (Office for National Statistics, 2016) and the Covid-19 pandemic at times exacerbated this inequality (Zamberlan, Gioachin, and Gritti, 2021). With regards to men and boys, harmful gendered social norms still play a dominant role in their lives and several issues persist in the UK. The academic underachievement of boys throughout the education system has long been documented as an issue, and there is a gender gap in UK higher education with fewer young men than women progressing to a higher education course (Hillman and Robinson, 2016). Male suicide rates are particularly high in the UK, with suicide being the largest cause of death in men under 50 years of age (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022). Furthermore, men make up the highest percentage of the prison population (Sturge, 2022), as well as those who are homeless (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Although some important transformations have taken place, such changes are more

about “what it means to be a man rather than a reduction in the need to conform to certain ideas of masculinity more generally” (Burrell et al., 2019, p.8-9).

2.8 Conclusion

While, overall, there is a paucity of research on menstruation with men and boys, the existing literature points to three key themes in extant research conducted in different global contexts. Firstly, that men and boys receive little education on menstruation and thus, hold limited and inaccurate menstrual knowledge. Secondly, due to this lack of knowledge, men and boys hold negative beliefs and attitudes towards menstruation. Finally, that despite this, some men and boys are, or can be, a source of support to menstruators through their personal relationships. The review of literature has highlighted that there is still little research in the UK on men and menstruation, key exceptions are the work of Newton (2016) and Laws (1990). Several studies have been conducted in high-income contexts such as the US (Erchull and Richmond, 2015; Rajak, 2015; Fishman, 2014; Allen et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson and Koo, 2010; Allen and Goldberg, 2009; Fingerson, 2006), Taiwan (Chang and Lin, 2013; Chang et al., 2012; Cheng et al., 2007), and Australia (Girling et al., 2018; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017), however there are still very few studies which have explored men’s attitudes towards menstruation and their experiences with menstruation in the UK (Newton, 2016; Laws, 1990).

With a focus on the UK context, this research aims to build on the foundational work of Laws (1990) by exploring men’s experiences as non-menstruators in the contemporary UK context. Given the overall lack of engagement with critical theories of masculinity within the study of men and menstruation, my research also seeks to start a conversation between the study of men and menstruation and discussions of hegemonic masculinity, tentatively exploring ways in which understandings of men and menstruation might be augmented by attention to how hegemonic masculinity works to legitimate and justify unequal gender relations.

Chapter 3 | Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Fieldwork started in January 2020, but the study's data collection process was significantly disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic from mid-March 2020. Social distancing, national and global lockdown restrictions, and international travel bans had a detrimental impact on the focus of the study and methods used to collect primary data from my participants. Resuming fieldwork during the pandemic after all face-to-face data collection methods were paused required adaptability and resourcefulness to ensure the research could resume and progress within the scheduled timeframe despite the restrictions in place and uncertainty ahead. Prior to the pandemic, the project was designed as a comparative study of men's menstrual attitudes and experiences in England and Kenya, with an aim of looking at how attitudes and experiences compare across low-middle income and higher income contexts, with in-person fieldwork using face-to-face data collection methods planned in both contexts. Given the ongoing uncertainty around restrictions and international travel in summer 2020, I made the necessary move towards a focus exclusively on the UK context, extended my participant recruitment age from 18-35 years to 18-45 years, and replaced in-person face-to-face interviews and focus groups with online video interviews using the university supported platform, Zoom.

The move to online interviews recommended by the University of York in response to the pandemic did not feel like a feasible option for interviews with participants in Kenya. This was due to the fact I had planned to recruit the participants in-country with Freedom4Girls acting as my gatekeeper and potentially recruiting additional participants during my time spent in the African Women's Studies Centre at the University of Nairobi through the Worldwide Universities Network Research Mobility Programme. I also considered the additional logistical challenges for participants in accessing a videoconferencing platform to take part in an interview, such as having a suitable device and a stable internet connection. Given this and additional considerations such as limited opportunity to build rapport with participants, requiring a translator, and my positionality as a white western woman conducting the interviews, I did not think it was appropriate to conduct the research online with participants in Kenya.

This chapter will provide an overview of the chosen methodology of the study reflecting the exploration of existing literature and methods used, and areas for further research addressed in the previous chapter. It will outline the research aims and research questions, provide justification for the chosen research methods and acknowledge the ethical considerations of the study and logistical issues for both myself as the researcher and for my participants. The chapter will discuss the process of participants being recruited to the study and their demographics, followed by the data analysis approach taken. It will also discuss the changes made in response to Covid-19, including the impact on the initial research aims and framework, the alternative methods I chose to use, as well as outlining the context in which most of the data collection was conducted with study participants in the UK.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology Ethics Committee (ELMPS) at the University of York in October 2019. Advertising the call and recruiting participants commenced in December 2019, with in-person interviews beginning mid-January 2020 and ending mid-March 2020, with remaining interviews conducted online¹⁴. Data collection concluded in August 2020, with 35 individual interviews carried out in total.

3.2 Study Aims and Research Questions

This study aims to contribute to the growing area of research on menstruation as an everyday lived experience, by exploring the menstrual attitudes and experiences of men as non-menstruators in the UK. More specifically, with a focus on the UK context, the study aims to provide an insight into how men view menstruation, how men have learned and continue to learn about menstruation, and how men view their role(s) in relation to menstruation. My research should make an important contribution to the field of critical menstruation studies, and it is hoped that this research will contribute to a greater understanding of how men and boys' menstrual attitudes are constructed and perpetuated throughout the life course.

¹⁴ This move to online research was confirmed by the Chair of ELMPS.

With these aims in mind, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do men view menstruation?
2. How do boys and men learn about menstruation?
3. How do men perceive their role(s) in menstrual-related issues and practices?

To respond to these research questions, I set out to recruit some menstruators to the study in addition to a larger participant group of non-menstruators¹⁵, because I wanted to ask menstruators about their interactions with men and boys around menstruation. Additionally, existing studies on the experiences of women, girls and people who menstruate in the UK, specifically with regards to their interactions and relationships with men and boys are limited. Furthermore, as a feminist qualitative study, I considered it important to include the perspectives and experiences of women and marginalised genders by listening to their stories and gaining an understanding of different menstrual experiences, beyond my own personal experiences of menstruation. This means my research includes some new knowledge on the lived experiences of women and people who menstruate, which supported my analysis process and some of which is situated within the analysis chapters. This study includes data collected from 23 cisgender male participants, 1 AMAB non-binary participant, 9 cisgender female participants, 1 transgender male participant, and 1 AFAB non-binary participant. Additional demographic information is discussed in section 3.5 of this chapter and presented in Appendix A.

3.3 Methods

Previous studies on men and boys use a mix of both qualitative and quantitative data to explore menstrual attitudes and experiences (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020; Diamond-Smith et al., 2020; Mohammed and Larsen-Reindorf, 2020; Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Girling et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2017; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Newton, 2016; Erchull and Richmond, 2015; Rajak, 2015; Reberte et al., 2014; Chang and Lin, 2013; Penakalapati, 2013; Wong et al.,

¹⁵ This choice of language is discussed in the thesis introduction.

2013; Chang et al., 2012; Allen et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2010; Wilson and Koo, 2010; Allen and Goldberg, 2009; Cheng et al., 2007; Fingerson, 2006; Laws, 1990). In line with the research aims and questions outlined, this study takes a qualitative approach to produce new knowledge and gather rich in-depth primary data from all participants. Using a qualitative approach produces textual data, providing meaningful insights through detailed accounts of people's perceptions and feelings and is well suited to research aiming to explore and understand experiences, relationships, and accounts in-depth. Marvasti (2004) acknowledges qualitative research as an opportunity to provide "detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience" (p.7). Qualitative research also allows for flexibility during the data collection process and for the generation of new ideas for the researcher. The researcher can use open-ended questions and tailor these accordingly in response to how the interviewee has answered previous questions. This enabled my study participants to respond in their own way to the questions I asked and allowed me some spontaneity and adaptation, generating responses which were rich, meaningful, and were at most, unanticipated for me as the researcher. I was able to probe initial responses from participants, asking them to elaborate on their answers through simple questions, such as "why do you feel that way?" or "what do you mean by that?" throughout. This worked particularly well when asking participants about societal attitudes towards sex during menstruation, and even more so when moving into questions about their own personal attitudes and experiences of sexual decision-making during menstruation. Given the sensitivity of the research topic, this approach meant participants' feelings and accounts could gradually unfold during the interview by transitioning smoothly between their initial response and the additional questions I asked. Most importantly, this meant my participants were encouraged to explore their feelings and accounts in more depth during the interview. Furthermore, they had the necessary space and time to think about areas of the topic we were discussing in relation to their own personal experiences, in ways they may not have been able to or asked to prior to the interview. Given the taboo and stigmatised nature of the topic of menstruation, this often meant I was able to observe my participants addressing their own uncertainty or confronting the tensions they were experiencing whilst doing this, in ways I would not have encountered or been a part of if I had used quantitative research methods.

Across the existing literature which uses qualitative approaches to explore men and boys' menstrual attitudes and experiences, semi-structured interviews were employed by some researchers, sometimes alongside other data collection methods (Diamond-Smith et al., 2020; Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Newton, 2016; Rajak, 2015; Reberte et al., 2014; Laws, 1990). With reflection on existing UK based studies, Laws (1990) used interviews with men and a participant-led group, whilst Newton (2016) also included some interviews with adult men and adolescent boys alongside a central questionnaire to explore their knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of menstruation. Given the choice of methods used by these researchers and my interest in conducting an in-depth study of individual attitudes and experiences, I considered individual semi-structured interviews as being the most appropriate method of data collection for this research with adult men. This decision was also supported by the various benefits of using this data collection method and how well it was suited to the sensitivity of the research topic, the study aims, and the research questions set out. For instance, interviewees can initiate dialogue stemming from their own thoughts and ideas alongside the interview guide. In-depth interviewing also allows for the researcher to gain "an empathic appreciation" of the participant's world (Marvasti, 2004, p.21) and has the potential to unveil a wide range of attitudes about a topic, which at times can be contradictory, so they have "the potential to capture the complexity of respondents' attitudes" (Marvasti, 2004, p.21).

Using semi-structured interviews as my chosen method of data collection provided me with the required flexibility for both myself and my participants when talking about the sensitive and often stigmatised topic of menstruation, and its associated taboo areas of discussion, for example sex, contraception and (in)fertility. This flexibility enabled me to 'read the room' and adapt the interview process in response to the interviewees' answers alongside their body language. In practice, this initially involved some brief reference to the study topic to test the water before the interview started, as well as some introductory questions, and then by managing the flow of conversation around the questions I asked and their responses. Most importantly, this form of interviewing provided participants with the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences in depth and at their own pace, in an interview space designed with them in mind. I believe this was vital for and valued by participants

because of the sensitivity of the research topic and its associated areas of interest being discussed. A semi-structured interview guide was used during the interviews which was designed around the aims and research questions of the study and shaped around existing literature and gaps identified in the research area (Appendix B). I retained some flexibility with the interview guide during interviews, allowing participants' responses to guide the discussion and the order in which the questions outlined in the interview guide were asked. It was common for interviewees to initiate the shift in conversation towards a new topic area in their responses to some of the more open-ended questions. For example, when asking interviewees, "*Where did you first hear or learn about periods?*", they would often start talking in-depth about their memories of school or growing up in their childhood household. Similarly, when asking interviewees, "*How do you think menstruation is viewed?*", they tended to share their opinion in relation to specific people and areas of society. Thus, topics outlined in the interview guide were covered in almost every interview but were not covered in the same order with each individual participant. All interviews started with the same rapport building questions: "*What comes to mind when I say the word periods or menstruation?*" and "*How would you describe menstruation/periods using one word?*". I revised the initial interview guide after conducting the first few interviews based on some additional interesting areas of discussion initiated by the participants during their interviews, and on my growing confidence at this stage to directly confront and initiate relevant but potentially taboo areas of discussion in future interviews. I also identified how some questions needed to be reworded in the interview guide to ensure they were more accessible to all interviewees and required less explanation from myself as the researcher during the interviews. I prioritised this to ensure participants did not feel out of their depth knowledge wise, but also to ensure the direction and flow of discussions developed organically within the interview context.

As a supplementary point of reference during transcription and analysis, I used a research diary during fieldwork which I turned to after each interview. This provided me with an informal and safe space to note down my thoughts about how I felt each interview had gone and it proved to be particularly useful as an avenue to pause and explore my emotions. The sensitivity of the research topic and some related areas discussed with participants meant this was at times necessary, but it also proved to

be a pillar of support after interviews where I had chosen to stay silent in the face of sexist comments made by participants. The research diary supported the ongoing revision process of the interview guide throughout the data collection period by allowing me to continually reflect on past interviews and adapt future interviews, taking forward what worked well with my interviewing style, as well as what I had learnt from my participants during each interview. I felt this was especially important because of the sensitivity of the research topic and related areas being discussed. I found this ongoing reflection and adaptation to be particularly beneficial for questions around dynamics of childhood homes, past and present intimate relationships, and potential future parenthood.

3.3.1 In-Person Face-to-Face Interviewing

I conducted 8 semi-structured interviews in-person between January 2020 and March 2020. I had chosen to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews with non-menstruators based on the benefits of engaging with participants in person. Interviews conducted face-to-face tend to be acknowledged as being the preferable choice for data collection over interviews conducted on the telephone, via email or on videoconferencing platforms (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). Collecting qualitative data from participants using in person interviewing allows for the researcher to pick up on nonverbal cues and to build rapport with each participant. Additionally, I understood the benefits of both the researcher and participant mutually deciding on where the interview takes place, given the sensitivity of the research topic. In designing this study, I was focused on and driven by how the in-person interview context could assist me in encouraging my participants to openly share their feelings and attitudes about menstruation in-detail, both comfortably and in confidence. For some participants, this may have been the first time they had talked about menstruation with someone other than a partner or family member, or perhaps their participation in the interview would be the first time they had been given the opportunity, or platform, to speak about menstruation at all on a personal level. Interviewing participants about menstruation and associated sensitive and taboo topics in person meant I could ensure the interview environment was supportive and that I spent some time building rapport with interviewees to ease them into the interview and the personal questions and discussions which followed.

Face-to-face interviews were scheduled with participants via email following their interest in the study. All face-to-face interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and interview locations were mutually agreed between me as the researcher and the participant based on researcher safety and convenience around existing commitments of the participant. Researcher risk while lone working was minimised by ensuring the meeting place was neutral, public, and safe, but quiet enough so the interview could not be easily overheard. This ensured researcher safety was not compromised for participant privacy. All in-person interviews were conducted during daylight hours in private hire rooms/areas and bookable spaces on the University of York campus, on a local college campus and in hospitality venues local and accessible to the participant. In addition to this, I informed a family member of my location prior to leaving home to travel to the interview location and checked in with them before and after each interview took place via text message. They were notified of how long the interview should take and estimated timings for travel and rapport building prior to each interview. As I was using public transport to travel to interview locations, I gave frequent updates on my location and any delays. I ensured I was contactable by carrying a charged mobile phone with me, with a portable battery charger compatible with my mobile phone to use as back up if needed. In the case of not having mobile signal at the interview location, I also enabled wi-fi calling on my mobile phone and ensured I was signed into the wi-fi service provided at the venue before I met the interviewee.

Participants were sent an information sheet (Appendix C) and consent form (Appendix D) via email to read through prior to meeting and had the opportunity to ask any questions they had in advance. Participants were given a printed version of the information sheet at the interview and were provided with a printed copy of the consent form to sign and return before the interview started. Participants were reminded they could ask any questions they had about their participation in the study or the research prior to signing the consent form. Alongside signing the consent form, participants were asked for their verbal consent to audio record the interview and were notified before I started recording the interview. Face-to-face interviews were audio recorded using a password protected dictation machine and data was transferred from the device to Google Drive and then permanently deleted from the device after each interview whilst still at the interview location. Where there was

travelling time between the end of the interview and having stable and fast-speed internet access, data was temporarily transferred to a password protected laptop and encrypted, then deleted from the dictation machine. Paper consent forms were scanned into an electronic document and transferred to Google Drive, then securely destroyed after each interview. Audio recordings were manually transcribed at the earliest convenience and then permanently deleted from Google Drive. Digital transcripts were produced on my personal computer and all versions were saved and transferred to Google Drive at the end of each transcription session. No transcripts were stored on my personal computer. Once participants had read the information sheet and signed the consent form, their names were replaced with pseudonyms which were then attached to all data documents in place of identifying information. A separate document linking pseudonyms to participants' identifying information was stored safely on a password protected computer and backed up to Google Drive with access restricted to the researcher only if participants chose to withdraw from the study. Given pseudonyms have been used in the analysis of research data. Participants were not informed of their individual pseudonyms.

3.3.2 Online Interviewing

Online interviews enabled me to conduct an additional 27 interviews between May 2020 and August 2020, despite Covid-19 restrictions in the UK. 10 of these informal interviews were with menstruating participants, as changing from planned in-person focus groups to online focus groups on Zoom did not feel manageable. Online interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) argue that although online interviews are often presented as second choice when face-to-face interviews are not possible, online interviews conducted using innovative communication technologies such as Skype produce in-depth and reliable data like traditional in-person face-to-face interviews. O'Connor and Madge (2017) describe how online synchronous interviews closely resemble traditional qualitative face-to-face interviews as they enable the same generation of spontaneous answers from participants, however they acknowledge that it's crucial for the researcher to use strategies to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction in-person. I opted for Zoom as my choice of videoconferencing platform due to the platform's key advantages for conducting research, such as the ability to securely record and store

sessions without using third-party software and its user-specific authentication (Archibald et al., 2019). The platform also offers one-click access, allowing participants to attend an interview online without requiring a Zoom account and the platform's waiting room feature offers additional privacy by enabling the researcher to see who is in the waiting room before admitting them (Lobe et al., 2020). This decision was also reinforced by the University of York's supported access to the service for all staff and students. Resuming UK fieldwork using online interviews is discussed in greater depth in 3.6, including the additional considerations for moving the research online.

3.4 Study Specific Ethical Considerations

3.4.1 Menstruation as a Sensitive Topic

Discussing the taboo and stigmatised topic of menstruation meant dealing with highly personal and sensitive issues and information throughout the duration of the research project. To respond to the research questions and offer an in-depth insight into men's attitudes and experiences, the topic needed to be explored in great depth with participants, which meant they would be reflecting and sharing details about their lives and personal relationships. Given the reproductive relevance of menstruation and the menstrual cycle, it was expected participants would discuss issues related to sexuality and sexual practices, specifically their views on and experiences of engaging in sexual activity duration menstruation, and it was anticipated there would be discussions with participants in relation to (in)fertility, menstrual suppression, and contraception. Participants were informed in writing of the potential topic areas which may arise during the interview in the information sheet provided to them before agreeing to take part in the study. Before the interview started, participants were reminded of this once again and were given an opportunity to ask any further questions they had about this before consenting to participation in the interview by signing the consent form. More importantly, it was explained to all participants that they could refuse to answer any questions during the interview and ask to move on to the next sub-topic and that they could terminate the interview at any point during the interview if they did not want to proceed with participation in the study. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study after

the interview had taken place and how they would do this in practical terms, in which case all data related to them would be permanently deleted and not used in the research. Due to the sensitivity of the topics explored during interviews, relevant helpline information was included in the information sheet for participants to refer to, should they feel they need to seek some form of support for any related issue after taking part in the interview. I was mindful of how in agreeing to participate in my research, participants may be facing their own uncertainties and apprehension of talking about menstruation, especially with a stranger and within an interview context. It was unclear how participants would view me as a researcher interested in menstruation. Due to the stigma and silence often surrounding menstruation, I did not make any assumptions of how each individual participant, regardless of if they had personal experiences of menstruation, would feel towards me as someone who is confidently and enthusiastically talking about and researching menstruation. For some, I could be viewed positively and as someone 'to look up to', however for others I may be viewed negatively and be ostracised for having an interest in menstruation and challenging menstrual shame and taboo. I remained conscious of how the sensitivity of the research topic could shape the communication and interactions I shared with my participants, both throughout the recruitment process, and during the interviews. These deliberations also extended beyond the interview context, with an uncertainty of how fellow researchers and academics I encountered throughout the PhD process may be viewing me based on my research focus. Lara Owen touches on this in a recent article, in which she questions "whether it is possible to be a fully respected academic when pursuing research into such a profoundly stigmatised topic" (2022, p.5).

3.4.2 Interviewing Men as a Woman and Feminist Researcher

Epistemological positions in research "reflect assumptions about what constitutes meaningful and valid knowledge and how such knowledge can (and should) be generated" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.175). Ardovini-Brooker (2002) argues that feminist epistemologies "are the golden keys that unlock the door to feminist research" and "once the door is unlocked, a better understanding of the distinctive nature of feminist research can occur". Approaching this study using a feminist epistemology required consideration of the influence of gender on conceptions of

knowledge and the situatedness of knowing. Feminist epistemologies are interested in how “the norms and practices of knowledge production affect the lives of women and are implicated in systems of oppression” (Grasswick, 2018), thus feminist epistemologies “do not separate epistemology from ethics or politics: inquiries about knowledge are considered in relation to inquiries into right and wrong, and power and oppression” (Poole, 2021, p.117). I position myself as a feminist researcher and acknowledge that doing feminist research involves attention to issues of *power*, positionality, and reflexivity (Hesse-Biber, 2012; Doucet and Mauthner, 2006; Deutsch, 2004). Brown, Western and Pascal (2013) note that reflexivity is “an integral component of research within many feminist epistemologies” (p.441). Furthermore, Dottolo and Tillery (2015) argue reflexivity can be viewed as a “mechanism or tool for thinking critically” (p.126) throughout the research process, as reflexivity requires not only self-reflection, but an analysis of systems of power, privilege, and marginalisation. In acknowledging that I am not a “neutral conduit of information” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.15) as the researcher, engaging in reflexive practice involved continual consideration of how each step of the research process was being shaped, from topic choice and methodology to data interpretation and analysis. Ultimately, reflexive practice positioned me in relation to the topic, research participants and knowledge created in this study (Dottolo and Tillery, 2015).

Feminist research also involves problematisation of the notion of complete objectivity (Westmarland, 2001; Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1983), which Haraway (1988) argues should be replaced by the concept of situated knowledges to reflect the social location and position of the knower in knowledge production. Drawing on Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge(s), I recognise myself as a situated knower, acknowledging how my own social identity and location has shaped the overall research process. Campbell (2003) notes how although the inclusion of men as both researchers and researched in feminist research “remains both problematic and controversial” (p.287), feminist epistemological work “has engaged with the world of men and become more theoretically inclusive and diverse” (p.300). In my research, I acknowledge *all* participants as situated knowers with unique lived experiences, perspectives and interpretations of social reality, yet recognise that situated knowledge can also come from a place of privilege (Haraway, 1988).

In employing a feminist methodology, some additional considerations around gender, power relations and marginalisation were necessary. Pini and Pease (2013) highlight that broadening feminist research methodology to capture the study of men and masculinities is “a risky venture for feminists” as it “risks diluting the politics and practice of feminist research” (p.8). Hearn (2013) argues that when interviewing men within the framework of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities, there are some additional considerations beyond that which has been acknowledged within feminist research, most notably, whether men in this context “attempt to seek equality, even empathy, or critical distance in the interview” (p.27). In acknowledging men’s possible stereotypical defensiveness and anxieties when being interviewed, Hearn identifies that “interviews can represent both threats and opportunities to men interviewees” and that interviews themselves can be “a site for reproducing, or challenging, men and masculinities” (p.27-28). I was mindful of this in both the planning and carrying out of the interviews with men, acknowledging how the points made by Pini and Pease (2013) and Hearn (2013) could potentially play out in research on menstruation, specifically in an interview context where I as the researcher, a feminist woman who menstruates, is interviewing them.

Pairing my own interview experience with school-age boys in Uganda (Suggett, 2016) and Sophie Laws’ (1990) reflections on being placed “in an unusual position” (p.218) when interviewing men in the UK, I approached the design of this study with researcher positionality and safety in mind and was reflexive about my approach throughout the research process. I was quick to acknowledge how my existence as a lone woman researcher meant the finer details of the project would need to be carefully managed in both planning and practice. Given the decision to conduct face-to-face interviews, I was particularly aware of the additional considerations required to ensure I minimised risks related to me being a woman researcher interviewing men. As previously discussed, procedures in place such as choosing a suitable interview location and checking in with a family member before and after interviews took place acted as general precautionary practices during fieldwork. Lefkowich (2019) acknowledges the “looming threat of harm, specifically, sexualized violence” present in women’s fieldwork, arguing that women are unanimously assumed to be at greater risk of male-perpetrated violence in fieldwork than male researchers” (p.2). Gailey and Prohaska (2011) argue that it is important for women researchers to

choose a non-threatening interview location when interviewing men and Lee (1997) says that interviews conducted by women researchers should be held in locations which are public but do not compromise the confidentiality of the interviewee. This decision making around the suitability of an interview location should also take into consideration how power dynamics, specifically the imbalance of power between the researcher and researched, could be perpetuated when interviewing marginalised individuals, for instance, in relation to ethnic and/or sexual identities (Lefkowich, 2019). In the case of my fieldwork, I was mindful of my position as a woman researcher, but I also remained conscious of how the power dynamics of each interview could change dependent on the identity of each participant.

Prior to commencing fieldwork and during the data collection period, I acknowledged there were additional important issues to consider when interviewing men, such as the risk of sexual harassment, gender performances within the interview context, and emotional labour during the interview. Gailey and Prohaska (2011) argue “the interview process is entirely different when a woman interviews a man and some situations and topics make the gender differences even more pronounced” (p.377). This raised questions for me around my personal appearance, body language and verbal communication during interviews, but I also acknowledged how the added element of discussing menstruation and its associated sensitive topics could shape the interview process for both myself and each participant.

In advance of starting in person face-to-face interviews with men, I accessed the limited literature on women interviewing men to support me in preparing for interviews and to enable me to have an improved understanding of the interview set-up and the dynamics at play during interviews with men. Women researchers have considered if men are less likely to participate in a study and not be as expansive about an issue if “it is associated with normative definitions of femininity and/or conflated with women as a group” (Pini and Pease, 2013, p.6). I was also specifically interested in predetermining how my participants’ natural assumptions around my position as someone who menstruates may also shape the interview, and I remained alert to this during the interviews. The literature presented researchers who reflected on how men would attempt to regain their dominant position by taking control of the interview, interrupting questions, and telling the researcher how to use equipment

such as an audio device (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011; Pini, 2005; Arendell, 1997; Lee, 1997). In their research with undergraduate men in the U.S, Gailey and Prohaska (2011) comment that some men's behaviour such as answering their phone during the interview suggests that men as interviewees were not taking the interview seriously. They argue that when control and power is lost to a woman researcher, the interviewee experiences some discomfort and in response carries out "the normatively masculine behaviors of trying to take control" to "make up for his lack of power" (p.372). This is echoed in the work of McKee and O'Brien (1983), who at times felt threatened by men they were interviewing who used masculine behaviours to assert dominance.

A consistent matter running throughout the literature on women interviewing men is the sexist remarks, sexual hustling, sexually suggestive comments, and sexual harassment present in this interview dynamic, even in research which is not directly related to sex (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011; Pini, 2005; Arendell, 1997; Horn, 1997; Lee, 1997; Green et al., 1993; Gurney, 1985; Smart, 1984; McKee and O'Brien, 1983). Interviewees flirting with interviewers and making sexual propositions is common when women interview men (Arendell, 1997; Lee, 1997). Haddow (2021) experienced this sexualisation from men as a female researcher in her ethnographic study through verbal comments and physical contact, with her appearance and choice of clothing often used for hustling through comments directed at her legs or chest. Green et al. (1993) suggest that the sexual harassment they experienced during interviews with men may have happened due to them being close in age to the interviewees. Similarly, Gailey and Prohaska (2011) recognise how their ages in relation to the interviewees' ages may have played a part in the sexist remarks they experienced during interviews with men about sexual behaviour:

"It is [also] possible that we, as young women, made the men feel at ease denigrating women in our presence because they viewed us as peers rather than as authority figures. The men may have responded to our questions entirely differently if we were older" (p.377).

This situation poses several issues for women researchers, such as being made to feel like they are lacking power within the interview despite being in the dominant position of the interviewer, as well as being made to feel vulnerable because of

sexually charged comments and body language from men they are interviewing. Similarly, women researchers report feeling obliged to listen quietly during interviews while men express their sexist views and share derogatory remarks to remain professional as objective researchers (Horn, 1997; Smart, 1984). Some researchers also face a similar situation when they reject an advancement made by the interviewee and must decide how and if to continue the interview. By not reacting or expressing an opposing view, they enable men to continue feeling comfortable talking to them in the existing interview set-up and therefore they reduce the risk of confrontation bringing the interview to an early close (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011; Arendell, 1997; Horn, 1997; Lee, 1997; Smart, 1984; McKee and O'Brien, 1983). In Haddow's case, challenging any sexual comments made was done by "laughing them off or attempting to change the subject" (2021, p.5). Silence demonstrated by interviewers at the expense of their own comfort and safety poses a significant issue for feminist researchers who may usually consider silence as being consent for the continuation and tolerance of such remarks and behaviour displayed by men. Laws (1990) acknowledges the discomfort she experienced during interviews with men about menstruation:

I have often found my research a painful process, for I have had to make myself pay attention to men's sexist views of myself in a way which I would 'naturally' avoid in any other situation (p.216).

Gailey and Prohaska (2011) also reflect on issues of sexism in relation to their research, acknowledging that because they wanted the interviewees to feel comfortable sharing their feelings and experiences for the purposes of collecting the necessary data, they were often pushed into a position which meant they "became emotional after a number of the interviews" and "felt horrible about remaining silent" (p.376) in the face of hearing and not challenging comments about abuse towards women. Despite this, they also comment on how they used the silence to "take back some of the power" by collecting the data they needed and publishing the findings, meaning that they "had the last word" (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011, p.379).

Based on these researchers' reflections, I recognised that in my interviews it would not be straightforward to react in a way which prioritises my existing values and opinions and acknowledged how this would likely be a doubly oppressive experience

for me as a feminist researcher. In practice, I found this acceptance difficult to uphold at times when my participants shared some negative viewpoints towards female partners' cyclical behavioural changes, and their positions on tampon tax and period poverty. For instance, Owen (28) talked about not deeming menstrual products as essential and went on to say that he is "humble" in what he needs whilst sharing that he can be "quite bigoted". I found some cases of misogynistic comments appearing subtly in responses, at times missed during the interview but picked up on during transcription. I stayed mindful of how participant responses could be shaped in a way which tries to not offend me, based on the topic of discussion and my existence as a woman and someone they may consider who menstruates. However, I found that there were many contradictions during the interviews, with participants clearly wanting to portray a positive standpoint towards menstruation, but with other comments not always being in line with this aim. Not only could this support the complexities of understanding how attitudes towards menstruation are constructed, but it also demonstrates how interviewees are influenced by the identity of the interviewer. Although I could have challenged this during the interviews, instead I chose to stay silent, listening and acknowledging what they were sharing with me as a way of 'staying on their side' and ensuring they were being made to feel like they could continue to talk to me about menstruation to ensure I was able to capture data. Given the under-researched topic of discussion, especially with men, I felt a degree of responsibility to do this as the researcher, to be able to present such findings in my analysis and draw attention to such attitudes and positions on the matters discussed with participants.

An additional consideration is gender performances within the interview context. Sallee and Harris (2011) suggest researchers should be aware of their own gender performance during interviews and how in tandem with social identities, it can shape and challenge the research process for the researcher. They acknowledge how 'doing gender' impacts the rapport established with participants, particularly when women researchers are interviewing men. Gailey and Prohaska (2011) refer to the implications of this in relation to their choice of clothing when interviewing men about sexual behaviour, although acknowledge that this is not the only way gender is performed. They recommend that women who conduct interviews with men should dress conservatively and always be aware of how their choice of clothing influences

how they perform their gender, as well as what this means for the dynamics of the interview situation. Similarly, some women researchers share the notion that they should be mindful of how much make up they wear to ensure they do not present themselves as too provocative towards the interviewee (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011; McKee and O'Brien, 1983). Lee (1997) recognises how this strategy could make the woman researcher feel empowered simply by believing she is presenting herself appropriately, however it also may enable her to take on the role of an objective researcher and maintain power within this specific interview situation. For Gailey and Prohaska (2011) this would play out as the woman researcher being able to deflect sexual innuendos and feel confident and comfortable enough to be assertive in this interview context when it is needed. I remained mindful of this when dressing for the in-person interviews, opting for a balance between smart and casual but not swaying much from my everyday attire at the time. Given the winter weather at the time of the in-person interviews, most of my body, bar my head and hands, were covered in clothing without much thought given. This ensured I felt like myself during these interviews, enabled me to maintain some power, but also could put my participants at ease as though they were just meeting up with a friend, as opposed to a professional they may feel intimidated by. When planning in-person interviews, I was mindful of how the interview could both look and feel like a date set-up, so my clothing choice and overall physical appearance did factor into this. I however became more conscious of what I was choosing to wear when it came to online interviews, opting instead for casual attire, including sportswear and loungewear, purposefully to reflect my surroundings and the context of lockdown/working from home I shared with my participants. Despite this, I remained conscious of my physical appearance, in many ways 'doing femininity' by ensuring I was wearing make-up, that my nails were painted, and my hair appeared neat on screen. This felt more like a balance between the shared experience and my own personal professionalism I needed to maintain in my home environment as a researcher on camera. These ways of doing femininity were also the case for in-person interviews, but by 'losing power' through my casual choice of dress online and the interview context on Zoom, my energy was instead directed towards how I presented myself from waist upwards, as this is all the interviewees would see on camera. Adding to this was how communicating online with strangers felt different to physically meeting a stranger in public. I did not feel uncomfortable during the online interviews, but I

acknowledged how talking to men who I did not know about their personal experiences and intimate parts of their lives online through a webcam felt more sexually suggestive than in person at times.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic which would likely raise some related discussions such as sex, contraception, fertility. with participants, I was particularly aware of how these researchers' reflections could potentially reflect my own experiences interviewing men. Gailey and Prohaska (2011) share their experience on interviewing men about sex and sexually degrading practices towards women, acknowledging how during interviews they did not move far from their "socially accepted gender roles or the men would likely become resistant to talking openly" (p.370). However, they also acknowledge that as women researchers, they were "violating gender norms simply by discussing sexual behaviors" with men (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011, p.370). They acknowledge that this can be misinterpreted as flirting, raising several dilemmas and obstacles for a woman researcher who finds themselves in a position like this when conducting research on similar topics. During my interviews, I confidently initiated discussions about menstrual sex with interviewees which I feel was unexpected by many of my participants, displayed in their stuttering and/or cluttering style of speech. I considered this to be a good approach to both inviting my participants to speak about their experiences and ensuring that as the researcher I was maintaining a comfortable level of control within the interview. I felt this was when power dynamics shifted in the interviews, as me initiating those conversations reaffirmed my position as being in control of the interview. The age of participants is relevant here, as I was more conscious of how this could come across to men older than myself who may be more likely to try to regain some control and power in the interview at this point. In practice, I did not encounter much difference in how I felt interviewing men who were either younger or older than me. On reflection, I feel this is due to a combination of being a woman who menstruates and is also researching menstruation. From their perspective, I could be seen as an expert, both personally and professionally.

Although I acknowledge it was not necessary for me to share my own personal feelings and experiences of menstruation with these participants, I have since reflected on my fieldwork and recognised my own shortcomings. An example of this

is how I started my period during one in-person interview with a male participant, and yet despite my openness to talking about menstruation generally, and my comfort and confidence in talking to this participant about menstruation within the interview context, I did not disclose the vulnerability, pain, and nausea I was feeling. In comparison to this, I recall one occasion where I was menstruating during an online interview with a female participant and I immediately disclosed how I was feeling, then stood up and showed my hot water bottle tucked into my elasticated waist trousers. This disclosure of my menstrual status with this participant happened without much thought and we were able to share a joke about the irony of menstruating and feeling all that goes with it whilst carrying out an interview about the lived experiences of menstruation. This is just one example of how I was more at ease with participants who menstruated, however this did not mean that all menstruating participants were at ease talking about menstruation despite our shared lived realities. Some menstruating participants were quite reserved in their responses and displayed some discomfort in their body language and verbal responses. This was particularly apparent when discussing menstruation in relation to their experiences of absent periods and fertility issues for example. As with non-menstruating participants, I was aware of power dynamics within these interviews. Although I could be considered as an insider, I remained mindful of my position as a PhD researcher which still meant I could hold outsider status from their viewpoint.

A final point of reflection on this is also my position as both a menstrual researcher and activist with a keen interest and passion in improving people's knowledge and experiences of menstruation. I found that some men wanted more information on what we had talked about, which was either requested during the interview as part of the discussion, or at the end of the interview. For example, some dads were interested in the ways in which they could support their daughters and wanted to know if there were alternate menstrual products available other than the ones they had spoken of. I found there to be a general interest in reusable menstrual products and whether menstrual products were accessible through the NHS. Several participants also thanked me and expressed their enjoyment in talking about menstruation, with some going as far as saying in doing so they had challenged their pre-existing thoughts. This suggested to me that this was the first opportunity they had to ask someone about these issues, and felt safe to, or perhaps that they had

not thought about these related issues until being interviewed by me about it. Like with the negative and misogynistic comments, I found it tricky to be both researcher and activist, wanting to equip these participants with correct information and encourage them to challenge menstrual stigma and taboos, but also needing to retain the position of the interviewer. Fishman (2014) experienced similar in her research with US male undergraduate students, acknowledging how in being invited and included in such communication on menstruation, participants recognised a positive shift in their perspectives and openness towards future discussions about menstruation with others.

In line with others' work on their experiences of interviewing men in research (Gailey and Prohaska, 2011; Pini, 2005; Arendell, 1997; Lee, 1997; Horn, 1997; Smart, 1984), I became aware of the battle between prioritising and balancing my values, emotions, personal safety, and research interests during the fieldwork for my research. This did however play out very differently across the face-to-face interviews and the online interviews, as discussed later in this chapter.

3.5 Study Participants

3.5.1 Participant Recruitment

The call for participants was initially advertised virtually through the means of a digital recruitment poster shared online using my professional Twitter account. I also emailed the poster to existing contacts in UK-based menstrual related research and activism networks including non-governmental organisations and shared via email with peers studying and working in various UK HE institutions. I advertised the call for participants to the University of York student body using the Graduate Students' Association 'Find a Participant!' service and shared the call for participants with a range of student societies via email. In January 2020 I took part in the University of York's PhD Spotlight Competition as part of YorkTalks and utilised this public engagement opportunity to advertise my call for participants through printed versions of the recruitment poster acting as part of my table and board display. Throughout the data collection period, I continued to share the call for participants online by retweeting my initial post and sharing revised versions of the recruitment poster as and when changes were made to the study, for example when switching to online

interviews and increasing the age range of participants in response to COVID-19, as discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Potential participants were encouraged via the recruitment poster to email me directly on my university contact email address to ask any questions they had about the study or to offer their time to take part in the research through a semi-structured interview. Some recruited participants had become aware of the opportunity to take part in the study on Twitter, either from seeing my original tweets or from seeing other people's retweet of my call for participants throughout the data collection period. Some participants had seen the recruitment poster shared on Facebook by a range of people both unknown and known to me, some had received an email from their student society and some participants had heard about the study through friends and colleagues. A few participants were recruited as an outcome of the York Talks event, either because they had attended the PhD Spotlight Competition, or they were notified of the call for participants through someone who had attended. The remaining participants were known to me personally through family contacts, university, and employment. Participants did not receive any financial incentive in exchange for taking part in the study. This decision was made on the basis that I did not have access to funds to support this as a self-funded PhD student and most importantly, I wanted my research participants to offer their time to talk about menstruation because they were interested in the study, valued the importance of the research and wanted to contribute by taking part in an interview with me regardless of the potential compensation on offer for participation.

3.5.2 Participant Demographics

All participants were recruited based on their age at the time of their involvement in the study fitting within the recruitment age bracket and their attendance at a school in the UK. I set out to interview participants who had spent some of their childhood in the UK and had some experience of menstruation within the school setting in the UK. Recruited participants had attended a range of schools in the UK, including Co-Ed State, Co-Ed Private and single-sex schools, as well as catholic schools and boarding schools. Some participants had spent some of their early childhood outside the UK. Where this was the case, participants informed me of this during interviews

to provide some context to their responses. Similarly, some participants had spent time outside the UK during adulthood, however all participants had spent most of their childhood and adult life in the UK. The youngest participant was 21 years old (male), and the oldest participant was 45 years old (female).

Some demographic information was confirmed with participants at the end of their interviews if they had touched on their identity when acknowledging their eligibility for the study prior to starting the interview or when providing context within their responses. This included their age, gender, sexuality, type of school attended, occupation and highest-level qualification¹⁶. Collecting this data allows for some inference in the analysis and discussion of data collected during the interviews with participants. This was optional for all participants and was purposely requested at the end of each interview to avoid participants feeling scrutinised at the start of their interview and to avoid participant bias during the interview. Furthermore, I felt it was important for me as the researcher to know little about each participant to enable them to guide their own narratives during the interview in response to my interview questions. All participants provided me with their demographic information and verbally consented to it being included in this thesis.

3.6 Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic

3.6.1 *Resuming Fieldwork*

Given the advantages of in-person face-to-face interviewing and the suitability of this method of data collection for my study, paired with the success of the first 8 face-to-face interviews, I was extremely apprehensive and reluctant to move interviews online. With the lockdown restrictions in mind, particularly the fact people had to stay at home, I was cautious of conducting online interviews based on the sensitivity of the research topic and the likelihood that some participants would be talking about people they were living with. At the time I was feeling a mixture of emotions towards the study, particularly disappointment, frustration, and grief, which were only exacerbated by the general anxieties of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown

¹⁶ The study had ethical clearance to collect this personal data.

restrictions in place. I was aware the situation I was experiencing was also being experienced by fellow PhD researchers both in the UK and globally, but a pandemic was not the type of data collection obstacle I had anticipated or made a contingency plan for when designing the study and scheduling fieldwork. This made the adaptation a more difficult process as there was not the usual research guidance available based on experience of conducting research during a global pandemic. On reflection, this was a one day at a time process which involved seeing how the research landscape was changing in response to Covid-19, attending workshops on adapting in-person fieldwork to online methods and ongoing discussions with my supervisory team and PhD peers.

In May 2020, two months into the lockdown restrictions in England, I was confident in moving to online interviewing methods after considering the additional ethical and logistical issues for myself and for my participants based on the sensitivity of the research topic. I was particularly aware at this stage of the pandemic of how the local restrictions and societal shift to working from home had started to normalise online communication through people using videoconferencing platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom to replicate in-person meetings with colleagues and catch-ups with family members. Lobe et al. (2020) comments:

With our ever-growing digital societies, and moreover with this specific COVID-19 pandemic, people have become familiar with various platforms and applications to transmit at least some of their daily interactions and communication online. We might assume that their digital skills and competences have accordingly grown, consequently making their participation in online research data collection easier (p.2).

Online interviewing using videoconferencing tools is commended for its ability to connect people geographically and enable researchers to reach individuals to take part in their studies without travelling to them (Gray et al., 2020). This meant I did not need to consider travel distance and costs when recruiting participants, which in practice meant I was able to interview a participant who was in Australia despite the distance and time difference. Prior to this shift to online interviewing, I was restricted to participants in Yorkshire and North East England based on my university and home locations, and the lower costs of regional travel.

I resumed recruitment of new participants to the study by advertising participation as an online interview on Zoom at a convenient time for the participant. I did not encounter any issues with recruiting participants for online interviews and was encouraged by the increased interest in individuals contacting me via email to take part in the study. On reflection, this increase in interest from potential participants may be due to the convenience of online interviews or the distance between researcher and interviewee during online interviews being preferable for participants when talking about menstruation. Additionally, discussions with some participants revealed that they had seen the call for participants and based on their increased availability due to being furloughed from work, they had time on their hands they wanted to put to good use, which in this case was taking part in some research they considered to be of value. The increase in online research interviews in response to the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to be normalising interviews using videoconferencing platforms both inside and outside the research community. Much of the advertisement and recruitment for online interviews was conducted using social media platforms such as my personal Twitter account, with some individuals then sharing the call for participants on their personal Facebook accounts. I felt like there was solidarity across the research community with people reaching out to offer their support by helping to recruit or their time in an interview with the knowledge that studies using in-person methods had been impacted by the restrictions. Although online interviewing poses some additional challenges and considerations, such as logistical and technological issues and changes in rapport building approaches, Lobe et al. (2020) argues that online interviewing using videoconferencing “provides a valuable opportunity to rise to the challenge of social distancing while maintaining our data collection efforts” (p.6).

Once I had started conducting individual interviews online with my non-menstruating participants and was confident and comfortable with the interview outcomes, I made the decision to replace the study’s planned focus groups with additional individual interviews. I had initially wanted to conduct 2 focus groups with male participants to gain an insight into how menstrual attitudes and experiences are discussed within a group setting and 2 focus groups with female participants to discuss their menstrual experiences in a group setting. Considering the pandemic and transition to online methods, I was conscious that participants who are not known to each other may not

respond well to an online focus group set up. This decision was based on my concerns around the logistics of conducting a focus group online, as well as the additional ethical considerations where multiple participants are involved from different home settings (Lobe et al., 2020). At this point in the fieldwork, it was important to instead focus on the in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with non-menstruating participants I was now conducting online and add some additional online individual interviews with participants with some experience of menstruating. These interviews with menstruators were shorter (max. 60mins) and more informal and did not rely so much on an interview guide. Instead, I asked these participants some open questions around their experiences of menstruation throughout their lives, which covered areas involving their experiences with non-menstruators, such as fathers and partners.

3.6.2 Additional Considerations Moving Online

Necessary amendments were made to the participant information sheets and consent forms and these were emailed to participants before scheduling interviews. Participants were able to ask any questions they had about the study and their participation via email, before signing the consent form and returning it via email. Participants had an additional opportunity to ask questions during the Zoom call before the interview started and they were asked verbally if they were happy for the interview to be recorded using Zoom's recording feature. Zoom's recording permission feature meant participants were aware when the recording had started after they had clicked 'continue' on the recording notification and were aware when the recording had ended. All recorded interviews were saved on my personal computer directly from Zoom, with audio recordings being copied to Google Drive immediately after each interview took place and then permanently deleted from my personal computer. Although Zoom offers audio transcripts, I chose to manually transcribe each interview and individual audio recordings were deleted from Google Drive once transcribed.

Building a rapport with participants online is different to in face-to-face interviews but can be done just as well (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014). I was able to gradually build a rapport with participants via email and before starting each interview we discussed topics such as our current circumstances with work/family and recent pandemic-

related news, with it often becoming apparent that we were in similar situations or feeling similar emotions. In a time of constant uncertainty where we were mostly all staying at home, I found it personally valuable to engage in these discussions with my participants and ensure they were aware of my appreciation for both their time and energy. These early conversations also enabled me to gauge how participants were feeling in the online interview space prior to starting to record the interview. Rapport and engagement were also maintained through nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and being able to see participants added a personal touch to the interviews by replicating in-person interviews (Archibald et al., 2019), however responding to interviewees' body language was more difficult than during in-person interviews at times.

To conduct audio video interviews online using Zoom, participants required a stable internet connection, a compatible device and a working camera, speakers, and microphone. This was not communicated to potential participants prior to interview but individuals' willingness and ability to partake in an interview may have been dependent on this. Participating in an online interview required some technological know-how to access the interview through the live link sent in the email using their mobile phone/laptop/desktop computer, and to navigate Zoom during the session if required. I suggest that online interview participants were technologically advanced or were experienced in using Zoom or similar videoconferencing platforms. I joined Zoom calls on my desktop computer at home using Wi-Fi but had the privilege of using my laptop or phone, if necessary, as well as having the ability to share 4G data between all three devices should my Wi-Fi drop prior to or during an interview. It was common for there to be some lags in the call, either due to my Wi-Fi or participants' unstable internet connections. I was concerned interviewees would end the call and I'd either lose them as a participant or we would have to reschedule. I resumed the interview whilst recognising how this disruption may have made the participant feel uneasy and given them the time to put their guard up again. Once we had mutually made light of the disruption, often through humour, I found the participant to be at ease again. On reflection, despite the frustrations and worries at the time, obstacles such as these gave online interviews a human feel and were reflective of the current times of people working from home due to the pandemic. For those continuing their research online or communicating virtually with colleagues or even family members,

this was a time when many people were still adapting to the online world using videoconferencing platforms to replicate 'normal' in-person face-to-face contact with others.

I allowed the same amount of time for online interviews as in-person interviews in case of technical issues and to enable discussions online to develop as organically as they would in person. Interviews could be scheduled between existing personal responsibilities and work commitments making participation easier and more convenient for the interviewees. This convenience was particularly advantageous as participants were at home or in their parents' homes, either working from home, were currently furloughed from work, or had childcare responsibilities including supporting children accessing schoolwork via online methods. Initially, lack of privacy had been my central concern for moving online given the sensitivity of the research topic and participants' potential reservedness for discussing their experiences with family members or housemates/friends close by. Some participants were verbal about scheduling their interviews for when partners were not at home or for when their children were in bed or in a virtual school lesson.

Providing the same level of privacy for online participants as in-person participants proved to be more difficult as I could not control the space the interviewee occupied for their online interview. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) argue the location and environment of the participant during the interview is an important logistical factor to consider for the researcher, noting how ensuring participants are in a location free from controllable distractions is an important element of preparation for online interviews. This is understandable, however there are additional issues to consider when interviewing online during a pandemic with national lockdown restrictions in place, particularly because their environment may have shaped their responses. In Gray et al.'s study (2020), participants said they were more comfortable speaking about a personal topic in a space they have chosen themselves. Some of my participants were sat at a table or at their desk, whilst some participants were sat more comfortably on a sofa or in a chair for their interview. Some participants were being interviewed in their bedroom, either sat up or lay on their bed, or sat on the floor against the bed. Most online participants were fully engaged in the conversation with no distractions or asynchronous tasks for the duration of the interview,

replicating the in person face-to-face interview set up. However, some participants were interviewed whilst carrying out tasks in the home, which may have also been tactical distractions. An example of this is one non-menstruating participant who asked at the start of the Zoom call if I was happy for them to continue defrosting their freezer, and given that I was taking their time for an interview which they were taking part in from their home, the interview went ahead with them alternating between being on their knees on the kitchen floor and casually responding to questions stood at their kitchen bench. Similarly, another non-menstruating participant continued to check their work emails on a separate device whilst responding to questions.

Despite some participants' best intentions to ensure a quiet and private space to take part in the online interview, additional factors came into play. For example, one participant started the interview by informing me their partner was in the opposite end of the room in a work meeting and that they had to be downstairs for a strong internet connection, and temporarily moved into the kitchen to make a cup of tea whilst still talking to me. Similarly, one interview was interrupted by a participant's partner offering them a drink and this participant also had to move around different rooms to find a steady internet connection during the interview. This type of interruption or distraction would not necessarily arise in face-to-face interviews, but I felt the informality of the online interview context I was able to create through good rapport building meant participants felt more at ease to do this. A similar example is a participant who asked 1 hour into the interview if we could pause the conversation for a few minutes so they could leave their computer and make another cup of tea. For some researchers this could be disruptive or frustrating, however I felt the opposite during the interview. Instead, I considered this to be indicative of their enjoyment in the interview and that they planned to continue talking to me for a longer duration of time. These examples present questions around participant tactics and measures, but I recognise how online interviews enabled my participants to 'feel at home' and how important this was for their participation in my study based on the range of sensitive and taboo topics which were covered. It was not always made known to me whether participant's family members or housemates were at home, but those who made it known to me used headphones. This did not ensure that their contributions to the interview were unheard by others at home and this may have shaped their responses during the interview. I felt this became particularly apparent

when asking questions around menstrual sex and during discussions related to their personal relationships. For example, one male participant demonstrated a change in body language, shuffling in his chair and looking over the laptop towards what I believe was the door into the main part of the house where he had said previously his daughters were in online school sessions. There was some hesitation before responding to the question, “Do you think men find it challenging to engage in sexual activity during menstruation?” and his discomfort meant his response was short and he did not use explicit words, instead using substitute words paired with nodding/shaking his head.

I conducted all online interviews in a private room of my home which was my home office, and the door conveniently had a lock to use during interviews. I wore headphones to ensure no information shared by the participant could be heard beyond the room by my own family members. I took the time to inform each participant of this measure before the interview started and ensured my headphones were visible for them to see during the interview. I was free from distractions and ensured privacy for the online participants in the same way I had done for the 8 in person face-to-face interviews. Lobe et al. (2020) recognises the potential visibility of the background in the participant’s surroundings as an issue for privacy in online interviews, particularly if they are being interviewed from their home. Some videoconferencing platforms enable users to change their backgrounds, including Zoom, however this was not something any of my participants utilised. It is unknown if they were aware of this feature before the interview took place, or if they were concerned about me seeing their environment. I was not personally concerned about this, however conducting interviews in my home office meant I retained some sense of professionalism and prevented interviewees from gaining personal insight into my private life beyond my identity as a PhD student.

I found that some participants were happy to continue chatting after the recording had stopped and the interview had ended. My initial feelings were that I should be ending the Zoom call after a quick de-brief as the interview had lasted for 60-90 minutes, however I soon understood the online interviews as being a chance for participants to escape their ‘working from home’ environment and the current restrictions keeping them there. For example, one male participant was quick to

inform me his partner was at work and described how he was spending every day at home alone during the national lockdown. On reflection writing this, sharing that information could come across as being sexually suggestive, however this was a conversation shared between us at the end of the interview when talking about the impact of the restrictions on our lives. Similarly, some male participants asked additional questions about the research after the interview had ended and I found that current PhD students or academics were interested in hearing more about what I hoped to do with the research impact wise, and what I personally hoped to do after my PhD. In-person participants were happy to debrief but were more likely to have somewhere to go after the interview and be under time constraints, thus I consider this continued interaction to reflect conducting online interviews during a national lockdown, as I imagine prior to the pandemic participants would be just as likely to wrap the discussions up sooner online to return to existing commitments. On the contrary, the additional discussions I shared with many participants after the interviews had ended online could be an indication of how individuals are more comfortable to talk about sensitive topics online than in person. The interview ending could be a relief for some participants, but interviewees may feel more engaged and relaxed with the researcher as not being physically present provides them with a 'safe space' and some distance to be comfortable enough to want to continue discussions after the interview has ended. Personally, I found online interviews to be just as intense as in person interviews, if not more, and I required additional time to reflect, rest, and reboot than after in-person interviews.

3.7 Data Analysis

3.7.1 *Transcription*

Although a "fairly taken-for-granted aspect of the research process" for qualitative researchers (McMullin, 2021, p.140), the active practice of transcription is a political act "inherently embedded in relations of power" (Bucholtz, 2000, p.1439). Decisions need to be made by the researcher regarding the transformation of audio data into written form, shaping how the study's research participants are portrayed. Although manual transcription is time consuming, at the start of the study I acknowledged its usefulness for enabling me to stay close to my data and continually review my interview style throughout the data collection stage. Most importantly, I understood

the benefits of me as the researcher transcribing the data and treated the transcription process as a preliminary form of analysis.

Manually transcribing the audio data after each interview was conducted and facilitated a “deep immersion into the data” (Byrne, 2021, p.1398), enabling me to get to know my data beyond the interview context. I listened to the audio data multiple times, focusing on a short segment at a time to ensure accuracy. Microsoft Word was used to produce transcripts. Data was transcribed orthographically, producing a complete and clear record of the spoken words, as well as inflections, hesitation, and laughter; grammar, slang, and accents were not ‘corrected’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013). I felt it was important to capture all audio data in the transcripts and not disregard any data at the transcription stage based on its relevance to the study. However, as part of the data familiarisation process, I began to consider what was appropriate and relevant for addressing my research questions as I listened to each interview. Where necessary, I recalled participant gestures and mannerisms, noting down some initial thoughts to return to during later phases of the analysis. A convention guide used in the transcription of data can be referred to in appendix E.

3.7.2 Thematic analysis

Following manual transcription of audio data into transcripts, thematic analysis was undertaken to make sense of the qualitative data. Nowell et al. argue that thematic analysis as a qualitative research method can “be widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions” and acknowledge it as “a highly flexible approach that can be modified for the needs of many studies” (2017, p.2). Most crucially for this study, thematic analysis offered an accessible form of analysis for myself as a PhD researcher and was a useful approach for examining the perspectives of a range of research participants and for generating insights which were unexpected (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2004).

I approached the analysis of my written qualitative data understanding thematic analysis “as a progressive but recursive process” (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.36), mindful that quality thematic analysis is dependent on “the researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful

engagement with the analytic process” (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p.594). As data analysis took place after data collection was completed, I firstly familiarised myself with the data by re-reading transcripts, considering what was significant and how the data may address the study’s research questions. This phase encouraged me to acknowledge my own responses to the data. I opted to manually code the written data, rather than using Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software such as NVivo. This meant I stayed close to the data, evoking what was relevant and noting down my underlying analytic take. Braun and Clarke note that in qualitative research, “themes are creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher’s theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves” (2019, p.594). In starting to think about the relationship between themes and the overall story across the transcripts in relation to the research questions, some initial themes were generated. These initial themes were reviewed against the codes and data set before being refined and named. The key themes derived from the written data were practices of menstrual exclusion; communication matters; learning through the life course; stigma and taboo; othering; leaky bodies; gender conformity.

Although this study did not set out to offer a life course approach, from data collected, it was clear that thinking about key stages of the life course is helpful for understanding men’s menstrual attitudes and experiences. Further analysis of the key themes from the data indicated that discussions, for example of exclusion, or stigma or taboo were often made with reference to particular times of their lives and particular settings (for example, childhood, school, intimate adult relationships) and through the interviews there was a common theme of learning through the life course. Responses indicated that menstrual segregation and taboo starts in early childhood and is built upon moving through the life course. Rather than foregrounding the themes in the structuring of the thesis, which would have had for example, a chapter on stigma and taboo, on practices of menstrual exclusion etc., the analysis chapters reflect and foreground the life course and the ways in which other themes are threaded through the life course. Thus, the following analysis chapters have been shaped and named to document men’s menstrual attitudes and experiences as non-menstruators at key stages of their lives and within these stages to explore further the remaining key themes from the data. Starting with childhood

and adolescence, the first two analysis chapters look at the home and school environment, followed closely by intimate relationships in the third analysis chapter as they move between adolescence and adulthood. The final analysis chapter explores the broader context of peers, menstrual products, and popular culture.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the study aims and research questions, drawing on previous studies on men and boys to justify my choice of qualitative methods to explore and understand attitudes and experiences. The chapter has discussed the methodological and ethical considerations of the research, as well as the study specific ethical considerations I acknowledged and remained mindful of throughout the research process. The sensitivity of the research topic raised several additional considerations in both the planning and carrying out of the research, as well as my positionality as a feminist woman researcher interviewing men. A key feature of this research was having to adapt methods in response to the unforeseen global Covid-19 pandemic. Although it was initially painful to give up the comparative element of the project, moving to a single country focus and collecting some data online had unanticipated benefits, not only allowing the research to progress but also providing an example of how sensitive research can be conducted online. To this end, my research adds to the growing body of social research informed by online methods of data collection (Howlett, 2021; Torrentira, 2020). The following data analysis chapters are structured around key moments in the non-menstruating participants' life course through which other significant themes from data (communication matters, stigma and taboo, for example) can be further explored.

Chapter 4 | School and Formal Education

4.1 Introduction

School and formal education were identified in the interviews as being a key environment for, and source of, early awareness, knowledge, and curiosity about menstruation for many of the non-menstruating participants. For some of these participants, school was acknowledged as the first place they heard about menstruation, either directly through biology lessons, Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) sessions, through the delivery of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)¹⁷ or indirectly through hearsay and jokes between peers.

Recollections of learning about menstruation at school and reflections on how menstruation was treated in the school environment varied. For Iain (39) who attended a boys independent boarding school, learning about menstruation as a 12-year-old took place solely during secondary level education, because his mother “*would never have discussed it*”. Although Stephen (30) does not have clear memories of directly learning about menstruation at his co-ed Catholic state school, nor does he remember the one exact moment when he knew what menstruation was, he believes he “*accumulated knowledge through school, in biology and the playground*”. Many non-menstruating participants acknowledged how education on menstruation at school was poor and insufficient, with some sharing how there was a complete lack of education on the menstrual cycle at school, thus they were never taught about menstruation during childhood and adolescence. For instance, Kevin (42) who attended a co-ed state school, explained:

I was never taught about it. There wasn't anything at school. There was never anything about periods at school. I wasn't really taught anything about sex education at school. There was biology, but we learnt about the human body, but we didn't get taught anything about periods, or sex, or anything like that.

¹⁷ Known as Sex and Relationships Education prior to the UK government changing the name of the subject area in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 (Big Talk Education, 2020). I refer to it as RSE unless directly quoting participants, although most participants would have known it as SRE at school from 1999.

The quality and effectiveness of formal education on menstruation in the school setting varied across participants. However, my research indicates that school was nonetheless a site for my non-menstruating participants as children and adolescents to learn about menstruation beyond formal lessons, through practices of exclusion which conveyed subtle messages that menstruation did not concern them. My findings support the research undertaken by Chang et al. (2012) in Taiwan, which views the school structure as operating to maintain some secrecy around menstruation, reinforcing the notion that menstruation is a girls' issue and not for boys.

Drawing on my non-menstruating participants' responses, this chapter focuses on how and what they learn about menstruation in the school setting through formal education, and informally between peers, as well as beyond the curriculum both inside and outside the classroom. The chapter firstly explores how boys are excluded from menstruation education through gender-segregated puberty classes in primary school, followed by teaching at secondary school which focuses on the biological aspects of menstruation and does not equip boys with a real-life understanding of menstruation based on the lived experiences of people who menstruate. This segregation and exclusion reaffirm that menstruation is a matter for girls and women. The chapter moves on to consider how boys pick up a range of messages about menstruation in school away from formal education, from observing girls' behaviour and exclusion from menstrual-related discussions with female peers in the school context. Finally, the chapter examines menstrual-related joking and teasing between peers and towards girls in the school setting, considering how and what is learned through this communication about menstruation. Here, the taboos and othering of menstruation, and stigma and silence around menstruation, are further enforced. To also consider the experiences of women and people who menstruate in relation to the experiences shared by non-menstruating participants, the areas explored in the chapter are at times supported by recollections and accounts shared by the study's menstruating participants.

4.2 Exclusion from Menstrual Education

Being excluded from lessons on menstruation or access to information on menstruation in school is at the centre of reflections for several non-menstruating participants. These participants shared their earliest memories of hearing about menstruation for the first time and becoming aware of menstruation as an indicator of difference between themselves and their female peers, most commonly because of gender-segregated puberty classes in primary school. For some, this was also an occurrence in secondary school for PSHE/RSE lessons. Boys and girls being separated was an event these participants remember vividly about their personal experiences of receiving formal education on puberty and sex in school, acknowledging how different this was to the normal everyday classroom or lesson set-up in their school. This acknowledgment did not always happen at the time for all participants; however, it was a point shared by participants when being asked to reflect on the separation and exclusion during the interviews, which for many was something that had come to light once they became aware of what menstruation was. For instance, Martin (25) described it as being “*a weird sort of day*” reflecting on sex education in the co-ed state secondary school he attended: “*We all went into separate rooms, boys and girls*”. This was also experienced by non-binary participant Ed (28), who shared how in their co-ed state primary school, they stayed in one room while the girls moved to a different room. This meant Ed was not taught about menstruation, and instead was provided with information about the changes they were going to personally experience through puberty:

We first had sex education in year 6 and we all got kind of sat on the carpet for the whole group thing where you get taught. I can't even remember, but the bit I remember is getting split into the boys and girls, that's the bit really stuck in my head. The girls went through into that room presumably to learn about periods and stuff and the boys stayed in this room to learn, as I remember it, a very biological scientific starting point of what happens when you get an erection.

The separation of schoolchildren for the purposes of receiving education on puberty is also discussed by Dan (27), who recalled how in year 5 or 6 of his co-ed state primary school he was taught “*some sort of general stuff*”, before the boys went outside to play rounders. His understanding at the time was that he believed the girls were inside still, being told different things about their bodies, but he was not aware

of menstruation at that point to know that is what they were being taught about. As with a few other participants, an awareness of menstruation some years later had meant Dan had personally questioned this and was able to put two and two together, concluding this was likely the case. A similar experience was described by Jordan (25), who recalled the noticeable division between boys and girls in how content was delivered during puberty education in his co-ed state primary school, commenting that there was a silence between peers in the classroom following the provision of this information in separate groups. More notably, that conversations between the boys and girls was not something that was encouraged or facilitated after the education was delivered, but in fact the opposite was the case. Jordan explained:

At that time, it was very *segregated*. Segregated is quite a strong word, but there was a boys' class and a girls' class, and you'll learn about you, and you'll learn about you, then we'll all be quiet about it kinda thing.

The shared memories across participants of this early introduction to menstruation through gender-segregated classes draws on the idea that only individuals who will most likely menstruate themselves need to receive direct formal education and information on menstruation through the curriculum within the school context. For some non-menstruating participants, their recollection of first becoming aware of menstruation was simply through the indirect message that as a boy, they did not need to know about menstruation, signalled to them through the exclusion from the puberty session the girls in their class were attending. As Ed (28) previously described, some participants recall how they were taught in a mixed group to begin with but were later separated when girls in their class were moved to a different room. This was also the case for Alex (26) in his co-ed state primary school when having "*puberty information lessons*": "*I think we were told a certain amount and then the girls would sort of, go off to be told more about it, sort of thing.*" James (25), who attended a co-ed state Church of England school, first became aware of periods in the latter years of primary school after the girls were asked to stand with the nurse and the boys "*were just left doing nothing*". James shares how this exclusion from education and information on menstruation and the menstrual cycle during primary school raised curiosity for those left behind, which was no doubt exacerbated by the girls not talking about it with them afterwards:

I remember the day that it happened because all the girls went away then they came back. I don't know, like an hour or so later and we were all like, 'What was that about?'. Because we just had to do maths. They obviously had a lot of information to digest at that point and couldn't or didn't want to explain what they had just been told. All we knew was there was a new bin, but it was for the girls' toilets.

The inquisitiveness of boys when separated from the girls in their class and being excluded from any teaching on menstruation in primary school raised some questions for Mark (27) in his co-ed state school. Although he said that "*you don't really know what's going on*", he described how he and his male peers were curious about what they had not been involved in, and they would ask the girls what they had been learning without them:

I can remember vividly that we used to get separated between the boys and the girls. The girls would go off into the hall and they'd have teaching on periods and what they'd go through. All the boys would be kept in the classroom and not taught anything. We'd be taught different stuff. Looking back on it I always thought, 'Ah that's really weird', because you would think men would need to know what's going on with a woman as well as what the woman is going through herself. When you're a kid, you're oblivious, you don't really know what's going on. They sort of just got took off and stuff and we'd ask them what they'd learnt about, and they'd tell us.

Some participants were keen to reflect on and share the thoughts they had of this separation between class peers in school for the purposes of delivering education on the menstrual cycle to female students only. For instance, Mark went on to state that despite being initially "*oblivious*" about this separation in the classroom when he was a child, he had reflected on his experiences of gender-segregated classes since then. His largest concern and ongoing questioning around this had been based on the reasoning behind breaking the group up when it came to learning about menstruation, especially after sharing sex education classes together as a whole group. Mark told me:

In primary school you would be like 8, 9, 10 and you'd be like, 'Ew, that's disgusting, I don't want to know.' On reflection, both groups learnt about sex ed together, we didn't get split up for that, but we got split up for that part of it [menstruation]. I was like, 'Well we're learning about sex education together, why can't we learn about what each sex is going through?', but for some reason they decided to teach that separately.

Gender-segregated lessons on menstruation in school were also reported as being significant for menstruating participants in this study. Their memories of being separated from boys in their class before being taught about menstruation share similarities with the accounts discussed by non-menstruating participants. For non-binary participant Mel (27) who attended a co-ed state school, they remember it as *“the only lesson that the girls had ever had, separate to the boys”*, and Jasmin (21) who also attended a co-ed state schools recalled how in year 5 *“they got all the girls out of the whole year and took us along to a little library and sat us down with the school nurse”*. Amanda (25) reflected on this separation of her class in her co-ed state Catholic school for sex education as being *“quite noteworthy”*, specifically acknowledging that they did not learn about each other in the separated groups. Amanda stated:

The first time I heard about it was when I was in year 6 and we had sex education in a classroom. They split the girls and the boys up. The girls were educated on their kind of reproductive system and changes they would have in puberty and the boys were told about theirs, but what was quite noteworthy about that situation was the fact that we were split up into boys and girls but as girls we didn't learn about boys, and boys I don't think I can't speak for them but my assumption of how the set up was, boys weren't necessarily educated on girls changes in puberty.

This classroom separation was identified as being problematic and counter-intuitive for several of the menstruating participants. Helen (35) reflected on her experiences of learning about menstruation in her co-ed state primary school, highlighting how splitting a mixed class up for education on puberty and menstruation can exclude trans and non-binary students, as well as incorrectly informing all students that only girls and women menstruate:

Boys were separated in primary school when we were told about it, which I think is the wrong way to do it in a way. You're already making it like it's just something women experience. Especially now I guess, my sister's partner is a trans man, but he hasn't had surgery, so he still gets periods and stuff.

This idea is expressed in trans male participant Joe's (21) account, as he remembered being taught about menstruation in year 9 on a PSHE day in his co-ed state school, and clearly recalled how the teachers split students *“off into the two genders as they do”*. Although at this point Joe had not started to menstruate, or had

thoughts about being transgender yet, he shared how gender-segregated classes on menstruation can be difficult for trans students:

I think if it happened after I started realising I was trans, I would have preferred it to be mixed, but because at that point I don't think I knew what it meant to be trans and feelings about my gender weren't prevalent then, so it wasn't a problem for me. I do know of trans guys who are still in school and sort of really struggle when they do split off and would prefer it to be mixed.

Participants' responses highlight how education and teaching received on menstruation, as well as how menstruation was treated in the school environment, was based on, and structured around a binary model of sex and gender, thus it failed to take account of the experiences of trans and non-binary students. The findings reflect the "prominence of the gender binary throughout the school day" (Bower-Brown, Zadeh and Jadvā, 2021, p.1) and an understanding of how schools perpetuate cis/heteronormativity, which can be understood through uniforms and sport, to toilets and changing rooms. In their recent study investigating the school experiences of binary-trans, non-binary and gender-questioning adolescents in the UK, Bower-Brown, Zadeh and Jadvā argue the educational system in the UK is "ill-equipped to support non-binary and gender-questioning students" (2021, p.16). The importance of inclusive RSE and menstruation education in UK schools was highlighted in Plan International UK's report *Break the Barriers: Girls' experiences of menstruation in the UK* (Tingle and Vora, 2018). In the report, menstrual researcher and #PeriodPositive founder Chella Quint argues that dividing students for sex education "alienates transgender and non-binary kids, it alienates boys who deserve to know, and it alienates girls who need to see all genders' conversations about reproductive health happening in front of them, all in a safe space with ground rules. It completely deprives everyone of their rights if you separate them" (2018, p.16).

Despite the recent developments around menstruation in the school context, including changes to education and policies, there are inconsistencies in the language used by the UK government in their response to period poverty and lack of menstrual education within the school context. Following a recent push for more inclusive menstrual education in the UK and the introduction of the Department for Education's funded Period Products Scheme to provide students with free menstrual

products in schools and colleges in England in 2020, eligibility is listed as being for “girls, non-binary and transgender learners who have periods may all need to access this scheme” (Department for Education, 2021). This followed decisions made by the Scottish Government in 2018, and Welsh Government in 2019, to fund free menstrual products to young people in educational institutions with correspondence also acknowledging the needs of all who menstruate (Welsh Government, 2021; Housing and Social Justice Directorate, 2018). Considering the introduction of compulsory relationships education for primary pupils, Relationships and Sex Education for secondary pupils and Health Education for all schools from September 2020, the statutory guidance issued by the Department for Education outlines that menstruation should be taught in Health Education, preferably before the onset of menarche for students, to “ensure male and female pupils are prepared for changes they and their peers will experience” (Department for Education, 2019, p.31). The guidance also states that “pupils should be taught key facts about the menstrual cycle including what is an average period, range of menstrual products and the implications for emotional and physical health” (p.31), however the gender binary is still apparent as the guidance does not use the same inclusive language used by the Department for Education for the Period Products Scheme, referring only to girls’ menstrual experiences and needs when directing educators on how to educate and support students during menstruation within the school context. This demonstrates how the gender binary continues to exist within the UK school system and through curriculum delivery, in this case supported by recent government guidance on compulsory education on menstruation in schools.

Accounts of experiencing gender-segregated classes at school for the purposes of delivering menstruation education have been shared by boys across several global contexts in existing studies (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Rajak, 2015; Chang et al., 2012; Allen et al., 2011). For instance, in Chang et al.’s study in Taiwan (2012), a participant recalled how teachers separated boys and girls when learning about menstruation in school because if boys are there the girls might not understand the information and “the boys will feel uncomfortable about it” (p.516). Similarly, in Australia, some participants recalled being removed from the classroom before girls were taught about menstruation (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017). Exclusion from menstrual education was apparent for some participants in Allen et al.’s study in the

United States (2011), with one participant sharing how they first heard about menstruation at 10 years old from a girl who had just been taught about it in a separate class while the boys were playing board games. The study's findings suggested that when boys have been excluded from education on menstruation, knowledge collected in school "was often through second-hand accounts, and much of the content was lost in translation" (p141). In Rajak's study (2015) also conducted in the United States, some participants recalled learning about menstruation at school and acknowledged the separation of boys and girls when teaching about menstruation as being responsible for their lack of knowledge and understanding of menstruation. In the UK, male adolescents recalled girls and boys being separated in primary school for sex education, with curiosity spiking in secondary school when girls were taken out of the class once again for additional education on menstruation and their bodies (Newton, 2016). This has parallels with Lovering's study in the UK (1995), with school-age boys stating that girls in their class were taught about their bodies away from them. In his work on men and menstruation, Linton (2019) draws attention to the potential implications of this separation when it comes to health education, specifically menstrual education in US schools. He argues that "an air of mystery and forbidden knowledge is created by the separation", and this secrecy "undermines the good intentions" of these lessons which "strive to teach girls to feel positive about their bodies, even proud of their newly acquired reproductive potential" (p.31). Linton (2019) notes that a feeling of otherness experienced by boys is then paired with a perception that girls are "mysterious beings whose bodies are shrouded in secrecy" (p.32) and they are left with a misconstrued understanding that boys should not express any curiosity about menstruation to avoid embarrassment for girls.

My research echoes some accounts in existing research, in particular the curiosity and 'otherness' felt and experienced by my non-menstruating participants at the time of their exclusion from menstrual education in school when separated from their female peers. It is noteworthy how so many of my participants acknowledge this exclusion in their interviews, indicating it is significant enough to both remember and reflect on now as adults with some greater awareness of menstruation as being a real-life experience; one which they do not personally experience and in many ways,

continue to be excluded from, as shared across their responses touched upon in later chapters.

4.3 Biological Education v Lived Experience

Based on the age range of my non-menstruating participants and their responses in my research, almost every participant experienced some form of PSHE and/or SRE during their time at school, and/or some content delivered through their biology curriculum. For context, the framework for PSHE was published in 1999, introducing Sex and Relationship Education which placed emphasis on needing to address both sex *and* relationships. It is also pertinent to highlight how the Labour Government's ten-year Teenage Pregnancy Strategy for England was also published in 1999 to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancies. At this time, a large portion of my participants would have left school or were approaching the final years of their schooling lives. For younger participants, this shift may have shaped the education received at the time and how their schools managed the provision of this.

Participants would not have been impacted by Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) changing to Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) in the 2017 Children and Social Work Act, and the Department for Education's introduction of compulsory relationships education for primary pupils, Relationships and Sex Education for secondary pupils and Health Education for all schools from September 2020 (Department for Education, 2019).

Beyond primary school and the gender-segregated puberty classes excluding boys from directly learning about menstruation, some participants discussed being taught about menstruation, or reproduction and the menstrual cycle, in biology and RSE/PSHE lessons at secondary school. For some, these were gender-segregated PSHE lessons or for participants who were in single-sex schools, classes were delivered in their existing all boys' classes. In co-ed schools, education through biology lessons was delivered in existing co-ed groups of students. The ages and year groups they were taught about menstruation at secondary school varied between participants, and some were unable to differentiate between their recollections of learning about menstruation in biology lessons and/or PSHE lessons. Despite this, the dominant perspective coming from participants was that a

biological focus on menstruation did not promote an understanding of the lived experiences of menstruation, and there were no additional opportunities to learn about menstruation as a lived experience in the school curriculum.

Some participants reflected on how the information on menstruation and the reproductive cycle was taught to them during biology classes and viewed it as being just a requirement as part of the curriculum for the purpose of being tested on it later in an exam. For instance, Mark (27) reflected on his experiences at secondary school being taught about menstruation in biology lessons, expressing how he felt this was the case and that the focus was not on how the information being delivered could be useful to boys at the time and in the future. He told me:

I felt like in primary school it was teaching the girls what was happening to their body and what to expect, what was happening. When it was moved to a classroom in an educational setting, it was more like 'you need to learn this information to relay in exams', rather than, 'this is the human body, this is what happens, and this is why you need to know what happens'. It was more like, 'learn these facts and can you name these parts of the body, and can you tell me what happens through the menstruation cycle?'. It was more taking this knowledge and trying to relay it back rather than taking this knowledge to know what was happening to your counterpart.

Being taught about the menstrual cycle for assessment purposes was also highlighted by Craig (26), who shared how he remembered being taught about menstruation in science lessons at his co-ed state school, but that the aim of this provision of information was solely to be tested on it. In Craig's reflections on this matter, he also suggested that understanding the content being taught required a certain level of academic ability, as well as commenting that this set-up of learning about menstruation did not enable "*a sensible discussion*" in the classroom:

Trying to teach that sort of stuff, they had a good go and some of us got it. People like me who were in the higher sets for science probably learnt the science side of it to pass for exams, but it wouldn't be particularly realistic to say we were able to have a sensible discussion about it or any of that stuff.

Although biology and PSHE/RSE lessons were acknowledged as being a source of new knowledge on menstruation for some participants when they were adolescents, this formal education was considered inadequate and lacking a constructive real-life focus, especially for non-menstruators. Jason (26) recalled learning about menstruation in biology classes at his co-ed state school, however he stated that "*it*

wasn't a massive topic covered" and it *"didn't really go into depth"*. For Liam (40) who attended a private school for boys, being taught about menstruation by a male teacher in an all-boys class as part of biology age 12-13 was *"just kind of matter of fact"*, going on to say: *"We learned about it, I think we were tested on it, and that was that"*. Liam recalled how menstruation was taught as part of the reproductive cycle and the content was focused very specifically on the biology of reproduction, which meant it lacked information and details on menstrual-related symptoms and how they are experienced by people who menstruate. He explained:

It was about 'the lining of the uterus sheathing' and that was the kind of language. There was none of the stuff about PMS or any other effects that might come along... So I suppose it was dispassionate and factual in that sense. It wasn't, possibly because there were no girls there, but, 'this is what can happen emotionally at that time' or, 'this is what might be difficult to do physically at that time'. There was none of that. It was just, 'this is how reproduction works in the female body'.

In his co-ed private boarding school, Jake (21) was taught about menstruation at secondary level during a *"sex ed class"* where boys and girls were split up but described the education as *"scraping the barrel of what you had to do in school for sex ed"*. In Jake's response, he touched on what this *"conservative"* approach meant for him personally, particularly his understanding of menstruation when he left school as a young adult:

We did stuff with tampons and water, and I suppose it wasn't properly like we had an understanding, an objective understanding, as opposed to like the realities of menstruation. It was very kind of like, I suppose it was probably kind of like conservative, as opposed to understanding what it really was and what it meant. I didn't realise periods were regular in women until one of my friends told me when I was probably like 18, and I didn't really understand how contraception, like the pill, worked for women and all of that.

Alex (26) who attended a co-ed school followed by a boys' grammar school at sixth form level, shared how there was a focus on the biological in the teaching of menstruation at his school. He reflected on how he learned about menstruation through formal education focused on biology, recognising how this approach could be improved by *"less biology teaching in schools"*. He commented that it's *"not really helpful, it's not practical"*, going on to say, *"it's not like, 'this is the impact on people's lives'"*, suggesting he also considered that his education on the menstrual cycle disregarded the lived experiences of menstruation. Alex also shared how he thought

there was a lack of education on anatomy at school, sharing how he had just learnt a while ago *“about the difference between the vagina and where the urethra comes out, sort of thing, and the difference between the two”*. In conversations about what participants would want to change about their education, specifically how they were taught about menstruation, Ed (28) also recognised this biological focus on menstruation: *“I think more social preparation, but I think this is a thing with sex education generally. I don’t know if this has already moved on, but certainly when I was at school, it didn’t move much past biological function”*. Similarly, reflecting on being taught about menstruation in year 7 during a biology class in his co-ed state Church of England school, James (25) explained:

It was never just something that was discussed about openly in conversation. It was very sort of regimented rules, hypotheticals. It was never someone’s experience or the differences that people have when they have a period. It was just like, ‘this is what it is, this is what happens, there you go’.

In James’ response, aside from the lack of focus on how people experience menstruation, we can also see how the structured learning around menstruation in his biology class did not leave space for open discussion in the classroom, like Craig’s earlier reflections on being taught about menstruation in science lessons. For Andrew (25), menstruation was not a topic often discussed at his all-boys private school. He recalls how he was taught about menstruation in biology and PSHE lessons but considers that the formal education he and his peers received was limited. As described earlier by Liam, Andrew puts this down to being because it was at a single-sex school, but he commented that this information shared with him was portrayed as being necessary because he might have friends who are girls, and they will experience it:

I think because it was done in a boy’s school it was very much like, not comprehensive. You were just told that you may have friends who are girls, and this is what they’re going to be going through in this point of their lives. That was about it really, we weren’t taught much else.

As explored here with other participants, Stephen (30) described his experiences of attending a co-ed Catholic state school and receiving some education on menstruation which he understood as being limited to a biological focus. In Stephen’s response to being asked how menstruation was treated in school, he

emphasised the silence around it, relating it to the lack of conversation about condoms and related issues which were also not addressed by his school. Although Stephen said that he was taught about conception in biology “*on a very basic level*” in his Catholic school, he stressed that this education did not develop further in social studies, suggesting this is where he considers that there could have been some education on menstruation as a lived experience:

Just a kind of silence, never had a conversation about condoms or anything like that, it wasn't given in school. The Catholic education involved a priest coming to tell us about why we shouldn't be involved in 'heavy petting', which meant most of us came home and googled what heavy petting meant and basically started watching porn, which basically wasn't the way the guy wanted it to go. We were taught on a very basic level in biology how pregnancy happens but nothing in social studies, it was a very strict catholic school and it's probably still the same.

During the interviews, discussion of this biological focus on teaching about menstruation and the reproductive cycle led to conversations around what participants wished they had been taught at school, or what they think should be taught at school for current adolescents, now they are able to look back as adults with some life experience. Responses ranged from more in-depth information on different types of menstrual products and contraception and what it is like to experience a period, to more comprehensive descriptions and explanations of hormones and how they impact the menstrual cycle and menopause, and more importantly the impact on those experiencing it. Based on his awareness and experiences developed throughout adulthood, Kieran (39) reflected on what he wished he was taught about when at his co-ed state school, expressing a desire for a better comprehension of the menstrual cycle over the life course:

I would have liked to have known from an early age the full process, from girls being 11/12 years old right through to 45/50, whenever the menopause happens. Understanding why and more about the changes women go through and how long it lasts. By changes, what they go through, I haven't experienced it much, but women go through mood changes, even some kind of physical changes, or behaviour changes around that time. It would have been good to know why that happens.

While some of my participants did want more detailed information on the physiological aspects of menstruation in school, many also would have liked a more

comprehensive discussion of menstruation that also included practical aspects. This is echoed in other research with men and boys, for instance in Australia, several men in Peranovic and Bentley's study (2017) considered their formal education as being inadequate due to the focus on the physiology of menstruation rather than the practicalities of the everyday. In India, adolescent boys recognised school as a source of knowledge as they had been provided with some information about menstruation and reproduction, but few participants said they learned much from the curriculum and complained that there were not enough details, as menstruation was just touched upon lightly (Mason et al., 2017). In the US, young men described the formal education they received on the menstrual cycle as being mostly biological, rather than information on the more practical side of menstruation (Fishman, 2014). This is consistent with findings in the UK context, where adolescent boys report receiving little education or information on menstruation at school, beyond an introduction to the menstrual cycle in biology (Tingle and Vora, 2018). In line with this previous research, my research highlights how focusing only on the biological side of menstruation in formal education on menstruation neglects the lived experiences and practicalities of menstruation. It also draws attention to the requirement to expand on what is taught about the menstrual cycle, including how the menstrual cycle changes over the life course, from menarche to menopause, and the impact of that on those who menstruate.

4.4 Learning Beyond Lessons

My research suggests that beyond the insufficient biology and PSHE/RSE lessons discussed, as well as the non-existent information and education on menstruation experienced by some non-menstruating participants during their time at school, boys also indirectly learn about menstruation through the messages they pick up about menstruation in the school environment, outside of the curriculum. Indirectly learning about menstruation outside of formal education takes place in the classroom, in the playground, during Physical Education lessons and during break times. When non-menstruating participants were asked to share their experiences of talking about or hearing about menstruation at school during the interviews, some described the practical joking and banter in school, discussed in more depth in the next section on menstrual jokes and gibes. Others shared their memories of how menstruation was

talked about or managed by their female peers in the school context. An example of this, described by several male participants, was the perception that girls used their menstrual-related symptoms as a reason for not wanting, or being able, to take part in Physical Education lessons. James (25) who said he had some close female friends during his time at school, shared his experience of how his female peers communicated this information to him:

I remember some girls using it as an excuse to get out of P.E. That was the funny side of it. I had some friends who would opt for the same P.E. lessons and then just sit on the side for the whole thing talking and they would use excuses. And they were excuses, they would tell me they're excuses. They would use like cramp or periods and say they can't do P.E., especially when we were doing swimming and stuff.

Menstruation being used as an excuse in the school context was also highlighted by Jason (26), who had a similar memory of how menstruation was often given as a reason for skipping Physical Education lessons during secondary school. However, in Jason's response, he focused on how the girls in his year group would communicate this to teachers in an open and direct enough way, so that other students, including Jason, could hear and understand the conversation:

P.E was the classic one. You'd always have girls trying to get out of P.E. and saying, 'it's this, it's this' and they were quite open about saying they were having their period and stuff because I think some teachers would be like 'okay fine whatever', but some teachers would be like, 'this isn't my area of expertise, you go and do what you want to do sort of thing, you take care of yourself'. Some people always tried to take the piss with it, stretch it out and always use the same excuse with different teachers a couple of weeks on the trot and you'd be like, 'hmm I don't think so'. Some people were genuine with it, like, 'I can't do it this week', sort of thing.

It is interesting that Jason felt like he could establish who was being 'genuine' and who was not at this time. It is also worthwhile to note how these teacher responses which come across as instant dismissal and closure to avoid any additional discussion of menstruation between teacher and student could also shape attitudes towards menstruation within the student population. Although this is not a situation in which a teacher is providing formal education on menstruation, this type of response nonetheless perpetuates menstrual stigma and silence in the school environment. With the introduction of compulsory RSE and Health Education, many concerns have

been raised recently regarding the role of teachers when it comes to formally communicating about such matters with students, both inside and outside their teaching environment. Regarding teaching and talking about menstruation with students, Kate Bowen-Viner, ex-senior associate at the Centre for Education and Youth, argues that teachers need the resources and knowledge from additional training and support to be confident using language around menstruation (Ferguson, 2020).

Another example shared by participants is how girls would leave the classroom during a lesson because they needed to go to the toilet or because they did not feel well, and how teachers would dismiss any questioning of this from boys. Mark (27) recalls this happening at his school, and how this paired with little knowledge and understanding of menstruation, meant that at the time he could not understand why they would have to leave a lesson to go to the toilet. In his response, Mark also touched on how it was “*always a sort of behind closed doors sort of thing*”, suggesting that communication here was not always as open and direct as described by Jason, as instead menstruation was being purposely hidden by both the girls and the teacher to avoid embarrassment for the girls:

Relaying back to when I was a teenager, I remember girls being embarrassed about it. There was always a sort of behind closed doors sort of thing so sometimes girls would leave the classroom and they'd be allowed to go to the toilet and boys wouldn't, it would be like, 'what's happening here? How come they're allowed to go and I'm not?' It's because we had no clue they were on their period at the time and obviously needed to sort themselves out, but obviously it would have been detrimental to the girl leaving if that was explained. Because we'd never been told this happens regularly and you need to be sympathetic to the fact, they can't control it. It was more seen as like, 'well you're favouriting her over me', like 'why?' The teacher would be like, 'it's none of your business, you don't need to know', and we didn't need to know but we needed to be taught so we did know in the future, so we didn't have to ask them questions.

Experiences of menstruation being used as an excuse in school or as a reason for needing to leave the classroom during a lesson were also acknowledged by participants who menstruate. For example, Jade (31) reflected on how going to the toilet during a lesson would instantly mean that you were menstruating from the boys' perspective, which meant girls would not want to leave the classroom to go to

the toilet because they “*wouldn’t want to make a thing out of it or draw attention to it*”. Such incidences were discussed by both menstruating and non-menstruating participants in relation to the silence and hiding of menstruation, specifically how teachers would fuel the idea of menstruation being something that does not need to be discussed with boys. This was an issue raised by Kieran (39), who shared a similar experience of teachers potentially exacerbating the situation for girls at the time by drawing more attention to it, but he also stated that once he knew someone was not feeling well due to menstruation, he then knew it was a “*no-go area*” for him:

A lot of the time, the teacher would be like, ‘ah is it women’s troubles?’, or ‘you best come out the room to talk about it’. To me it kinda just seemed like I need to respect the privacy about it. I mean I was a joker at school and that, but if I knew somebody wasn’t feeling well due to that, I knew that’s not for me to, well a no-go area for me, don’t ask.

Building on this outside of the classroom, Kieran recalled how reference to “*women’s things*” and exclusion from them went hand in hand in the school setting, as he acknowledged how any mention of this would shape his understanding of knowing when and where he could talk to girls at school. He stated:

Sometimes I’d go over to them [girls] and want to talk in general, have a bit crack on with some of the lasses at school, but sometimes they’d be like ‘We’re talking about women’s things.’ They probably weren’t, they were probably trying to get rid of me (laughs), but aye, when they say that, you kinda just think, ‘I’ll leave you to it then’.

Although subtle, these messages about menstruation being something just for girls and women can be easily absorbed by boys and carried outside of school and into adulthood, especially given an existing lack of knowledge and understanding of the menstrual cycle paired with taboo, stigma, and silence. This narrative of boys viewing menstruation as a topic solely for girls and women to communicate about is corroborated in other UK research, where boys and young men reported being “alienated from conversations around periods” (Tingle and Vora, 2018, p.25). It is also interesting how this can play out in adulthood, as Kieran shared that this exclusion from conversations about menstruation at school with girls can now be likened to his current situation as a father with his daughter who now menstruates,

which is explored in more depth in the next chapter on home and family. Kieran explained:

I remember if a girl was feeling ill, it would always just be like 'women's problems', which was kinda like to me it was, 'don't talk about it, I don't want to share anything with you'. Now that Jenny is starting to go through it, if there's something the matter with her, she won't want to talk to me, she'll want to talk to her mam about it.

Incidences related to menstruation in the school setting away from lessons are acknowledged by boys and men in existing studies. As in this research, not all events recalled by boys and men in these studies are necessarily associated as being key to their current awareness and learning around menstruation in childhood and adolescence. In Laws' UK study (1990), some adult men reflected on how girls were able to use menstruation as an excuse for not attending school, not taking part in P.E lessons, or why girls could use different schoolbags to boys. Some participants in this study acknowledged how menstruation was an indicator of difference in the school context, responsible for producing feelings of 'us and them', which was particularly apparent when jokes associated with menstruation were used as a way of getting at girls (Laws, 1990). In Fingerson's study in the United States (2006), male participants discuss how girls use menstruation and related symptoms as an excuse to avoid certain activities at school. These adolescent boys also shared how they had learned about menstruation through overhearing discussions among female peers about their menstrual experiences in the school setting. This has parallels with experiences shared by adolescent boys in India, who said had gained some knowledge of menstruation from overhearing private conversations between female peers at school (Mason et al., 2017). In this study, boys also reported how an incident such as a girl being allowed to go home during school time suggested to them that she was menstruating, based on their limited awareness, and understanding of menstruation. In Fingerson's analysis of the various ways in which menstruation is used in the school context by girls, she identifies it as being a "potentially manipulative power girls have" which "boys resent" (2006, p.135). My research adds to this existing awareness of how menstruation is talked about and dealt with within the school context outside of the curriculum, drawing attention to how boys learn about menstruation through girls' communication and actions in

school related to menstruation, with feelings of 'otherness' continuing here in how girls experience different treatment from teachers because of menstruation.

4.5 Menstrual Jokes and Gibes

Laughter, jokes, taunts, and teasing related to menstruation were discussed by some non-menstruating participants as being a common occurrence at school, with few participants sharing that they had at some time been the perpetrator of this. Laughter around menstruation seemed to first start in the classroom when being taught about the menstrual cycle, often in response to not wanting to pay attention to the education being delivered or due to awkwardness and embarrassment towards the subject matter within the classroom. James (25) shared an example of this, highlighting that the delivery of education on menstruation was mistimed, given that people had already started their periods in year 7, and that "*the other half*", meaning those who did not and will not experience periods, were bored:

We learnt about it together, like male and female, in secondary school in year 7, but even then, it was year 7. We were at the point where we didn't want to digest things, we just wanted to be little shits. It was too late. Most of the people in the room had already started their periods and knew exactly what was happening and the other half were just like bored, we were 13-year-old and just wanted to dick about.

Laughter in the school context when being taught about menstruation was also a memory shared by Owen (28), who attended a co-ed state primary school and a boys grammar school at secondary level. Owen recalled a similar experience of peers laughing at images of fallopian tubes in science books, which he excused as being typical behaviour for boys of that age: "*In science we had books and I remember people flicking to the pages with the fallopian tubes and having a little giggle about it, that sort of thing, but that's just 11- and 12-year-old boys really.*" This laughter was understood as a tool used in response to embarrassment experienced by Kieran (39) when being taught about menstruation in biology lessons. He described a similar situation to Owen, also commenting on how this was an expected reaction for boys at that young age when being taught about it:

I remember being told specifically about the menstruation cycle in biology in secondary school. There was a lot of sniggering from boys, but again for me it was

more like an embarrassment, because I think at the time, we were probably only like 13- and 13-year-old boys being shown pictures of women's parts (laughs). Again, it was a lot of giggling.

In Andrew's (25) all-boys school, when menstruation was being taught "*it was definitely sort of like giggles in the back of the classroom, a bit like, 'Ew, they've got blood coming out of their genitals, that's disgusting' sort of thing*". Like Owen and Kieran, this humour and disgust around menstruation was understood by Andrew as "*typical boy stuff*". Iain (39) recalled that "*there was a lot of sniggering and a lot of laughing*" when learning about menstruation at his boys independent boarding school. Rather than this being viewed as being typical behaviour for boys, Iain suggested that the separation from girls in both the classroom and boarding arrangements, thus from menstruation, was responsible. He acknowledged that finding periods "*amusing*" was because "*it was a typical public school*", and although girls were in the class at the time and they were separate when it came to boarding arrangements, the boys "*would never know if a girl had started or was going through her period*". Jason (26) also acknowledged that when being taught about the basics of menstruation in year 5 or 6, his classmates were "*joking about it, instead of taking it seriously*". He touched on how when being taught about each other's bodies, they would "*get giddy*", and that the boys did not receive and understand the information about menstruation as being something that happens in real life, but rather something they collectively had an instant distaste towards instead. He recalled:

I can remember bits in detail, like doing lessons sitting there going through certain bits and when it gets to the male part the females get giddy and when it gets to the female part the males get giddy. They start talking about the cycles and stuff and the guys just sitting there at that age like, 'eugh, that's disgusting, what's that all about?' sort of thing, rather than taking it as a thing that's going to happen.

In contrast to this giddiness when being taught about menstruation, Benjamin (32) remembers there being "*awkward occasions at school*" during PSHE lessons at his co-ed state school. He compares these lessons to other subject lessons at school, commenting that they were "*for once, kind of silent*". Benjamin shares how the awkwardness he experienced was likely due to how he was perceiving menstruation at the time, specifically the bleeding as being "*weird*" and how he felt strange after being taught about it, not knowing what he should be thinking:

I think that awkwardness that I used to feel, just came from the fact that you're bleeding really, and that in itself is quite weird. I suppose when someone, a teacher, explains what the bleeding is, it makes you feel, I don't know why, but I definitely remember feeling a little bit strange afterwards y'know. As a young guy you struggle to understand 'what should I be thinking?'.

Outside of being taught about menstruation in lessons, participants acknowledged how menstruation was often a foundation for making jokes directed towards girls and between each other in the school context. Various examples were provided by participants, for instance, Kieran (39) reflected on comments made towards girls if they were "*in a bad mood*", which was instantly associated with their menstrual cycle and/or that they were menstruating:

There was no bullying, it was more like daft remarks and stuff like that which some people could say is bullying. There was no maliciousness I think, it was just a lot of awkwardness and lack of understanding on how things affect people in the mind. So, there was just like, without specifically knowing someone was on their period, if a lass was in a bad mood one day you would just kind of, there would be comments like 'it's just that time of the month'.

Following this response, Kieran was keen to reconfirm that this was not bullying at the time, but that it could be identified as bullying by some people. He also justified the "*daft remarks*" as being a result of awkwardness and a lack of understanding of how the menstrual cycle impacts "*people in the mind*". Kieran also shared how jokes would be directed towards girls if they were feeling unwell or left the classroom with the teacher, as mentioned in the previous section on learning beyond lessons. This was understood as an indicator that the girls were experiencing menstruation; thus, jokes would be made and directed towards the girls about their menstruating bodies. Kieran explained:

It [boys making jokes about it] happened a lot at school. Just when girls were feeling ill or the teacher would take them out for a chat when they were feeling ill, then they'd come back in and they'd be like, some of the lads would make jokes to the lasses, which would then upset the lasses quite a bit.

The use of insults and slander directed towards girls suspected of menstruating in school, based solely on their communication and behaviour, was also discussed by

Stephen (30), who acknowledged his own part in this type of behaviour with female peers:

I do remember even from a young age, 'shut up you sound like you're on your period' was a slur that was used and 100% did I say that myself at some point. That was part of lexicon, of like, 'she sounds like she's bleeding'.

Jokes and gibes associated with menstruation made by boys and directed towards girls was something observed and experienced by some menstruating participants during their years at school, particularly in relation to mood changes and/or displays of emotion. For example, Amanda (25) reflected on how at her co-ed state Catholic school, "*if girls were a bit antsy or a bit moody or if a girl snapped at a lad if they'd said something that was immature or they didn't like, the lads would be like, 'are you on your blob?'*". Similarly for Helen (35), when remembering how menstruation was treated at her school, she recalled when girls "*got emotional or angry*" in school, boys and male teachers would equate it to, "*she must be on her period*". Participants also shared how jokes and taunts made in school between boys were often related to sex, specifically sex during menstruation. Dan (27) describes how "*jokes would be made about someone having sex with someone whilst they were on their period*", and responses to the remarks would be, "*Eurgh! Or something crude like 'Ah bloody dick!'*". Alex (26) recalled menstruation as being something that wasn't talked about seriously at school, but "*sometimes people would talk about sex and bring periods up as sometimes talking about why someone didn't want to have sex*". Equally, Stephen (30) acknowledged how menstruation was mentioned occasionally through jokes or comments in school related to sex, as opposed to it being a subject talked about in a sensitive way or discussed maturely between themselves or with girls:

I was probably 14/15 and some of my pals had started having sex and periods then were starting to be talked about, like 'ah I couldn't shag her because of her period'. But in terms of a sensible discussion of what is a period, there was nothing like that and I had a lot of friends that were girls, but it wasn't something that was spoken about. I think by the time people were having sex it would come up more often, because you're young, you're curious, 'have you been having sex with her?' bla bla, 'no because she's on her period' kind of thing, so that would have definitely come up at some point in school.

In addition to the verbal menstrual jokes and gibes made in school, some participants recalled how tampons were at the centre of some negative and immature behaviour between boys. Alex (26) remembers being in the changing rooms at school and tampons being thrown around, *“People acting like it was disgusting or sort of like cooties sort of thing, don’t sort of touch it sort of thing y’know, there’s a bit of that nonsense going on”*. An additional example of this is Craig ‘s (26) reflection on how he and his peers responded to their relationships and sex education classes at school when condoms and tampons were present in the school setting:

They gave us condoms and everyone had them filled with water, throwing them around or someone is tying loads of tampons together swinging them around and setting them on fire by the strings. This is in class, or just outside lessons.

This focus on menstrual products being at the centre of boys’ menstrual related practical joking in the school context has parallels with Fingerson’s study in the United States (2006), Piper Pillitteri’s study in Malawi (2012) and Newton’s study in the UK (2016). In these studies, it was found that male students would rummage through female peers’ school bags and if menstrual products were found, girls would be teased and the menstrual products would be thrown around the classroom, kicked around the floor, or stuck onto someone. As Newton argues, *“it appears that the materials of menstruation, those items that are so regularly kept ‘under wraps’, have become objects of fascination, and backstage body management products and processes are forced into the foreground through young peoples’ practical joking and play”* (2016, p.87).

Learning new information about menstruation through jokes and laughter on topics related to the subject extended to the sharing of euphemisms at school for some participants. For Liam (40), who acknowledges his participation in this at his all-boys’ school, he excuses this behaviour by saying it was short lived and *“not a massive deal”* because it just happened in the presence of boys:

When I was a kid, I’m sure I made those jokes and certainly I remember when I was at school...We would hear things about when there would be a new euphemism, like ‘getting the painters in’ or things like that. That would go round the boys. I remember around that time there were the giggly jokes about PMS and the various euphemisms

that we learnt. I don't think it was a massive deal, possibly because there weren't any girls there. It was a joke and a laugh for the five minutes that someone said it, but I don't think it was a big thing.

Boys using euphemisms for menstruation in the school context is discussed in Newton's study in the UK, with boys sharing alternative terminology for describing and talking about menstruation, such as "on the rag" and "on the blob" (2016, p.79-80). Newton also explores the significance of storytelling about menstruation in the school environment and how adolescent boys communicate about the topic. Her research led her to a focus on the term 'rainbow kissing', which was brought up by different students in her study as a phrase commonly used by boys which means "the act of cunnilingus performed on a menstruating woman" (p.80). Newton argues such discourses are used by school students "in a brazen attempt to shock" and to "disgust or 'gross out' their listeners" (p.81). This power play and way of communicating about menstruation, with a redirected focus on sex using humour, is particularly noteworthy given boys' general lack of awareness and understanding of menstruation and is yet unsurprising.

My research indicates that menstrual jokes and gibes either directed at girls or between each other were recognised by some participants as a response to a lack of understanding about menstruation. Like Kieran's giggles and embarrassment when being taught about menstruation, Mark (27) also recognised how jokes made in the school context are carried out from a position of poor knowledge and understanding of menstruation. Mark also touches on menstrual jokes being expected in groups of boys due to "*lad culture*" and how it is often played off "*as banter*". Banter as a form of social communication is explored in more depth in chapter 7 when looking at learning about menstruation through peer-to-peer communication. Mark explained:

I probably did take part in it [making jokes about periods]. I'm not going to pretend that I was a goody two shoes, I probably did say stuff. As a young man, a young boy, you do say it as a joke. I had a friendship group of all boys, but our friendship group was quite universal to everyone...We had friends who were girls and friends who were boys outside of our friendship group but there was a main nuclear unit of about 6 or 7 of us, all friends together. I can't think of any particular occasion that we made them sort of jokes, but I would imagine they were probably said at some point. Especially in the sort of lad culture we have, it's cool to make fun of them sort of

things and to play it off as banter and say it's only a joke but making jokes without any knowledge of what is actually happening.

In their study on how humour is used amongst Finnish school boys in the school context, Huuki, Manninen and Sunnari (2010) acknowledge how humour is both a resource and strategy to gain social status but is also used “to strengthen one’s masculine status, to violate and exclude others” (p.379). Kehily and Nayak (1997) explored young men’s use of humour in the school context with male secondary school pupils in the UK and concluded that despite their humorous performances having oppressive effects on other pupils, humour is used to validate heterosexual masculinities through gameplay, insults, and storytelling. Their findings identify the presence of conformist dynamics of humour amongst male pupils in English schools, and how such humorous interactions “creates and consolidates heterosexual hierarchies in male peer groups” (p.83). Diorio and Munro (2000) note how boys use the information they receive about menstruation, especially related to cyclical mood changes, “to try out their emerging masculinist power by taunting girls with slurs aimed at their periods” (p.351). Other research in the UK has also acknowledged boys’ disruptive behaviour during the delivery of sex education at school (Hilton, 2007; Allen, 2006; Buston and Wight, 2002; Davidson, 1996). Haste (2013) recognises the practical and behavioural challenges this poses in the classroom but based on their research conducted in an all-boys school in England, argues that there can often be a focus on problematic masculinity in the classroom, in favour of engaging “with the cultural field in which they [boys] must forge their sexual identities” (p.525). My research suggests this can also be the case specifically in relation to menstruation being taught in school, where boys laugh and make jokes in response to the content being delivered but do have specific concerns related to menstruation which are not addressed in the classroom.

Research on menstrual attitudes and experiences across a range of global contexts share similar findings to the areas explored here around menstrual jokes and teasing. For instance, Allen et al.’s study (2011) in the United States recognised that “the onset of a young girl’s period was an opportunity to make fun of girls” (p.145), with boys sharing how jokes were made about periods to shame girls. Benshaul-Tolonen et al.’s study (2020) conducted in Tanzania on menstrual teasing showed

that “male peers are the most commonly feared perpetrator of period teasing in co-educational schools” (p.7). Reasons given for such teasing ranged from menstruation being embarrassing and periods being unnatural, to boys’ immaturity and lack of understanding of menstruation, or because other boys were teasing girls about their periods. In England, Newton (2016) found menstrual jokes, specifically related to mood, to be common in the school setting with male students directing these towards both female students and female teachers. This was highlighted in Plan International UK’s report on the UK context (Tingle and Vora, 2018), with girls reporting how school-age boys made jokes and sniggered while being taught about menstruation with girls present, and that menstrual teasing was present throughout the school setting away from the learning environment.

In Sophie Laws’ work (1990) on men’s attitudes in the UK, participants interviewed recalled how when they were younger, boys joked about menstruation in the school context and teased girls about periods, although for most it was a topic discussed between them and their male peers, rather than directly used against girls. Similarly, research with 11/12-year-old boys in the UK (Lovering, 1995) highlighted how once boys gained some knowledge or awareness of menstruation, they would often use it “to ridicule and oppress girls” (p.25) in school. Menstrual-related teasing perpetrated by male students towards girls in the school context is also present in findings from studies conducted in Kenya (Jewitt and Ryley, 2014; McMahon et al., 2011), Tanzania (Sommer, 2010) and Rwanda (Penakalapati, 2013), with boys acknowledging this teasing in Rwanda as being the result of their limited knowledge and lack of personal experience. This is echoed in Fingerson’s work focused on adolescents in the United States (2006), where she acknowledges sexual-related talk and practical joking related to menstruation as boys’ way of talking about menstruation, arguing that boys joke about menstruation because they lack knowledge and experience, and “because they are being sexist or trying to exert power over girls” (p.124). Newton (2016) also recognises how boys use their limited knowledge of menstruation to subordinate girls but argues that there is “a certain degree of ‘power play’” when the dynamics of a social situation can be shifted by the “out-of-place mentioning of a ‘sensitive’ subject” (p.87), in this case girls joking about menstruation in mixed-gender interactions.

Given the lack of knowledge and understanding of menstruation at school experienced by my non-menstruating participants, my research suggests that telling menstrual-related jokes or general practical joking about menstruation exists as a means for sharing information without needing to demonstrate concrete knowledge about the menstrual cycle. Within peer social groups, this joking described by participants in school enables boys to communicate about menstruation without being criticised for any inaccuracies, as well as presenting an opportunity for social bonding around a topic they are often excluded from in other areas of their lives, especially when it is carried out towards girls. Moving away from the school context, this is explored further in chapter 7 with a focus on how peers learn about the menstrual cycle between themselves when communicating about menstruation, specifically using humour and banter during adolescence and into adulthood.

Previous research on how and where boys learn about menstruation highlights the centrality of the classroom and school setting. An illustration of this can be seen in a recent report published by Always (2021) with young people and adults in the UK¹⁸. The report states that “nearly half of boys first learn about periods at school” and that boys consider the school classroom and teacher as their “greatest and most trusted source of information about periods” (p.12), as opposed to their mums, friends, medical professionals, or online sources. Supporting this, in her work on the social aspects of menstruation in the United States, Fingerson (2006) acknowledges the school setting as a key place for cross-gender interactions about menstruation and subsequently where tension in power relations exist between adolescent boys and girls. Additionally, Newton (2016) argues when female and male school students first learn about menstruation, they become aware of “the majority of menstrual etiquette and the sensitivities that accompany it”, and soon begin to provide “defining guidelines for how menstruation ought to be dealt with in school” (p.71).

¹⁸ The report is based on 13 quantitative surveys carried out in the UK between 2015 and 2020, including a recent survey conducted in partnership with Plan International UK, search data from Performance Media and usage data from Apple apps.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how my research supports some existing studies (for example, Newton, 2016; Fingerson, 2006; Laws, 1990), identifying the school as a key site for learning about menstruation for boys. In my research, four main issues were raised in relation to menstruation education in schools: boys' exclusion from menstrual education; a focus on biological information over menstruation as a lived experience in teaching about menstruation; learning outside of lessons; the presence of menstrual jokes and jibes.

My research illustrates the direct and indirect ways my participants collated information and picked up early subtle messages about menstruation during their attendance at both primary school and secondary school. My interview data shows how exclusion from formal learning about menstruation through gender-segregated puberty lessons begins to shape boys' understanding of menstruation from a young age in primary school, where menstruation becomes an indicator of difference between boys and their female peers. Exclusion continues into secondary school, where boys still receive inadequate information on menstruation and are at times dismissed from conversations on menstruation by both their female peers and teachers. Menstruating participants' accounts support these findings, as well as the menstrual jokes which accompanied this exclusion, highlighting the impact of boys' exclusion from menstrual education on all students. Although for many participants, the structured formal education they received was considered poor and insufficient, their responses suggest that boys continue to learn about menstruation in school through observation of female peers and within informal exchanges between peers. However, practices of exclusion do also continue here, with this informal learning often cementing the notion that menstruation is not and will not be of concern to them, adding to existing feelings of otherness. For some, this also adds to their prior experiences of exclusion, in primary school for example, and has moved with them into adulthood.

Exploring the four areas presented by non-menstruating participants suggests that boys' experiences of learning about menstruation in the school context may set the foundations for their uninformed stance, negative attitudes towards menstruation and

presumed disinterest in the menstrual cycle as they move into adulthood, where they may continue to consider menstruation as being 'not for them'. Across the four areas, it is evident how menstrual stigma and othering of menstruation and leaky bodies is present in the school context. The areas discussed demonstrate the importance of the school context for how and what non-menstruators learn about the menstrual cycle, either through formal education or peer-to-peer interactions during adolescence. Despite participants' responses illustrating some negative experiences of learning and communicating about menstruation at school, their recollections highlight the centrality of school and formal education for early introductions to the menstrual cycle and more crucially, for how as a non-menstruator, they start to make meaning of menstruation during childhood and adolescence. My research also points to the ways in which male power is enacted and perpetuated in these contexts (sometimes through jibes and making fun). Menstruation is reinforced not only as something that concerns only girls and women, but also something that is shameful and embarrassing. Thus, the exclusion of boys from and their marginalisation within learning about menstruation serve to cement broader inequalities between girls and boys. Kimmel (1994) argues that hegemonic masculinity centres on the repudiation of the feminine. In the school context we can see how the construction of menstruation as something taboo and embarrassing is linked to the broader othering of girls and women as different and inferior, with leaky bodies that are shameful.

My research highlights the existence and impact of the gender binary present within the school context and argues for structural and content changes in the delivery of menstruation in schools and the importance of including all students, including non-menstruators, in formal education on menstruation. It draws attention to the need to include more practical information on menstruation and insights into menstruation as a lived experience, as suggested by my adult non-menstruating participants who reflect and identify the foundations of their awareness and understanding of menstruation as being developed through this early exclusion and through limited access to information on menstruation in school. With a focus on the UK context, my research demonstrates the inadequacies of previous SRE and PSHE curricula and highlights the need for more inclusive and comprehensive education on menstruation to be delivered in schools to all students at various ages. Given the timing of this research, my findings support the statutory guidance issued in 2020 by the

Department for Education outlining that menstruation should be taught in Health Education at the earliest opportunity before the onset of menarche for students, so all students are prepared for changes they and their peers will experience. Furthermore, my research raises questions about not only who and what is taught regarding the menstrual cycle and at what age, but also *who* is doing the teaching. Participant responses indicate the influential role teachers play in their learning about menstruation within the school context, both during formal education and informally within the wider school environment when they communicate about menstruation with girls in the presence of boys. Thus, my research also highlights the crucial need to ensure teachers are equipped to talk to and support students when it comes to menstruation, openly and with confidence, using positive and inclusive language, as to avoid reproducing menstrual stigma and silence through their own personal menstrual shame and embarrassment. It is also pertinent to note here that educators should be aware of constructions of masculinity in relation to menstruation, to enable boys to be positively included in the learning environment, and so that such does not exist as a barrier to their inclusion in menstrual education.

Accounts shared by non-menstruating participants are similar regardless of their age and type of school they attended. It is important to mention here that some older participants I interviewed generally found it harder to recall and share clear recollections of learning about menstruation in school, based on the fact it was for some, 25-30 years ago. When asked about menstruation at school more generally, some responses were vague and limited, thus are not included in this chapter. For these participants, their responses tended to relate more closely to the significance of home and intimate relationships on their understanding of menstruation, as is explored in chapter 5 and chapter 6. As could be expected, recollections of menstruation at school in responses of participants who attended all boys' schools at primary or secondary stage (Andrew, Iain, Liam, Owen, and Ross) are limited compared to participants who attended co-ed schools. It is however noteworthy how for these participants, despite the absence of girls in the school setting, menstrual humour when learning and talking about menstruation was still existent between themselves, with menstruation still collectively treated as an indicator of difference and point of comedic interest.

My findings discussed in this chapter contribute to the limited existing research on how boys experience menstruation within the school context, and how as adults they reflect on the significance of these experiences. Due to the age range of my participants, this research can shed some light on how what is learned about menstruation through formal education or within the school environment can be carried and internalized into adulthood, as will be explored further in upcoming chapters. Much of the existing research is on school-age boys in other global contexts (Benshaul-Tolonen et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2017; Penakalapati, 2013; Chang et al., 2012; Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006) and adult men in the U.S. and Australia (Linton, 2019; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Rajak, 2015; Fishman, 2014; Fingerson, 2006). There is little research focused on the UK context; these are either studies with school-age boys, are not focused specifically on men's experiences, or are now considered as dated despite their foundational strength for this research (Always, 2021; Tingle and Vora, 2018; Newton, 2016; Lovering, 1995; Laws, 1990). There are some similarities between the findings discussed and those in existing studies, however my research offers some important additional reflections on school and formal education in the UK from the perspective of adult men who situate this period of their lives within a wider reflection of their experiences of menstruation throughout the life course.

Chapter 5 | Home and Family

5.1 Introduction

Home and family members were acknowledged as being of significance to some non-menstruating participants, who identified their childhood home as being the place where they first heard or became aware of menstruation. Some non-menstruating participants recalled learning about periods from family members during their childhood and adolescence, although this was mainly indirectly through everyday occurrences, as opposed to being directly taught about it for educational purposes. Conversely, several participants shared how they did not consider their family and childhood home as being responsible for how they had become aware of periods, with their responses highlighting the little, if any, exposure to menstruation they had when they were growing up in the family home. Across these interviews, it is notable how the childhood home was not considered the most obvious place to learn about menstruation in comparison to how they discussed their experiences at school. No participants explicitly recalled being directly taught about menstruation at home from parents or family members, that there was generally a silence around menstruation. My research indicates the importance of still recognising the home as a site for learning about menstruation, albeit through subtle messages, indirect incidents and the exclusion and lack of exposure to menstruation described by my non-menstruating participants.

This chapter focuses on how, and what, non-menstruating participants learned about menstruation from family members, and how menstruation was treated in their childhood home. It firstly explores the silence around menstruation experienced by most participants, and the little explicit exposure to menstruation they had as boys and young men from their mothers, fathers, sisters, or other relevant family members. It then moves on to consider how the role of mothers is viewed by participants, specifically in relation to who is responsible for educating sons about menstruation in the household and how some of their understanding and awareness of menstruation has been shaped by their mothers' menstrual experiences during childhood. Drawing on from this, the chapter examines how awareness and understanding of menstruation for boys and young men develops gradually through

the everyday, specifically how visual exposure to menstruation, such as seeing blood in the toilet and menstrual products in the bathroom, indirectly teaches them about menstruation within the childhood household. Finally, the chapter moves on to explore some non-menstruating participants' experiences with menstruation as fathers to daughters, as well as discussions shared around teaching and supporting future children with menstruation as potential fathers with remaining non-menstruating participants. Within the chapter I also discuss the experiences of menstruating participants to explore their memories of menstruation within the family home, especially in relation to male family members.

5.2 Lack of Communication About Menstruation

Discussions with non-menstruating participants indicated that the menstrual cycle was not a topic taught at home by family members, and menstruation was not regularly, if at all, talked about in the childhood home. Some participant responses suggest that this was also the case regarding communication about puberty more generally. When these participants were asked how menstruation was treated at home when they were growing up, the question was often met with some laughter and/or prompt firm confirmation that it was not a topic discussed in their household, with most participants struggling to recall a time when their parent(s) or sibling(s) had communicated about it openly with them, or in their presence. For example, Benjamin (32) who has two sisters said, *"I wouldn't say it's a conversation I particularly had. I'm trying to think of having a conversation with my mum or dad about it (laughs). I think I'd be equally as weirded out by it at the time, I don't think I would have managed it."* Similarly, Liam (40) shared how menstruation was not a topic openly talked about in his childhood home, but he recalled how his parents introduced him to *"the birds and the bees"* when he was aged 11/12 years by gifting him an educational book they had intentionally bought for that purpose. Liam explained:

I always remember, we were on holiday in London. I don't know what happened, but they must have thought, 'he's old enough, he's going to start asking questions', so they bought me this book about reproduction from the science museum and that's how I first learnt about it [menstruation].

Despite receiving this initial brief introduction to menstruation through an educational book on reproduction from his parents, this indirect method of providing Liam with new knowledge demonstrates Liam's parents' avoidance of directly communicating verbally about menstruation and reproduction with their son. Liam described how his father was *"an old dad in years but he was also a traditional guy, so he would never have discussed this [menstruation], never have discussed masturbation or porn, anything like that."* Liam understood the purchase of the book as being his dad's way of dealing with the need to address the topic at home, to support any learning in biology lessons at school. Aside from the book, Liam said: *"There was no discussion of it [menstruation] at home. My mum is very different, she's 12 years younger than my dad and is just a cooler person, but I still don't remember my mum discussing it."* Similarly, for Ross (38) who has an older brother, he recognised how his family, particularly when it came to his parents, *"didn't talk about anything, emotions or anything sex related and other bodily functions"*:

My dad isn't someone to have emotional conversations or to talk about that kind of thing, and my mum may have felt like she ought to, but I think also would be terrified where to start at that time, and therefore we never had a conversation at home about anything along those lines. Because I don't have a female sibling, it therefore meant that it wasn't something that was a present issue in my life and then probably the fact I went to a boy's school. Having come from a family background where nothing is discussed, it's therefore not surprising, it would have been a few steps down the list of what probably should have been talked about in our home.

Kieran (39), who lived with his mother, father, and older brother when he was younger, had a similar experience of not being explicitly exposed to puberty and the subject of menstruation through a chat with either parent at home when he was younger. He told me:

Growing up there was me, my mam, my dad, and our Nath. I never really had that kind of conversation with my mam and dad. My dad never sat me down and had a conversation about what changes I was about to go through, and my mam certainly didn't. I think my mam...well, they're both old school, so I think what she was going through, her period cycle, would just be a no-go area with my mam.

Growing up at home with an older brother, Mark (27) also shared how there was no communication about puberty more generally at home with his parents, nor did they talk to him about the bodily changes Mark would personally experience:

I can't remember ever having a conversation with my mum or dad about it to be honest. I can't ever remember sitting down with mum and dad and them speaking to me about it and them saying, 'this is what's going to happen to your body'. I can't remember ever talking about puberty or sex or anything like that. We've always been an open family; we've always talked about things, but I can't remember ever having to sit down with mum and dad and having the birds and the bees conversation. I don't know why that was.

With a focus on menstruation education specifically, Martin (25) who has a younger sister, recalled how "*it wasn't a conversation that happened*" at home when he was younger, despite feeling like his Mum was open to that kind of discussion as she worked for the council "*for teenage pregnancy and all that*":

I don't think I ever got specifically told anything about them [periods]. It's tough to remember that far, but yeah, she was open as in, "just ask me anything", but I think maybe she didn't realise how much I necessarily didn't even know how to even begin to ask a question about it. It felt at that age quite an embarrassing thing to initially talk about for sure. I feel like he [Dad] probably got told to do something at some point, but no it wasn't from what I remember a big sort of chat or anything like that. I think he didn't know how to approach it to be honest.

For Peter (31), who lived with his mam and brother, menstruation was not a topic discussed at home, but on reflection, he pondered on whether it was something which needed to be talked about in the context of home with his family members when it was just him and his brother who were approaching and experiencing puberty and adolescence, and thus menstruation was not relevant. Here, despite Peter acknowledging his mam being in the household and as someone who menstruates, or menstruated, he does not think there was a reason to ask her anything about menstruation, nor does he think he should have as her son:

There wasn't really any girls in the family, so never really having to talk about it I guess because it was male orientated, I guess. And there was only my mam, and she's not going to be telling me about it, I guess. I've never really thought of asking her anything really, it's just not really my place to be asking her I suppose. Obviously, you know what's going on, but you don't really need to ask about it.

Similarly, Jason (26) spent most of his childhood living with just his mother as his older sisters lived away from home for most of his adolescence, so he didn't consider menstruation "*as a home thing*" or something that he believed his mum thought needed to be talked about at home, because he had been taught about menstruation

at school. Alongside this, Jason acknowledges how any discussion of menstruation with his mum would have been awkward, despite them being “*fairly open and honest with each other*” usually:

I knew the jest of it from school and bits and pieces but not really went any further into questioning things, especially with my mum because it felt a bit awkward at times. Me and my mum are fairly open and honest with each other but there's certain things like 'AH, that's just a little bit awkward.' With my sisters living away from home and stuff it's not something you'd really pay attention to or notice with them and stuff so for me it wasn't really anything that was a home thing... I don't think it was anything she ever really decided she needed to talk about or cover or anything like that because she knew I'd done that bit already.

This was a similar situation described by Jake (21), whose mum had joked a few years prior to the time of the interview, “*the reason why we spent so much money on you going to school was so that you could do all your sex ed there, instead of us having to do it.*” Jake attended a co-ed private boarding school and was later joined there by his younger brother and younger sister. He shared with me how his mum had not talked to him or his brother about menstruation but knows that she did with his sister. Jake considered that his parents did not need to discuss menstruation with him and his brother, but that his mother is also “*quite private about stuff like that*”:

I think they needed to have these conversations, but not with my brother and I. She's always made it very clear that if anyone gets pregnant that she's not going to be very sympathetic (laughs). I don't know, I guess 1. That it would be better done at the school than by her, and I also think that she's quite private about stuff like that with us. I don't know, I don't really know, I think that's probably why.

On the contrary, Kevin (42) shared how his mam was “*always comfortable talking about things*”, using sexual jokes made between him and his brother in the presence of his mam as an example to support this claim, but he acknowledged how menstruation was never a topic discussed with her. Kevin considers that because him and his brother did not have girlfriends before the age of around 17 years old, that there was not a need for menstruation to be talked about in the family home with their parents, suggesting that the purpose of any discussions on menstruation would have been related to sex and reproduction:

If me or my brother had sexual jokes, we'd tell my mam and laugh about it and we'd think we were great, but periods wasn't a thing to talk about. There was no need for us to talk about it. I didn't have a girlfriend until I was, like 17, my brother didn't have a girlfriend until around the same age. I can't remember, but we didn't ever have a need to talk about periods.

Stephen (30), a middle child with two brothers, acknowledged how his mum "*would never discuss periods*", most likely due to it being "*a house of four men*". He recalled an incident at home when his mum was "*kinda horrified*" at the fact he knew his girlfriend was menstruating:

I mentioned once, I was downstairs making a hot water bottle or cup of tea or something, and I was like 'Jane isn't feeling well', and she was like, 'what's wrong with her?' 'Oh, she's on her period', and my mum was kinda horrified that I knew that. She was like, 'she told you?' I was like, 'aye well she's in my house, she's lying upstairs!' I don't remember verbatim what she said but it was like, 'god I would never have told a boy I was seeing at that age anything about periods'. I think that's the one and only time it was discussed, was my mum saying that. I think she hid pads and stuff; they must have been in a drawer or somewhere, so we never seen them because it wasn't something we grew up accustomed to.

In this example shared by Stephen, it is significant how the silence on menstruation in his childhood household is accompanied by, and perhaps due to, the shame and secrecy around periods experienced and upheld by his mum. In this instance, the silence and taboo nature of menstruation is being perpetuated by Stephen's mother, both verbally in this exchange and the general lack of open discussion about menstruation in the home, and in a practical sense by hiding menstrual products away out of sight, demonstrating how women can often be complicit in reinforcing menstrual stigma in the home. It also suggests that there could be some generational differences in outlooks towards menstruation, given Stephen's openness towards sharing his girlfriend's menstrual status with his mother, and her "*horrified*" response that his girlfriend had been so open with her son about menstruation being the source of her feeling unwell.

In the same way in which Stephen noted that menstruation was not talked about at home because it was "*a house of four men*" living with his mother, it was not unusual for participants without sisters to understand the limited exposure to menstruation and lack of discussions about menstruation at home to be due to the lack of female

presence in the household, despite mentioning mothers in their responses. However, as seen in some previous responses shared, participants who grew up with sisters had similar experiences, with most knowing very little about their sisters' menstrual experiences. This differs to some accounts in previous studies where men and boys recognise their sisters' menstrual experiences as being significant in their own early awareness of menstruation. For instance, Allen et al.'s study in the US found young men became aware of and learned about menstruation when their sister experienced menarche (Allen et al., 2011). Dan (27) who has a younger sister by a few years said: *"I never once really talked about periods with my sister, it never came up, I was never told 'Emily is on her period', or anything like that. I wouldn't know to this day when she started or anything like that."* Dean (39) was also not aware of his younger sister's menstrual experiences when he was growing up at home, because neither she nor his parents talked about menstruation with him, yet he does not believe it was a taboo topic in the home, and puts it down to his lack of curiosity towards menstruation:

I've got a younger sister who is 2 years younger than me, and I couldn't tell you at what age she started having periods. My mum was 27 when she had me, so she would have been pre menopause for most of my childhood and adolescence...My mum didn't, my parents didn't talk about my sister starting to have periods with me. But then again it wasn't also treated as this big taboo subject that you mustn't talk about. It was just a fact of life. I think if I'd had questions, I could have gone to them with those questions, but I don't think I was an incurious teenager, I just wasn't curious about periods, for one reason or another.

However, for some participants, even knowing their sisters had started to menstruate or were experiencing a period did not mean that it was a topic openly discussed with them. For example, Ed (28) recalls their mum telling them when their sister had started having her period *"in a sort of, 'by the way, this is happening now' kind of thing"*, but they had never had conversations about menstruation with their sister and did not believe there was a reason for them to, referring to the possibility of doing so as *"a really fucking weird thing to do"*:

She's a great laugh my sister, but she'd shy away from conversations like that, but that's with a lot of things, like if she's feeling upset, she doesn't really wear her heart on her sleeve, do you know what I mean? Again, the idea of having conversations with my sister about her periods, feels like a really fucking weird thing to do. I don't know why it should be necessarily.

Craig (26) had early memories of hearing about menstruation for the first time at home and acknowledged that although it was not a topic discussed regularly at home, his parents' openness to such discussions had ensured that "*there was never a topic you can't talk about at the dinner table*". He shared how his mum was "sort of an old school hippie type" and his dad was "into motorbikes and all that sort of thing", thus they had an "openness about sex and drugs" because of the "liberal cultures" they were involved in. Not only did Craig feel like menstruation was a topic that could be openly discussed at home if needed, but he also felt that if he had said a negative comment about menstruation when he was younger in his childhood home, that it would not have been accepted by his parents and "*there would have been consequences*":

My mum would have told me that wasn't the right way to behave, but my dad would have had a go at me about it. My dad is interesting, he's uncomfortable with it I think but he knows he shouldn't be if that makes sense. He made sure that I knew that you can't be rude about any of this stuff and it's like that's just what happens, and women have these things... My mum has always worked for the NHS and stuff like that, so any kind of conversation involving talking about illness or anything remotely medical which would have included that, wasn't just like that, it was all aspects of it. She worked in a sexual health clinic so that probably fed into all that sort of stuff.

Despite Craig's (26) family's openness to talking about any topic he describes here, his sister who is three years younger did not choose to talk about her periods in the family home. Craig's account suggests that his sister did not communicate about menstruation with any family member in their childhood home, including their mum, which Craig considered as being "*weird*" because of their parents' openness:

I can remember it just because it was weird in our house that she didn't want to talk about it. Mum would get her stuff and leave it in her room, like tampons and towels and stuff like that, she'd get them and leave them for her because she knew she needed them but there was never like a conversation about that, not even a thanks for getting them. Not that she isn't grateful, but I'm just trying to express how little it was talked about that she didn't say thank you for getting those or anything like that.

Sisters not talking to their brothers about menstruation was discussed by some menstruating participants, but their understanding of the home context and how their periods were treated by family members differs significantly. For example, growing up at home as the middle child with two brothers, Emma (34) felt like "*the odd one*

out", meaning her periods were not talked about, and when mentioned, it was met with aversion:

They [brothers] didn't give two flying monkeys about what was happening with me really. A couple of times I'd say, "Oh mum I've got period pains" and Dev, my brother, would go "UH!" and screw his nose up or walk out. My dad wasn't there a huge amount, so I don't remember how he was, or reacted to it. They weren't bothered, they just didn't care really. It wasn't part of anything they wanted to talk about, or they weren't interested in it.

Similarly for Helen (35), menstruation was a topic she and her sisters did not discuss with their brothers, but as emphasised in her interview, this was not always out of personal choice. Helen explained how she, along with her two younger sisters, were encouraged to hide menstruation from their brothers:

I was definitely taught to hide it from my brothers, which was weird, like it's a thing. I had two younger sisters as well, it was a thing we didn't talk about in front of them, like they didn't need to know about that yet...I was annoyed, I don't see why I should have to hide it because they're going to have girlfriends, or not necessarily, but people around them that are going to have periods...I think looking back now, people putting shame on me, like "You've got your period, so *YOU* should hide it from your brothers".

Non-menstruating participant responses paint a picture of sisters often not talking to them or their parents about menstruation, however menstruation being a taboo and highly stigmatised topic shapes both the ways in which women, girls and people who menstruate, as well as cis men and boys communicate about menstrual related matters. These accounts present an example of how menstrual etiquette (Laws, 1990) can also make women complicit in reinforcing menstrual shame, stigma, and silence. As highlighted across many of these non-menstruating participant accounts, whilst reflecting on how menstruation was treated in their childhood homes, responses suggest they felt that menstruation was a subject which did not need to be taught to them or discussed in their childhood home, specifically not with family members during childhood and adolescence. It was common for these participants to display some discomfort with the idea of their parents or siblings talking to them about menstruation, despite having some occasional a-ha moments during the interviews in which they recognised how their lack of exposure to menstruation when they were younger at home most likely was detrimental to their current

understanding and awareness of the menstrual cycle as adults. As seen in several responses, a dad's potential involvement in conversations related to menstruation were dismissed, which often extended to brothers too because they did not personally experience periods. For example, Jay (35) did not think he had ever spoken about menstruation with his brother or dad, *"possibly because they didn't really feel like, us men, boys, males, didn't really feel like it involved us. It was just something to know about because it wasn't going to happen to us, we didn't really need to worry."* Noted earlier, even when mothers were present in a household with sons and male partners, participants did not consider menstruation as an important topic to talk about in the family context. An additional example of this is Jordan (25), who has two younger brothers: *"It was only my mum as the female presence in the house, so I guess it wasn't something she needed to discuss (laughs), it was just her thing."* This outlook towards the relevance of menstruation shared by these participants is considered in greater depth in this chapter when looking at mothers as menstrual educators. However, there is an interesting shift in attitudes towards parental involvement when these participants are asked to think about current and potential roles as fathers with sons and daughters, explored further at the end of this chapter.

5.3 Learning Through the Everyday

Non-menstruating participants' responses when discussing how menstruation was treated at home indicate how their learning and awareness of periods happened indirectly through everyday occurrences living with someone who menstruated. For many of these participants, this was often through seeing menstrual blood on the toilet seat or in the toilet bowl and/or noticing menstrual products in the house. For Alex (26), menstruation was not a topic his family directly discussed with him when he was growing up living in the family home, but he described becoming gradually aware of menstruation through hearing different euphemisms and through such everyday occurrences whilst living with his mother and sister:

I think people using the euphemism 'time of the month' and my mum and my sister would use that instead of like, 'I'm on my period', or something. They'd use that when I was younger all the time. I don't think there was a time I was told what that was, it was just 'time of the month' and then there'd be some blood in the toilet bowl, and

you just sort of become aware of it that way, rather than having it sort of described to you. It's just a thing that happens and over time just sort of all the details fill in, do you know what I mean?

Alex went on to recall another way in which his awareness and understanding of menstruation had developed during adolescence, specifically about menstrual blood and the disposal of menstrual products, which was from an incident that happened at home with his mother and sister. Although he had not seen menstrual blood in the toilet, he recalls a parental reaction to his sister putting used menstrual pads in the bin:

I honestly think people have been so careful around it [menstrual blood], that's never something I've had to deal with. Women are so careful around it. I remember my sister being told off once for it actually...putting pads in the bin.

Recalling how menstruation was treated at home when he was growing up, James (25) shared a vivid memory from childhood of how he and his brother understood menstruation in relation to the onset of his mother's period, indicated by blood in the toilet bowl, and how they would react to it by speaking in code with each other:

My younger brother coming to me after being to the toilet and saying, 'Ah it's the blood of the month, watch out!', because my mam had started her period. It was spoken in code (laughs). That's one thing I remember being funny, but shit scared of.

Living in a household with his mother and sister from an early age, Owen (28) recognised how this household dynamic meant menstruation was never a taboo subject at home, and how seeing blood in the toilet was not a big deal for him, but in fact it had encouraged him to question his mother about what it was when he was younger and effectively normalise periods with him. Owen explained: "*I mean there was times as a kid I'd go to the toilet and there was blood in the urinal and I'd say, 'Mum, why is there blood in the urinal?'... 'Ah that's just my period son'... 'Ah okay'... Flush the chain and get on with it.*" Jay (35), who shared a home with his mother, father, and brother, experienced a similar openness from his mother when it came to finding menstrual products in her handbag:

Now that I think about it, that might actually be one of the first cases of talking about it. We'd be rummaging through her handbag, usually because we were obsessed with her purse and counting how much money she had, pretending to have credit

cards and things, and then finding tampons and being like, 'what are these?' She would quite appropriately say, 'these are tampons'. I don't think she would explain how they were used, but we knew what they were used for and occasionally I've got a feeling she would say, 'can you go into my handbag and pass me a tampon?', that kind of thing.

Kevin (42) also shared a childhood home with his mother, father, and older brother, and although puberty and menstruation was not a topic openly discussed or taught to Kevin and his brother at home, he recalled his mother's openness to talking about periods in relation to their pet dog's estrus cycle:

Thinking about this now, I tell you when I did know about it at home, was when my Yorkshire terrier bled all over the settee (laughs), and my mam said she was on her period and I linked that to what everyone had said at school and then obviously this is when I started knowing about this, what it does, everything. We used to put a nappy on her!

Some participants shared how they remained curious about menstrual products when seeing them in their childhood home, often feeling some discomfort or inquisitiveness. Dean (39) shared a home with his mother, father, younger sister, and younger brother growing up and remembered "*there always being sanitary products*" in the bathroom, "*but it was never something that was discussed*". Kyle (42) who has three younger sisters, also recalled seeing menstrual products in the family bathroom and shared how he would experience some awkwardness around the menstrual products being there:

Looking back to when I was a child, I'm one of four but the other three are all girls and so I was brought up in a very female orientated house, and I suppose I was embarrassed to see Tampax on the bathroom windowsill. I'm the oldest, I've got one 2 years younger, 8 years younger and then 18 years younger. I didn't really take that much notice; I just remember seeing the Tampax on the bathroom windowsill and feeling a bit embarrassed about why they were there.

Here it is interesting that even when women in the family are open enough to have menstrual products on display in the bathroom, rather than hiding them away out of sight, there is still some embarrassment and awkwardness experienced by these participants when they see these menstrual products that they know their family member will use or have used. This extends to the fact that although some participants shared their curiosity about seeing the menstrual products or wrappers

at home and not knowing exactly what they were for, they did not ask for an explanation from family members. As Liam (40) describes, *“I remember a tampon wrapper and just not knowing what it was, but I suppose knowing enough to not ask what it was.”* He acknowledged how this was something he had pieced together as he got older: *“I certainly didn’t talk about it, but I suppose I became dimly aware of it and put two and two together about what it was when I was 11, 12, 13.”* Similarly, Jason (26) recalled how growing up meant acknowledging what the menstrual products were used for:

That wasn’t until I was a bit older that I started realising what they were. You kind of, when you’re younger, just think it’s one of mum’s things, it is what it is sort of thing, you don’t really question it. When you get older you sort of realise what it is, like, ‘ah right okay, *now* I know what it is’. I knew they were there; I knew they were kept in the bathroom. It was just one of those, like it’s just a natural thing for a woman so she’s going to need them, that’s what it is. I’ve never really questioned it.

Similarly, for Mark (27) who shared a home with his mother, father, and older brother, seeing menstrual product packaging in his parents’ bathroom incited some curiosity when he was younger, but it wasn’t until learning about menstruation in secondary school that he started to understand what their purpose was:

I can remember seeing, not the actual product, but the packaging that towels come in in my parents’ bathroom and I can remember being like, what’s that, what’s that for? And I’d see them all the time, like what are they for? But I never actually asked mum and dad about them, I just was always like curious, I see these all the time, but I don’t know what they are and then there was a time when I moved into secondary school and started learning about it and was like, ah that’s what they’re for!

David Linton (2019) shares his own experience of menstruation in the home in his work on men and menstruation, recalling how when he was around 10 years old, he had found an empty box in the bathroom bin which he thought would be appropriate to use as gift wrap for a present for his father. This was met with some disagreement from his mother who stopped him from doing that, which naturally led to some questioning for David as to why he could not. Linton explains how his mother had said it was something she used, but the “power and mystery in her words and the way she said them” (p.2), paired with the words *‘feminine napkins’* he had noticed on the box, was indication that it was something he as a boy could not know about.

This, like some examples given through my participants' responses, indicates once again how mothers can play a fundamental role in perpetuating menstrual shame and stigma through silence, and in limited explicit and direct discussion on menstruation with sons.

5.4 Mothers as Menstrual Educators

As highlighted in the first section of this chapter, a common perception across non-menstruating participants' responses to learning about menstruation in the childhood home, is the assumption that mothers are the obvious primary source of education within this context. Participant responses indicate this assumption is based on their mothers' position as someone who has or does menstruate; thus, they have the knowledge and experience to discuss and educate others on the matter. This is apparent for the non-menstruating participants who recall learning about menstruation in some shape or form at home, as well as for those non-menstruating participants who received no exposure to menstruation in their childhood household, thus they identify their mothers as being the person with the most, if not all, responsibility for sharing such information. Although for most participants there was little conversation about periods at home, some participants recalled occasionally being aware of their mothers' periods when they were younger. As demonstrated in the previous section, seeing mothers' menstrual products in the home, or mothers' menstrual blood in the toilet, had caused some initial insight and curiosity towards menstruation for these participants. The sharing of menstrual experiences between mother and son were rare, however for some, this openness had encouraged an early awareness of the menstrual cycle. For instance, Jay (35) shared his earliest memory of hearing about menstruation, which was his mother "*relatively freely...explaining she's got a very heavy period this month and so she's not feeling very well, something along those lines*". Jay explained how although his mother had not always been as open about menstruating when he was younger, he felt it was something that she was "*occasionally happy to talk about*":

My mum, if it was particularly heavy that month, she would explain what was happening but that wouldn't happen regularly. But yeah, it came up in conversation relatively easy. I say relatively because, my mum has a tendency of hiding or not sharing all the things that are going on all the time. It's not really the same as hiding,

but yeah, those were one of the things she was occasionally happy to talk about when it was happening.

Similarly, James (25) recalled sharing some open conversations with his mother about her periods when he was younger, and how her menstrual experiences were impacted by her health: *“My mam would go through patches of being anaemic and we’d go and buy iron tablets to help her, I knew that iron would help her have an easier or better period.”* James was also aware of his stepmother’s experience of menopause, as she had also openly communicated about it to him:

I always thought it was funny that my mam was older than my step mam, but my step mam went through menopause about 10 or 12 years before my mam did, giving a gap of about 15 years. My step mam was young, about 35 or 36, to start the menopause... Yeah with like me and my step mam, she told me that her mam had started the menopause early and that’s probably why she started early. That was about as open as it was. She knew it was happening and was telling me.

On the contrary, such conversations were not as explicit and direct for other non-menstruating participants and their mothers, particularly in relation to experiences of menopause and hysterectomies. Dan (27) and Kevin (42) reflected on their mothers’ hysterectomies when they were young teenagers, both sharing how it was not openly and directly communicated to them what the procedure was and what it would mean for their mothers, both short and long term. As Dan recalled:

I remember my mum having a hysterectomy but not really understanding the full impact of what that was. I think that we were just told it was the, I’m not even sure what it is now, but the removal of her uterus or something like that. I was never really told why or what impact it would have but just that she had to have some medication to help normalise her hormones is what I was told, or the extent of what I was told. I think maybe I was just about 13/14 and I still didn’t understand the impact of that until very recently when I was talking to her about it. I can’t remember why it came up, but you know I didn’t really understand what menopause meant or anything like that. I still don’t think I do.

It was a similar situation for Kevin, who was also told in a roundabout passive way why his mother was going to hospital, meaning he did not know exactly what procedure his mother was having or why:

Back then I didn't know what my mam had gone in for, I didn't know until I could find out what it is myself kinda thing. It was never really talked about, 'your mam is having a hysterectomy', just 'your mam is going into hospital, she's not very well and is having her insides taken out'. That was it, or just pushed under the rug.

For Liam (40), their mother experiencing menopause was not something which was disclosed to him openly as a young adult, but he did recall hearing some occasional related comments from his mother regarding her use of Hormone Replacement Therapy when he was younger:

My mum is 70 now so has obviously gone through it. She was 30 when she had me so she would have been early 40s when I was going through this kind of awareness. I can't remember, I assume she would have gone through the menopause when I was 18 or early twenties. I do remember her very occasionally mentioning she was on HRT, and she was trying this and that, it was nothing more than a kind of "I've got to go and get these from the chemist". I can imagine hearing that and thinking, 'oh my god don't talk about that'. Beyond that, certainly no open discussions about it.

A few participants shared how they had some suspicions that their mothers may be approaching menopause or were postmenopausal at the time of the interview. This was not a topic initiated and approached by the participants, but when asked if they talked to their mothers about their menstrual cycles or if they were aware if their mothers were pre- or post-menopause, some participants chose to comment on their general curiosity and uncertainty of menopause, as well as this in relation to their positions as sons. Although Mark (27) acknowledged how he shared what he thought to be a good and open relationship with his mother, he considered her experiences of menopause to be a subject area his mother was unlikely to discuss with him as her son:

There's been recent talk of my mum...I think she's nearing the time of going through menopause. I don't think she has done yet, but she's never really like spoke about it outwardly. I think for her even though we have an open relationship, it's her body and I don't know whether she feels as comfortable talking to her son about it as I would be talking to her. Maybe that's something she wants to keep private to herself, because I'm her son, she probably doesn't want to open up that sort of side because obviously it's her body and she's going to be the one going through it, and I don't really need to know if she has or hasn't. I only need to know she's happy or healthy essentially.

This absence of communication around mothers' menopause experiences was also shared by Benjamin (32), who described having "*a very distant awareness of it*", but said he "*hadn't even crossed that line*" with his mother:

I don't know how old she is, 55 I reckon, something like that now. I have a very distant understanding that it might be something she's going through (shoo away hand gesture), but you notice how I'm doing my hand, it's like something that's going on *over there*. I have even less of an idea about that time [than menstruation]. Not the foggiest, not the foggiest of what she's experiencing, what it means.

Despite this, Benjamin acknowledges how differences in his mother's behaviour had been something he had noticed, but he felt it was still unlikely to be something his mother would discuss with him:

Sometimes my mum is just off on one, good and bad, and you just think, you don't know why, what's going on sort of thing. Whether we can have a full-blown conversation about it, I strongly doubt it, I strongly doubt my mum would have a conversation about it.

Existing studies in the US and UK show boys sometimes learn about the menstrual cycle from their mothers (Allen et al., 2011; Lovering, 1995). In my research, participants acknowledge the relevance of their mothers as menstruators in the prospect of learning about menstruation within the home environment, but some responses contradict this when justifying that menstruation did not need to be talked about because they did not grow up with a sister at home and the household was mostly men. This implies that there would only be value in or a need to discuss menstruation at home if they had a sister, disregarding their mothers as menstruators. This disconnect extends further when non-menstruating participants were met with some discomfort and difficulty in responding to questions asked about their mothers' menstrual experiences and in particular menopause. Despite viewing their mother as the *natural* menstrual educator and some commenting on seeing their mothers' menstrual blood or menstrual products at home when they were younger, it comes across as though these participants do not think of their mothers as menstruators. They make associations between their mothers and the menstrual cycle in theory, but menstruation is not necessarily understood as their mothers' lived experience, both in the past and at present.

Non-menstruating participants' lack of awareness of whether their mothers had experienced menopause could be due to them not associating sex and reproduction with their ageing mothers now that they are adults themselves, but it may also be representative of the social stigma, shame, and embarrassment around menopause across society due to its association with two taboo areas: menstruation and ageing. Studies in various global contexts including the UK, suggest men and boys are not knowledgeable about the cessation of menstruation due to both natural and induced menopause, and often hold negative views of menopause (Rodolpho, 2016; Liao et al., 2015; Hidiroglu et al., 2014; Dillaway, 2008). As explained by Erchull (2020), in the same way men lack knowledge and an understanding of menstruation and its associated symptoms, menopause "is another case where men are haphazardly piecing together information from a number of, largely informal, sources" (p.398). These findings on menopause in the home and family are unsurprising, given the silence and lack of education around menopause in the school curriculum and across society more generally. Reflecting on the introduction to the UK context, it is promising that moves are being made towards destigmatising menopause, educating about menopause in schools, and most importantly, supporting those experiencing menopause through the more accessible provision of HRT and menopause care.

5.5 Role of Fathers in Menstrual Education and Support

Highlighted by most non-menstruating participants in the first section of this chapter, fathers played little, if any, role in providing education on menstruation in the home. Responses indicate fathers can be reluctant to talk about menstruation in the home with or in the presence of their children. When asked some follow-up questions regarding the absence of their fathers in communication around menstruation and about puberty in general, most non-menstruating participants dismissed the prospect of their fathers playing any sort of role, with these questions also often being met with a smirk and some unease displayed through their body language. Many of these participants held the outlook that their fathers should not have been a source of knowledge on menstruation in the home when they were children/adolescents, nor were they acknowledged as being the presumed parent to discuss menstruation if it had of been a topic raised in the family home, as emphasised in the previous section on the role of mothers as menstrual educators. When exploring this further in the

interviews, non-menstruating participants tended to explain their father's absence on the matter through dismissal of his ability to do so in both a practical and emotional sense, as well as fathers upholding traditional attitudes towards gendered parenting roles. As Erchull and Richmond (2015) argue, "it is likely that attitudes toward traditional parenting roles influence a father's knowledge about and comfort with discussion of menstruation, affecting the likelihood that they will discuss menstruation with their children" (p.97).

Narratives from research examining the presence of menstruation in the household presents menstruation "as something which should be kept between daughters, mothers and sisters" (Newton, 2016, p.105). In Wyckoff et al.'s study in the US (2008), menstruation was part of discussions between mothers and daughters, but it was not a topic discussed between fathers and their daughters or with their sons. This gendered communication on menstruation at home highlights a wider issue around communication between parents and their children, where those who menstruate may share some discussions, but there is a prominent lack of communication between fathers and their children, regardless of whether their child experiences or will experience menstruation. This is further echoed in studies in the US and Australia, where fathers struggle to discuss sexuality and sexual health with their children (Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman, 2002; Wright, 2009). In Bennett and Harden's study in the UK (2019), fathers share their discomfort towards the idea of talking about menstruation with their daughters based on their lack of knowledge and understanding of menstruation, as well as a lack of lived personal experience of menstruation. UK-based social enterprise Hey Girls launched the *Pads4Dads* campaign in 2019 to encourage fathers to talk to their children about menstruation and to educate them on how to support their children who menstruate. Hey Girls conducted a survey prior to the campaign launching with 1500 British men, 753 of which were Dads, and findings revealed that 1 in 4 Dads never learnt about periods at school and 45% of Dads are unsure what the signs are that a girl might be about to start her period. The research also identified that 41% of Dads were not comfortable talking to their children about menstruation, nearly half had not discussed menstruation with their daughters, and 1 in 3 Dads had never purchased menstrual products (Hey Girls, 2019).

Discussions with my non-menstruating participants placed emphasis on fathers being emotionally inept in dealing with menstruation, with suggestions that it was because they were traditional and old school. As included earlier in the chapter, Liam (40) talks about his father being “*an old dad in years*” but also that he was “*a traditional guy*”. Similarly, Ross (38) dismisses his dad’s potential involvement in such discussions as he “*isn’t someone to have emotional conversations or to talk about that kind of thing*”. Interestingly, when Jordan (25) was asked if they talked to their dad about such topics growing up in response to him saying that his mother did not need to talk about menstruation in the house as she was the only “*female presence*”, Jordan refers to his dad’s lack of engagement in relation to menstruation as being “*a generational thing*”:

Nah man, he’s got no idea. I can just imagine him not being particularly in touch with that. I don’t know, I think that is like an easy reference to draw, but I do think it is a generational thing. I don’t think my dad has ever used an iron, you know what I mean, there’s just certain things they’ve never had to contend with.

Despite these participants’ recollections of their own childhood and adolescence growing up in the family home, specifically the absence of fathers when it came to communication around menstruation, it was noteworthy how their outlook switched when asked how they view they own role as current or future fathers in educating their children about menstruation, either at present or in the future. Responses varied, but there was a clear shift from previous discussions on their experiences with their own fathers when they were asked to think about themselves and what potential roles they could personally play when it came to menstruation with their own children. At the time of the interviews, nine non-menstruating participants were fathers, and one was an expectant father. Out of the current fathers, one participant had a daughter who menstruated (age 13) and a younger daughter approaching puberty (age 10), and one participant had a daughter he believed was approaching menarche (age 13) and a younger daughter (age 8). This father did not think his 13-year-old daughter had started her periods yet as his wife had not told him. Additionally, one participant had a teenage son (age 17) and a younger son (age 9), and one participant had two sons in the early stages of puberty and approaching their teenage years (age 12). The remaining participants who were fathers had younger children between the ages of 1 and 7 years. Overall, in total, three

participants were fathers to daughters, four participants were fathers to sons, and two participants were fathers to both daughters and sons. Views on the role of a father and their responsibility with their children when it comes to menstruation were also explored in interviews with participants who were not fathers.

Beyond initial brief introductions from school peers and within intimate relationships, men are “confronted with menstruation” when it comes to parenting (Erchull, 2020, p.401). In Peranovic and Bentley’s study in Australia, men believe they need to know some information about menstruation to be able to play an active role in educating and supporting both daughters and sons (2017). Although hypothetical for some of my non-menstruating participants, when asked whether they considered themselves as having a role to play when it comes to their future children asking questions related to puberty and specifically menstruation, responses varied. Some believed they had or would have a role to play as a father when it came to their children and menstruation in the future, however there was some lack of clarity around what this would look like in practice. The main concern expressed by these participants was that they had a lack of knowledge on menstruation and would simply not know enough to provide correct information to their children, paired with their lack of lived experience of menstruation which meant they did not fully understand what their child will go through when menstruating. However, their willingness and openness to try was clear. Most significant, was how many participants recognised a level of responsibility they would hold to do this, despite not having any personal experience of menstruating. An example of this is Jordan (25), who explained how having a daughter could be a turning point in his need to learn more about all aspects of menstruation:

I think if I was to ever have a daughter, I would feel a requirement to learn about menstruation to understand what she was going through...I’d feel a bit embarrassed I think, that it had taken me so long to know. I guess it comes down to, I want to understand the emotional concept, or aspect of it, but maybe the practicalities would be lost on me (laughs).

This willingness and acknowledgement of what is needed to communicate about menstruation was not a position shared by all non-menstruating participants.

Branching off from this were additional considerations around whether the mother of the child would be better equipped to do this based on their personal experiences of

menarche and menstruation. This reflects existing literature on parent-child communication around sex and puberty, as well as the gendered division of labour across families and within households when it comes to providing such information and support to children and adolescents. For instance, in Wilson et al.'s study in the United States (2010), fathers considered that their lack of experience in menstruating meant they were not in a good position to talk about menstruation with their children and communicated with both their daughters and sons less than their mothers do on the matter. Similarly, in a study conducted in the UK, some fathers experienced discomfort at the prospect of talking to their daughter about menstruation and adolescence, viewing it as their wives' responsibility (Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018).

In my research, some non-menstruating participants did state that they would hope they could be involved in such discussions and share responsibility alongside their partners, even if it meant following their female partner's lead. As described by Stephen (30), *"I'd like to think that having those conversations with your kids would be part and parcel...a routine part of parenthood"*. Similarly, Dean (39) said:

I would like as far as possible the goal to be that there isn't really a distinction between father and mother in terms of how we talk to our daughter and any future children about puberty and anything and everything that goes along with it, whether that's menstruation or masturbation or sex or dating, drugs, crime, whatever. I don't think we want to approach that in a gendered way...I would hope that when she gets to that age, she will talk to me about things like menstruation in the same way she'll talk to her mother about them. I'd like to hope we will as far as possible bring her up in a way that facilitates that or gives her the best possible chance of that being the case. But I'm also not ever going to force that on her and if it turns out that she's more comfortable talking about periods with someone who has had periods then I'm not going to be running in brandishing boxes of tampons every time she talks about getting cramps.

This echoes the position of some fathers in the US and UK, who believed it was important for both mothers and fathers to talk to their children about puberty and sexuality and did not want to be excluded from it despite the gendered division of labour offering an easier approach in practical terms (Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018; Wilson and Koo, 2010). For some of my participants, they acknowledged that although they might not have all the information at the time of the interview, they would likely source the information from online should their child ask

a question they cannot respond to. A few participants added to this by stating that they would hope they could search for this information alongside their child as a shared experience, as well as learning from their child too by letting them take the lead in any conversations related to puberty and menstruation.

The main finding from conversations with all my non-menstruating participants is that they all recognised the importance of children/adolescents receiving some education on menstruation. They all believed that their children, daughters, *and* sons, should be educated on menstruation, although the extent of responsibility of the parents to do this in the family home was at times debated within participant responses.

5.5.1 Educating and Supporting Daughters

Changes in family structures and societal norms mean fathers often raise daughters alone and there is growing recognition of fathers as primary caregivers within family units (Girling et al., 2018; Kalman, 2003). When it comes to menstruation, literature argues that fathers can provide some education on menstruation, be supportive in the household when daughters reach menarche, and as fathers are often the head of a household with control of the family finances so they can ensure daughters have access to the menstrual products and any additional resources they require during menstruation (Mahon et al., 2015; Mason et al., 2013; House et al., 2012). In my research, out of the fathers with daughters, only Kieran (39) had some personal experience to share as a father to his 13-year-old who had “*started to go through all that [menstruation]*”. Kieran’s account of his experiences so far painted a picture of it being an ongoing learning process, commenting, “*over the past few years I’ve noticed quite a lot more about it with Jenny starting to go through that cycle*”. As mentioned in chapter 4, Kieran describes experiencing the same silence and exclusion from menstruation from his daughter at home, as he did with female peers in the school context when he was younger, with his daughter opting to speak to her mother about menstruation instead of him. Despite this, Kieran shared how he is the parent who most often does the food shopping for the family, which includes buying menstrual products for his daughter at the supermarket and how he has often had to rush out to a shop when she has run out of menstrual pads and left it until the last minute to communicate that she needs some more. Kieran expressed how he was

comfortable doing this for his daughter and that he would not find it awkward if his daughter wanted to tell him about what she was going through with her periods, but he expressed how his daughter talks to her mother instead “*if there’s something the matter with her*” and that she’d likely find it “*uncool and embarrassing*” talking to him. Despite this, Kieran shared how he sometimes considers this lack of communication between him and his daughter as being his fault as when she started her periods, he had expressed to her how he did not understand what she was going through and that he therefore found it hard to talk about it:

In some ways, I wish I hadn’t said that. She will always go to her mam for advice on stuff like that, so I get kinda like pushed aside from it. Sometimes if we’re [Kieran and his wife] watching the tele, she’ll come through and ask me to leave the room while she talks about it [menstruation].

Yet, in his responses to questions about his role as a father, Kieran demonstrated how menstruation in relation to his eldest daughter had been on his radar for some time and had in fact been causing him some concern due to his lack of knowledge on menstruation and the ways in which he should support her when she first starts her periods. He described how due to his wife often working away and spending long periods of time outside of the family home, that there was a high chance that he might have been the only parent present when their daughter experienced her first period:

Remember when I was saying my wife works away? Well I was getting a bit panicky about, what do I do? What if it’s the first time when Jenny came on, if it was just me, her and the little’n in the house? I wouldn’t have had a clue what to do.

Although his daughter does not talk to him directly about her periods, Kieran shared how he is often aware of the stomach pains she experiences when she’s coming on her period and that he’ll take care of her in the same way as if she was feeling sick or had a cold bug, which is usually done by getting her a hot water bottle and giving her “*the extra bit of TLC*”. When questioned earlier about his own experiences during his adolescence, Kieran described how his own parents did not talk about menstruation with him, stating that they were “*old school*”. It is interesting that despite this silence on puberty and menstruation he personally experienced at home from both his father and mother, as a father of two daughters Kieran recognises his

responsibility to support his children with menstruation. Although for Kieran this may not be by sharing information on menstruation due to his own lack of knowledge, he demonstrates care towards his daughter through practical means i.e., by comfortably purchasing menstrual products for her without any awkwardness and by trying to help alleviate pain by making her a hot water bottle.

The ability to still support daughters in relation to menstruation through practical care, despite not feeling equipped with the right information or some lived experience, was a position also discussed by some other non-menstruating participants when thinking about potential daughters and their future roles as fathers. Although some focus remained on needing to learn more about menstruation to have a better sense of what their daughter would be experiencing and to avoid embarrassment on both parts, some shared alternate ways of being able to be of use to their daughters during this time. For example, Owen (28) recognised how he would need to approach the situation with some sensitivity when attempting to explain the onset of menstruation, and Iain (39) said that although his wife will likely take the lead, he would need to know when to “*back off*” and when to help. Interestingly, Benjamin (32) recognised that he might not have the information his daughter would need from him, but that he had something else to offer; his personal experience, which meant using what he does know to support his daughter:

As a dad you can have a conversation about how a boy might approach your period, having a conversation with your daughter about how a boy might approach your period from a boy’s point of view...and say, ‘we don’t quite understand your experience, what you feel like, we don’t know the products...if boys are trying to have sex with you he might not really understand that it’s your period time and he might not get the consequences of that’.

Fathers recognising the role they can play with their daughters by talking to them about how men think and feel about sex, dating, and relationships by using their personal experience can also be seen in studies in the US and UK (Bennett et al., 2018; Wilson and Koo, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010). As felt by Benjamin, fathers in the US acknowledge that they are better suited to engaging in sexual-risk communication and discussing relationships by using their knowledge of how men think and behave, than their mothers are (Wilson and Koo, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010). It is interesting that menstruation is viewed as a topic which can rarely be

openly and directly discussed between fathers and daughters, yet fathers and participants in my research consider that communication about sex with their daughters is doable and more comfortable for them, despite sex also often being a taboo topic. This is seen as being connected to a father's protectiveness towards their daughter and the consequences of sexual risk which are identified as being greater for daughters than sons (Wilson et al., 2010). Hutchinson and Cederbaum (2011) argue fathers can play an important role in sexual socialization and support daughters regarding the promotion of healthy behaviours and choices around sexual decision making. Although this study in the US with women aged 19-21 years does not touch directly on menstruation as a discussion topic between parent and adolescent, one participant shared how her father's openness to talking about sexual risk had meant he had also supported her to visit the doctor and start taking the contraceptive pill (Hutchinson and Cederbaum, 2011).

Despite a recognition of how and what to communicate, as well as do practically for daughters, non-menstruating participants held the belief that a daughter would likely not want to talk to them about menstruation, especially not in favour of their mother, but they hoped that their daughters would know that they could. Research suggests that daughters often withdraw from fathers when approaching menarche or post menarche, which may play some part in fathers' ambivalence towards communicating about menstruation with them (Allen et al., 2011; Kalman, 2003; Koff and Rierdan, 1995). There were some doubts about the receptiveness of daughters who just talk to their dads about menstruation, purely based on their lack of personal experience, thus some participants hoped that if they did not have a mother present, that they would also have at least one female figure in their life who would have the personal experience they believe is still so crucially important for supporting daughters through puberty and with menstruation. Erchull and Richmond (2015) recognise the importance of this and argue that fathers can also help daughters find female adults for this additional support where necessary. In my research, there was some reliance on the presence of mothers and other women to support daughters with menstruation, so they did not have to. An example of this is Liam (40):

I would be worried if my daughter didn't have a good relationship with her mum...I think I'd have to play a greater role in that, but I'm lucky in that she's got a couple of

women she would be pretty comfortable to talk to about that and I must admit I'm happy that means I won't have to have the discussions. But if I have to, then I'll have it, I'll be open. It'll be a bit awkward on both sides, and it'll be fine.

Menstruating participants interviewed in my research shared how fathers played little if any role in their understanding of menstruation and experiences with menstruation throughout adolescence and into adulthood, echoing existing literature (for example, Fingerson, 2006). For those with both their mothers and fathers in their lives, opting to communicate with their mother was common when it came to menstruation based on shared lived experience and expectations that they knew what they needed. For instance, Jade (31) talked about "*naturally*" heading in the direction of her Mum when it came to menstruation, and Amanda (25) noted how her dad was not involved in menarche celebrations which she shared with her female family members and thinks that that her mum likely discreetly informed her dad that she had started her periods. Similarly, Lucy (21) did not feel like she could talk to her dad about menstruation or sex when she was growing up and Megan (26) did not feel like she needed to talk to her dad because she got what she needed in the form of information and support from her Mum. As described by Kieran when sharing his experiences with his daughter, Jasmin's (21) dad supports her through practical means by filling up her hot water bottle and giving her some pain relief when she asks. Jasmin felt that she had never needed to openly communicate with her father about menstruation because she has her mother at home too, however she shared that she knows he is there for her because of these ways in which he supports her when he "*just knows*" she's menstruating based on the symptoms she describes to him when seeking this support. Jasmin added that this has not always been the case, but that they have both become more open around menstruation as she has aged. This is like Mel's (27) account of their relationship with their dad, in which they acknowledged how their dad did not talk about menstruation when they were younger but that in recent years, he has become more open to doing so because it has become less taboo and more normalised in the home environment. Mel stated, "*I didn't talk about it, so he didn't talk about it*", sharing how their dad is now more aware of the painful periods they experience, and because Mel talks to him more openly about that, he has become less embarrassed and realised it is okay to talk about menstruation with them.

Some of the responses from my own research mirror Girling et al.'s study in Australia (2018), in which fathers explained that they were open to communication about menstrual health more generally, but 19% said they would be uncomfortable talking to their daughters about menstruation. This was closely related to their lack of knowledge on menstrual symptoms, despite being sympathetic towards menstrual pain and being concerned about their daughter's welfare. The tensions and obstacles in accounts and viewpoints discussed by fathers in my research are in line with existing studies documenting parent-child communication around menstruation. For instance, in the UK, mothers are the trusted source of information on menstruation for young people who menstruate, with fewer conversations shared with fathers about periods than mothers (Always, 2021). In Plan International UK's report (Tingle and Vora, 2018), young people in the UK share some negative experiences with their fathers when it comes to their periods. For example, one young menstruator describes her father's intolerance towards her menstrual leaking and blood stains on white towels, which he states she must clean. Another young menstruator describes how her father does not like paying for the expensive menstrual products she requires during her periods. The awkwardness of discussing menstruation with fathers is also raised in this report, with a 15-year-old menstruator sharing how when her sister takes a day off school because of her period, her dad says that she "is unwell" yet they both know what he means, but "we prefer not to talk about it because it gets a bit awkward" (Tingle and Vora, 2018, p.24). Both reports demonstrate how dads and young people experience awkwardness and that dads hold a lack of knowledge on puberty and periods, which impacts on their ability to educate and support their child during menstruation, as well as on daughters wanting to communicate with their father in favour of their mother on the issue. Erchull (2020) argues that when fathers encourage their daughters to be open with them and they then seek support from their fathers, fathers "can find themselves facing a paradox" because they "are also uncomfortable actually talking about menstruation with them" (p.402).

5.5.2 Talking to Sons about Puberty, Penises and Periods

Puberty, penile erections, and wet dreams were recognised as being the more obvious topics non-menstruating participants believed they would need to chat to

sons about. They all also believed there would be some awkwardness in these conversations. Whether it was important for sons to be educated on periods by their parents was a question which often required some additional probing of participants during interviews, as most participants focused solely on their role with daughters in their initial responses. In these cases, it was common for participants to share that they had never considered talking to sons about menstruation prior to that moment in the interview, but in being asked to think about it, they had been indirectly encouraged to consider the importance of it and potential value in doing so. All non-menstruating participants thought it was important for sons to know about menstruation, but they were apprehensive to list exactly what they believed their sons needed to know. Again, there were also some comments about potential discomfort in talking to sons about menstruation. In a previous UK study, fathers who recognised their role in talking to sons about matters related to reproduction in favour of the mother expressed discomfort in doing so (Bennett and Harden, 2019; Bennett et al., 2018). The relevance of a father in these conversations was also debated by participants in my research, as they argued that their child's mother would have some personal experience to bounce off and to direct these discussions. Yet, some participants did acknowledge that as a young boy, to have a father talk about menstruation could be embarrassing, but it would also demonstrate that menstruation is not just a conversation for mothers and daughters, or women and girls to have, especially beyond the childhood home. This perspective is echoed by Erchull and Richmond (2015), who argue that "fathers are in a unique position to disrupt and challenge menstrual taboos" (p.94).

Responses varied in what fathers could and should talk to their sons about regarding menstruation. Martin (25) explained that he "*would just try to get across the idea that it's [menstruation] a normal process and you [boys] shouldn't feel weird about it in any way*". Benjamin (32) viewed it as being an opportunity "*to interject what the general gist is of men's thoughts*" when it comes to menstruation. As noted previously in reference to how he would communicate with a daughter, Benjamin considered that he could use his own experience as someone who does not menstruate but has relations with people who do when talking to a potential son about menstruation in the future:

With your son, there's a part for a father to play there, like trying to help them understand that what women go through with the menstrual cycle, and you might also give your own views on how you manage that time as a boy as well, so when they go on to have partners and daughters and sons, for them to know it's important to have that conversation and be open and honest and understanding about it.

This echoes the position of fathers in the US who recognised themselves as a more important source of information on menstruation for their sons than daughters.

Fathers in this study shared that they were more likely to talk to sons than daughters about behavioural changes such as mood swings and would discuss the need for empathy and advise on how to act with menstruators (Erchull and Richmond, 2015).

As a father of a sexually active teenage son, Kyle (42) shared how there was no communication about menstruation between him and his wife with their son but knows that there should have been in the past. Kyle puts this down to some wider issues they have experienced with their son, but also because his son would run off away from them and avoid any discussions related to puberty in the past on the few occasions when they had tried to engage with him on the matter. Kyle said he hoped to have more positive open communication with his younger son when the time comes and stated that he is comfortable to talk to both sons about the biological side of menstruation as someone who researches and teaches the subject in a science and sport context, but he believes he lacks knowledge and understanding of the more practical aspects of menstruation as a lived experience. Peter's (31) understanding of the importance of talking to his sons about menstruation in the future placed emphasis on sexual risk, specifically the risk of pregnancy and "*how to be careful*", because of his own personal experience of unplanned conception with a previous short-term sexual partner. This association between menstruation and sex is also made by fathers in Erchull and Richmond's study in the US (2015), with some fathers acknowledging menarche as a time to discuss pregnancy and fertility with both daughters and sons.

For some participants, talking to their sons about menstruation was not just about conveying some details of the menstrual cycle, but instead an opportunity to instil positive attitudes into their sons towards women and girls more generally. For these participants, a discussion on menstruation could present an opening to talk to their

sons about “*having respect for women*” (Mark, 27) and “*how to be good to girls*” (Jay, 35). Andrew (25) responded with a similar viewpoint, expressing how he would want his son to be knowledgeable enough to be “*the nicer guy*” and be equipped “*to do the right thing*” when it came to sharing space with his peers who menstruate:

If I was going to have a son, I would want him to be the kind of guy that wasn't laughing about it [menstruation] behind girls' backs, because he doesn't understand it. I'd want him to be a conscientious type, could sympathise and understand, and he knew everything so he could do the right thing. I think there's lots of different ways guys approach periods, so I would want to make sure he was the nicer guy.

My research highlights how men have some understanding of their role as a father when it comes to puberty and sex related communication with their sons and recognise some reasons why sons should be knowledgeable of menstruation. It is clear however that they are not fully certain on what to discuss and how best to approach this need for open communication and knowledge exchange about menstruation between father and son in the context of home and family.

5.6 Conclusion

My research demonstrates the relevance of the childhood home for my non-menstruating participants' experiences of menstruation growing up. Four key areas were identified: lack of communication about menstruation; learning about menstruation through the everyday; mothers as the expected menstrual educator; role of fathers in menstrual education and support. My research indicates that home and family members play a key role in how boys construct meaning around menstruation during childhood and adolescence, through subtle messages and mostly a lack of explicit and open communication about menstruation. Again, like school, this is a site where boys experience some gendered exclusion from menstruation, either in relation to their sisters' or mothers' menstrual experiences, or more generally in terms of limited parent-child communication and education about puberty and sexuality more generally. Through the silences around menstruation, the stigma and othering of menstruation are repeated and perpetuated in the home context. It is important to note here how experiences of menstrual exclusion at school and home may happen concurrently, and how subtle messages picked up

about menstruation may either support, or conflict with one another, potentially causing some confusion and/or additional questioning for boys at this young age. Ultimately though, the childhood home is still a place where boys may develop the understanding that menstruation does not concern them and does not need to concern them.

Yet, unlike school, the home is where menstruation can sometimes be visually exposed to boys, in the case of menstrual blood in the toilet, or in seeing menstrual products in the bathroom. In few cases this had encouraged some openness about menstruation between mothers and sons, but wider cultural shame around women's bodies and menstruation more often meant conversations were not had between mothers and sons and thus, some participants experienced awkwardness and embarrassment as children and adolescents with regards to menstruation in this context. My research draws attention to the significance of mother-son relationships, specifically how the impact of little communication and lack of openness from mothers about their menstrual experiences further limits their understanding and awareness of menstruation as a lived experience, with this silence and concealment continuing throughout the life course with the menopause. Where there had been some communication about mothers' hysterectomies, it was often not explicit and limited in description and detail, reflecting the wider silence around menstruation and women's bodies in the family more broadly. Likewise, few participants were aware of if their mothers had experienced menopause, with limited communication and subtle cues, such as a minor mention of HRT usage, having continued into adulthood. Some experiences presented by participants suggests mothers and sisters may be complicit in perpetuating menstrual shame, stigma, and silence by not openly talking about menstruation and menstrual-related issues with their sons and brothers in the home. Some menstruating participants' accounts highlight how they were told to hide menstruation from their brothers, and for those who talked about menstruation in the presence of brothers were met with disgust and disinterest.

Furthermore, this chapter discussed the relevance of fathers within the home, specifically their lack of involvement when it comes to menstruation. My research shows how fathers were not associated with menstruation and this additional gendered exclusion may have played a key role in how my non-menstruating

participants understood the irrelevance of menstruation for themselves as boys and young men in the home – Dad does not talk about menstruation, so why would I? For most non-menstruating participants, they did not reflect and consider their fathers as needing to be someone who should have talked to them about menstruation during childhood and adolescence. Alternatively, and unsurprisingly, given their lived experience of menstruation, participants viewed mothers as the ‘natural’ menstrual educator for children. Menstruating participants’ accounts of menstruation in the home and with family supports this, with fathers having little, if any, involvement in menstrual education or support during adolescence, although some acknowledged how communication about menstruation with fathers had improved somewhat into adulthood led by their own increased openness around menstruation.

Supporting existing literature, my research indicates that within heterosexual relationships, there is a gendered division of labour when it comes to this parental communication about puberty, menstruation, and sex with children. Despite their own fathers not playing an active role in puberty education in the home, and acknowledging their own lack of knowledge, confidence, and certainty when it comes to menstruation as a topic and experience, promisingly, several of my non-menstruating participants expressed the importance of both daughters and sons being taught about menstruation at home and discussed various ways in which they could contribute to both menstrual education and practical support with their children as current or future fathers. For some this meant trying to normalise menstruation, but for others they viewed talking about the topic of menstruation as being a gateway into some wider discussions with sons especially on how to respect and treat women and girls well more generally. This openness and willingness to try to do things differently with their children than they had experienced as an adolescent challenges hegemonic masculine ideals and traditional notions of fatherhood (Marsiglio and Pleck, 2005), however responses indicate that their future involvement could be more complex in practice because of menstruation still being considered a woman’s issue.

In putting the research findings in conversation with the conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity, it is clear how menstrual education within the home is tied

into broader gendered divisions of labour within families. Menstruation is not only 'othered' as a solely female and stigmatised matter, but any informal education around menstruation that does occur sits primarily with mothers – fathers remain relatively silent and indeed often shielded from menstrual talk. The separation of men from the menstruating body could be interpreted as reinforcing a broader female/biology male/cultural division within society where culture is seen as superior to biology (Ortner, 1972), and where masculine hegemony is predicated on this division. We can see instances where women act to perpetuate men's exclusion from menstruation, where, for example, menstrual taboos mean that many women also feel uncomfortable talking about their experiences especially with men and boys, as patriarchal structures mean that they are also subject to the shame and stigma around menstruation. Nonetheless there are pockets of resistance in my research, including positive masculinities that seek to create more equitable relations between genders by seeking to break down the barriers around menstruation. For example, as current or future fathers who would like to try and do things differently with their own children when it comes to menstruation, demonstrating potential for more caring masculinities to emerge (Elliott, 2016). This is valuable for considering how menstruation as a topic and experience may be managed within the home with a future generation of children, and thus the extent to which exclusion from menstruation in the home for boys, and for fathers, may continue. Moving through adulthood, the home remains a central site for learning about menstruation, this time through partners' menstrual experiences, explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 | Intimate Relationships and Partners

6.1 Introduction

Beyond learning in the school and home contexts, heterosexual and bisexual non-menstruating participants identified their intimate relationships with female partners as being central to their learning and awareness of menstruation and the menstrual cycle. Ranging from first girlfriends to longer-term relationships and wives, participant responses suggest partners are significant in how boys and men gain an understanding of menstruation as a lived reality and experience. For some participants, early relationships in teenage years and those extending into adulthood were identified as the main source of new knowledge on menstruation, which followed the basic biological information taught at school. For instance, Stephen (30), *“became aware of periods and what they were”* through his first girlfriend who he was sexually active with at 16 years old, and then he *“became much more aware of the different facets of having a period”* when he moved in with his now wife in his late twenties. Craig (26), who is married to his partner of 10 years, recognises how their relationship is *“the key thing”* that has shaped his experiences with menstruation since his teenage years. Jay (35) considers that his partners have been more open with him in his adult life, particularly after leaving university, when relationships *“were pretty serious”* and there was *“a lot more intimacy and frank exchange around things”*. Similarly, Ed (28) acknowledges how having longer and more relationships as an adult has meant they have become more interested in menstruation, talk about it more than previously, and they have *“gained some insight into what that’s like”* through their partners. For Dean (39), *“the physical evidence of them [periods] happening”* has been the main exposure he’s had to menstruation within relationships and through partners: *“It’s been blood during sex, doing the laundry and just sort of almost idly noticing blood stains on partners’ underwear, or things like that”*. Summed up by Peter (31) when discussing his relationships and becoming a father, *“I’ve learnt more in this process than what I would have done in school. I suppose it [school] gives you the basics, but obviously you don’t live it.”*

Although partners were acknowledged as playing a central role in how these participants had increased their awareness and understanding of menstruation, this

was not always as an outcome of overt communication and direct open dialogue, but instead through the silence, subtle cues, and incidents they had observed and experienced in relation to the menstrual cycle within their relationships. Leading on from the two previous chapters on school and home, examples of covert and overt communication continue into these intimate relationships. Within discussions with participants about relationships, it was apparent that their awareness of menstruation had often increased through their everyday lived experiences, such as seeing partners' menstrual products or acknowledging cyclical changes in partners, such as their mood and libido, or physical changes such as breast swelling and abdominal bloating. For some participants, partners' menstrual cycles seemed to shape their relationships, as though the patterns of their relationship were guided by the menstrual cycle of their partner. In some cases, their understanding of, and interest in, the menstrual cycle had also increased through conversations and experiences with partners related to contraception, conception, infertility, and birth. This fed into wider discussions around sex and intimacy (physical and emotional), and particularly the acceptability of menstrual sex within short-term and long-term relationships, or with casual sexual partners.

There is value in critically understanding menstrual attitudes through heterosexual intimacy and relationships, as this is where menstruation will often become an everyday reality for men through their partners' experiences, and where the menstrual cycle may begin to have a personal impact on their lives with regards to entering fatherhood. In studies conducted in Australia, Brazil, and the US (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Reberte et al., 2014; Allen et al., 2011), men report how they have gained some understanding, maturity, and comfort around menstruation, developed through their intimate relationships as they were able to learn more about the menstrual cycle from their partners and can share the experience of menstruation with them. Thus, intimate relationships are where menstruation becomes routine and a reality for men as non-menstruators, and as recognised in Allen et al.'s study in the US, this embracing of menstruation through partners by men "revealing their capacity for intimacy and protectiveness toward their partners" in relation to menstruation is understood as a "previously unmarked" way that men "come of age as a man" (2011, p.151).

This chapter will firstly explore participants' experiences of learning about menstruation and the menstrual cycle through everyday practices within the dynamics of a relationship, particularly around the sharing of menstrual status. Closely linked to this, the chapter will explore participants' experiences of, and attitudes towards, supporting partners during their menstrual cycle. It will then move on to examine participants' accounts of how menstruation and the menstrual cycle impact sex and intimacy with female partners, leading to an exploration of how related topics and issues addressed in relationships with partners, such as contraception and infertility, have fed into their understanding of menstruation and the menstrual cycle. The areas explored in the chapter offer insight into how these participants view their roles within their relationships when it comes to menstruation and menstrual-related issues and experiences with partners. Additionally, the final section draws on the experiences shared by participants who menstruate in relation to their male partners and both past and present relationships, providing further commentary to the chapter.

6.2 Sharing of Menstrual Status and Menstrual Experiences

Non-menstruating participant responses indicate learning around menstruation and the menstrual cycle within intimate relationships occurs through everyday life. Just as subtle messages were received and understood at school and in the childhood home, it is clear these subtle messages and ideas around menstruation and the menstrual cycle extend to and exist within heterosexual relationships, contributing towards men and boys' understandings of menstruation. Central to discussions with participants about their experiences with partners was if, and how, partners shared their menstrual status and experiences with them. Although most participants acknowledged the relevance of menstruation in relation to their relationships and partners, few participants said their partners were explicit about their menstrual experiences and it was not always known when their partners were menstruating. Reflecting on his different partners over the years, Dean (39) acknowledged one partner who *"found it a bit more embarrassing to talk about"* but considered himself lucky that he had *"never had to try and puzzle it out from a series of cryptic clues as to what's happening"* with his partners: *"I've always been with people who have been happy to say 'ugh my period has come', or, 'thank God, my period has come'".* For

some participants, becoming aware of a partner's period was through their complaints of symptoms such as pain, or noticing their partners using menstrual products. Alex (26) described it as "*that weird thing of not volunteering more than a certain amount of information about it*", when reflecting on his ex-girlfriend's reluctance to talk openly about her periods with him. Although he acknowledged she would sometimes mention the cramps she was experiencing, or how a few times she had mentioned her period was late, Alex described situations where he was unaware of her period but had felt a pad in her underwear when trying to initiate sex in bed:

She'd be like "ah, yeah", and I almost felt like, 'why didn't you say anything?' But obviously it's her right to tell me what she wants to and what she doesn't want to tell me...It's one of those things, there's situations where yeah it would have been nicer to know, but also most of the time I didn't need to specifically know. But you want to know what someone is doing, it's a big part of how someone is generally, on that sort of cycle.

This response indicates that although Alex feels that he does not need to know when his partner is menstruating "*most of the time*", he acknowledges the value in knowing, which here suggests that he does want to know how his partner is feeling when experiencing menstruation. For some other participants, their understanding of partners openly talking about their periods by sharing their menstrual status was more related to having some awareness of how their partner is feeling. Kevin (42) wants to be aware of how his partner is feeling and argued the need for openness and emotional intimacy around menstruation in a relationship, indicating that he considers menstruation can and should be a shared experience:

When you're in a relationship with somebody, you just want to talk about stuff like that, I want to know how she's feeling or whatever. You're a team y'know, you want to know about these things.

Non-binary participant Ed (28) reflected on how their current partner talks about the pain she is experiencing, how she will sometimes mention that her flow is heavy, or that her period is lasting longer than usual. Ed acknowledges this sharing of information as being about "*practicalities*", but more so about "*knowing what is going on...and being aware of where she's at*". Although Ed recognises how their interest and openness towards talking about menstruation has developed through their "*steady stable relationships*" with adult partners, they also recognise how sometimes

they will still question in the back of their mind, *'oh, why are you talking about that?'*. Ed describes this as *"a learned reaction"*, which is soon outweighed when the rest of their head *"steps in like, 'of course, it's not a problem'"*.

Openness of current and previous partners when it came to sharing menstrual status was often for the purpose of everyday logistics, for instance acknowledging how their period was going to impact their plans that day or in the week ahead. Similarly, general discussions of when a period was expected tended to be related to wider conversations of booking trips or planning meet ups for participants in longer distance relationships. For example, Dean (39) said:

I had my first girlfriend when I was 18 and I remember her having periods and it being a sort of matter-of-fact thing. I remember one time, I went to uni quite close to where we grew up and she took a gap year, so she would come and stay with me at uni. We'd have just sort of matter-of-fact conversations. At least one occasion when she didn't want to come and stay one particular weekend, was because she had her period.

In these cases, openness to talk about menstruation and plan travel around partners' menstrual cycles was acknowledged as being necessary for two main reasons. Firstly, a few participants shared how their female partners had identified how they would be feeling in the run up to their period and preferred to not be in the company of their boyfriends. Secondly, this openness and strategic planning was heavily related to ensuring sexual intercourse and intimacy could take place without any PMS symptoms or menstrual blood to consider. Dan (27), who has been in a relationship with his girlfriend for 15 months, shared how his current relationship is long distance between London and North East England. As they try to see each other at least once a month, they are now at the stage of openly communicating about his partner's menstrual cycle to plan with suitable dates, so it does not impact their sex life:

There was a period where, a time where, we were seeing each other at the end of the month and that's when she was always on, and she was like, "we need to change this up because it's affecting our sex life by me being on every time". It was only after 3 or 4 times of that happening that she was like, "we need to do something". I hadn't really clocked it, like processed it, 'ah we are always seeing each other at the same time every month, if that's your time then that's bad for our sex life' - so now we try and see each other in the middle of the month basically...When you're there with

each other there's sort of that set time, you know you're there for those three days, there's a lot more pressure for there to be some intimacy because you're not going to see them for another month or whatever.

Interestingly, Dan understood this open communication as being important for the sake of planning when they would be seeing each other next around the constraints of their long-distance relationship but shared how he did not always know when his partner's period started or ended, because he was not with her in person during this time anymore. Despite this, when comparing his long-distance relationship to being able to see his partner every other night, Dan said, *"I can imagine it not being as much of a thing that needs to be or is discussed, it doesn't really impact you because it's just like, 'we just didn't [have sex] but next time we will'".* Aside from changing when they would see each other because of the impact Dan's partner's period was having on their sex life, Dan shared how his partner had acknowledged how the symptoms she was experiencing were generally impacting on their time spent together:

She was saying when she was with me, she was like more hormonal and more emotional and stuff like that. "It was making me madder at you even though you weren't doing anything differently, just because that was the time and that was the only time I got to see you and then if things weren't perfect, I would y'know- potentially spiral and stuff"- So I think it was probably a good thing [changing dates].

Here, Dan acknowledges and accepts his partner's position on the need to change the dates they plan to see each other around her cycle because of the cyclical emotional changes she would experience. It is unclear whether Dan had offered a different take on the matter to his partner, but alongside the need to plan differently because of the impact on their sex life, Dan's responses suggest he agreed that his partner's menstrual cycle was impacting the quality of their limited time spent together. Across the participants, it was also clear how sharing menstrual status was often done to excuse or rationalise partners' cyclical mood changes, or to support partners' request for personal space or support. Although Dan shared how he did not *always* know when his girlfriend was menstruating, he considered her to be *"quite open about it"*, but this openness at times was closely tied to justifying, or at the least explaining, her change in mood or behaviour. Dan found this to be a complex exchange to manage with his partner as someone who does not menstruate and who did not want to "stigmatise her experience", as explained in this woke response:

There's times when she says to me, "I'm sorry I was mad, I'm feeling very hormonal" or whatever, which I really never know how to deal with. I know there's a sort of stereotype of like writing off like, 'ah she's on her period and she's hormonal', which I never want to do because that's really dismissive and horrible. When she says it, I'm like, 'I don't know what to do with this information', because I don't want to be, like, 'well it doesn't matter then', or equally be like, 'oh it makes sense now kinda thing'. I can't at all put myself in those shoes, I don't know how that feels. I find it interesting when she identifies that that's why she's been mad or that's why she's been upset or something...I don't wanna nullify or stigmatise her experience by being like, "ah it makes sense that's why you were mad then", or if she is mad, in the moment being like, "ah, you're on your period!" I wouldn't be that person, but it's hard to sort of process it because there might be a time when she's mad and I'm like, 'ah she's on her period'. I don't know, is it real mad or period mad?

The length of relationships and marital status were common points of reference raised by some participants in relation to how they understand their partners' openness to talking about menstruation and their menstrual cycle. Nonetheless, there was no commonality of experience overall, with experiences varying across participants' responses and recollections of partners and situations throughout their adolescence and adult life. Neil (37), who believes getting into a long-term relationship meant "*actively becoming aware*" of menstruation, shares how his wife, whom he is now separated from after 15+ years together, did not openly communicate about her period. He reflected on how he would pick up on "*little sort of minute differences*" such as clumsiness leading up to her period, describing it as "*sort of like a sixth sense rather than [knowing] dates*". Jason (26) shared how partners who have not been as open about menstruation with him have been those he has shared shorter-term relationships with, but he recognises that the longer they spent together, the more comfortable they have been to talk about it, "*like it is what it is sort of thing*". This suggests emotional intimacy around menstruation is developed over time within the context of intimate relationships. On the contrary, Jordan (25) described "*that hyper comfortable phase*" you're in when you're texting a lot in an early relationship, and "*you just naturally talk about everything*". He reflects on how he's picked up on some interesting information and "*really profound things that you aren't going to see on the surface or associate with something that is so physical*" through this context, such as, "*for three days in a month you know you're going to sit at a desk and not be able to concentrate*". Jordan recognises that learning more about menstruation through this more detailed and open sharing taking place within

the early stages of a relationship, allows him to be closer to the realities of menstruation, and to his partners, where he has “*an opportunity to be empathetic and sympathetic*” towards them. Kyle (42) who has been with his now wife for 20+ years, shared how his partner will say when she’s menstruating and “*is quite open talking about when she’s feeling pain*”, this openness he understands as reflecting the length of their relationship. Furthermore, he feels he picks up on cues or subtle signs that his wife is menstruating or approaching menstruation after being together for such a long period of time. This presents an additional example of how both menstrual awareness and intimacy may develop throughout the course of a heterosexual intimate relationship. In previous research, men in the US share how their interactions with partners about menstruation is an opportunity to show respect, care, and empathy for their partner (Allen et al., 2011). Similarly, men in the UK understood their interest in menstruation with their partners as being “part of the process of getting more closely involved with their wives or girlfriends” over time (Laws, 1990, p.129), which they chose to demonstrate through practical ways of helping their partners manage their painful periods, such as filling up a hot water bottle for them.

Living with partners, either within a marriage or through cohabitation, was identified by some non-menstruating participants as being the reason for having some awareness of when their partner was menstruating. For example, Jason (26) acknowledged how living with his ex for two years out of the four years and six months they were together meant he could “*pick up their cycles and understand when it’s going to be happening and what time to expect it sort of thing*”. He said the clear communication between them also meant he knew when her period was late and they “*were both on the same page in case a mistake had happened*”, meaning unplanned conception. When asked if they thought they had a role to play with their wife’s period, Stephen (30) acknowledged how sharing a household with someone means “*you kinda share everything*”. By contrast, this was not the case for Kevin (42) who shared how his ex-partner did not talk about her periods within their home, but instead he would suspect she was on her period due to a change in behaviour, which would soon be confirmed by “*tell-tale signs*” such as wearing different clothes and her choice of underwear:

If she had big knickers on, I knew she was on her period, but she would never say “I’m on my period”. She would never do that, but I just knew, I could tell. She was different, she would snap, she just wasn’t herself, then I’d see she was wearing her big knickers and I’d think, “ah she’s on her period”. Talking about her, she was the kind of person I couldn’t really talk to about it, she wouldn’t want to talk about it, so I didn’t talk about it.

Kevin’s reference to how she “*just wasn’t herself*” indicates his acknowledgment of the influence of the menstrual cycle on his ex-partner, but also suggests any change in mood or/and behaviour would be associated with her menstruating.

Picking up on the signals such as these described by Kevin was mentioned by several participants, especially those who felt like they did not share open conversations with their partners about menstruation and their menstrual cycles. For instance, Liam (40) would often learn his partner was menstruating through seeing menstrual products in the home:

We’ve been together for 20 odd years, we have two kids, we do not have sex as often as we used to have sex. It’s certainly not like that is how I know. I will often know just because you’ll see a tampon wrapper that’s next to the bin rather than in the bin, just little things like that, right? So, I’ll often know for reasons like that, or possibly the tampon hasn’t flushed in the loo but there’s certainly no overt communication about it.

Building on from Dan’s earlier difficulties with knowing if his girlfriend’s heightened emotions are related to her period, a point touched on by several participants was that heated arguments in the relationship and obvious changes in a partner’s emotional state is often instantly associated with them being due on their period or menstruating at the time. Iain (39) who has been with his wife for 11 years and married for 8 years, said that although she does tend to mention when she’s menstruating, “*you can pick up signals, you can pick up changes in behaviour*” regardless. Benjamin (32) shared how a common time for discussion around periods with partners was in relation to these emotional and behavioural changes: “*I’m pretty sensitive to know when they’re just off, or snappy, or really weird. That sort of change in emotion. That for me triggers a conversation about a period or upcoming period, I think.*” Benjamin values having “*full free flowing conversations around menstruation and the hormonal changes that might happen*” with his current partner and recognises how being invested in his partner’s menstrual experiences has

benefits for their relationship. On the other hand, he recognised how this openness in their relationship “*gave some legitimacy*” to how his partner is feeling and what she is experiencing, but in doing so, makes her changes in behaviour and mood “*excusable*”. Despite this, Benjamin considers the conversations he has shared with his partner about menstruation and hormonal changes help him to take a step back, be mindful, and ask himself what is happening when she “*might be acting a little bit strangely, or oddly...during certain times of the month*”. Although Benjamin’s account here indicates that covert communication between him and his partner may be beneficial for their relationship, this association of menstrual and hormonal shifts with ‘strange’ or ‘odd’ behaviour, also noted by some other participants, reflects wider discourse on the menstruating woman and menstruation as a disorder or illness (King et al., 2014; Ussher, 2006).

6.3 Supporting Partners

Building on the previous section, the sharing of menstrual status within a relationship enabled some non-menstruating participants to discuss ways in which they felt they had actively supported partners when they are menstruating, or at certain points of their cycle. The ways in which they had done this varied between participants, and although not all participants recognised themselves as having a role to play during this time, some responses shed light on their understanding of menstruation as an experience, as well as how they understand their ability to contribute towards more positive menstrual experiences for their current or future partners.

6.3.1 Using Menstrual-Tracking Apps

Firstly, the sharing of menstrual status and involvement in partners’ menstrual cycles extended to using menstrual tracking apps/fertility tracking apps for some participants. This was not particularly surprising, given these apps’ popularity and their ability to share data through a simple invite link, giving users an opportunity to connect with friends or partners. In the case of my participants, these apps served as a mode for them to covertly communicate about the menstrual cycle with their partners. What came from discussions around menstrual tracking apps with participants was how they viewed the purpose of these apps, particularly what they

considered their value to be within the dynamics of their relationship when using them with their partner. Although the purpose varied slightly between these participants, their experiences all pointed towards acknowledging menstrual tracking apps as tools to demonstrate support for their partner and their menstrual experiences. Reflecting on Benjamin's earlier comments, having some open discussions with his partner about the hormonal changes she experiences had led them to using a menstrual tracking app together. Although he expressed some uncertainty around the app's functionality, Benjamin recognised the app as another way of learning about the menstrual cycle. However, what came across more strongly during the interview was how using this app together meant his partner was able to acknowledge *his* interest in her menstrual experiences, which he saw as positive for their relationship:

We've even taken it as far as say...you know those apps and you can sort of input it. It's so crazy right, all these apps, it's not just marketing tools. They're actually designed not just for women to use. So, you can manage menstruation and contraception that might be involved, but it also gets all their partners and blokes to keep track and learn a little bit. So, we went as far as downloading an app about it and she can sort of update how she's feeling and what was going on in her cycle and that kind of thing. This app in particular, it was pretty crap, it wasn't that great, the functionality of it wasn't that great, but the principle was really good and really simple. I think for my partner she was very much like, well I was kinda invested in how she felt and what she was experiencing, and that alone was a huge benefit for our relationship, but it also gave some legitimacy, dare I say legitimacy, to how she was feeling, and I think that's what she really valued from it and one of the benefits.

Interestingly, although Benjamin recognised this openness shared through the app as being positive for their relationship, he drew on his idea of "*legitimacy*" once again, referring to it as "*a free pass*" she can use to make her changes in emotion and behaviour "*excusable*". Alongside the open conversations Kevin (42) shared with his current partner about menstruation, using a menstrual tracking app enabled Kevin to feel involved in his partner's recent diagnosis of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). Although he acknowledged the usefulness of the app prior to this diagnosis as it meant he knew when his partner's period was due without her always needing to communicate it each month, having access to her cycle information through the app on his phone meant they could both see and monitor the irregularity of her cycle and associated symptoms being experienced:

She was recently diagnosed with PCOS so we're still learning about that, we're still pretty fresh on that. We're both kind of learning what she can do and what she can't do in regard to polycystic ovary syndrome, but one of the effects of that- is that it throws her cycle into turmoil, we never know when she's going to come on her period. She has an app on her phone, and it's synced to my phone as well, so we both keep an eye on it.

Beyond using a menstrual tracking app with a partner for the purposes of monitoring symptoms and cycle length, their usefulness was acknowledged by Stephen (30) in relation to fertility and conception. Although Stephen does not have the app synced to his phone, he shared how he had recently been involved in using an app with his wife who has started tracking her cycle as they looked ahead to trying to conceive soon. Stephen recognised that he knew "*the basics*" of why menstruation occurs, whilst acknowledging the things he does not know so well. He did not identify using an app as being a way for him to improve his understanding of the menstrual cycle, yet his awareness of his wife using the app, and why she was using it, suggested he felt involved in the process and viewed this recent interaction with his wife positively:

My wife has now got an app on her phone to track her cycle because we're looking at maybe trying to have a kid over the next year or so, so she's using that. I don't have it [the app], it's actually just on her phone. We sat and looked at it on Saturday. We're not actively trying just now but we're using the app to build up a cycle history and she had a long cycle of 49 days, and she showed me on the app how going back to April the calendar is shaded and the app says you're so many days late, when you're fertile and all that. So, [being] part of it in the sense that I know it's being used and what it's being used for.

Hamper (2021) acknowledges the ability to share cycle tracking information between two devices using smartphone apps as an invitation to partners to be involved in both the "practical and emotional pursuit of conception" (p.12). Not only do these apps prompt and support interest in conception for the partner, but they also help partners take an active role in the timing of sexual intercourse, presenting themselves as a solution to the unequal weight and worry of conceptive fertility work usually placed on women. Hamper also recognises how inviting partners to access this information "draws on broader narratives of togetherness in future parenthood" (p.6). I suggest this idea of 'togetherness' between partners using a cycle tracking app extends outside the planning of conception and exists in relation to cyclical changes more generally, as my participant responses indicate here.

6.3.2 Purchasing Menstrual Products for Partners

An additional area discussed by several non-menstruating participants was how they had bought menstrual products for partners in the past, and their various experiences of doing this, although few participants chose to use the words 'pads' and 'tampons' in their responses. Dan (27) was one of the few who did, yet he shared how his current girlfriend of 1 year and 2/3 months does not say the words in front of him:

I've been out with my girlfriend, and she's been like, "I need to pick up some...erm...". I think she gets uncomfortable about it actually; I don't think she's ever said tampons or whatever. I think she says I need to pick up *something*, but I know that means she needs to get tampons or something like that. It's more of a code than her being explicit.

Jason (26) who at first had been unsure which he needed to buy for an ex-partner said, *"It doesn't hurt to show you're supporting your partner by going and buying her what she needs. In my head that's how it works anyway, I'd just go and get it"*.

Although like most participants, Jason acknowledged buying pads and tampons as having *"the same stigma of buying condoms"*, he was keen to convey how you have to *"just embrace it"*, because *"it's a natural thing, everyone goes through it"*. This association of menstrual products with condoms in the interviews suggests Jason and others are confronted with similar anxieties and apprehension when holding menstrual products in a public space, and thus view menstruation as taboo and socially stigmatising as sex. Conversely, in Liam's (40) long-term relationship, heading to a shop to buy products for his partner was not something he had done early on into their relationship, but *"for the last 13 or 14 years it's been perfectly normal...I get a shopping list and it's as normal as bread and milk"*. Similarly, Kieran (39) said he's *"always been comfortable"* purchasing menstrual products for his wife, however he did recognise how she had not asked him to do so early in their relationship, and in fact the first time he did was after they had married in his mid-twenties. When questioned further, Kieran did not believe this was related to their marital status, but rather their increased maturity and intimacy as they had aged. Participants sharing more positive and open approaches to buying menstrual products for partners also shared how their awareness of different types had improved through open discussions with their partners. An example of this is Ross

(38) who said he had “*a little bit of an awareness*” of different types from buying them for his wife and knowing he should understand what it is she needs. This had recently developed further for Ross as an outcome of discussing sustainability and environmentally friendly menstrual products with his wife, who had started to look at switching to reusable menstrual cups. This was a similar situation for Stephen (30), who was keen to share how his wife had been talking to him about the environmental impact of using tampons and that she was also interested in switching to a reusable menstrual cup. Stephen was given “*quite detailed instructions*” of what he needed to look for the first time he had been asked to buy menstrual products for a partner, but he shared how he’s found it easy “*to get the jist*” since he moved in with his partner, as he’s now often reminded just by seeing yellow and green Tampax boxes lying around the house.

Attempts to buy the correct, or preferred, menstrual products had resulted in some awkwardness for participants in the shopping aisles, or at times even tension between some participants and their partners when they had taken home the wrong type or size. Worries around this were equally shared by participants who had not bought menstrual products in the past or had not been asked to by anyone. Dan (27) reflected on being asked to “*pick up some tampons*” on his way over to his first girlfriend’s house when he was 17/18 years old and able to drive before she could. He described being “*a bit stressed about it*” based on the fact he didn’t know what he was looking for and therefore didn’t know enough to ask for help in the shop. Despite this, Dan said he thought of it as being “*one of those grown-up milestones*”. For Mark (27), buying pads for his ex-girlfriend by just “*going off the colours*” had been a learning experience, as he once bought pads for her which were for a heavy flow and were too big for her to wear. He described his current partner as being more specific about which menstrual products she needs so he therefore has a better understanding of what to buy for her, going on to say, “*I need to be trained, I don’t necessarily know the differentiations of what you need for certain things*”. Iain (39) shared a similar experience of buying the wrong pads for his wife, the first and only time he was asked to, describing it as “*a disaster*”:

I got given a list for pads and went and stood there in Tesco, bought them and they were the wrong type...It didn’t go down very well. I got the wrong ones. It was a case of, “I’ve messed up”. I left the pads, and I left the receipt, and I left the card, and I

think she went out the next day and exchanged them. It wasn't discussed, I think she thought what she asked me to do was relatively straight forward and I messed up.

Despite this, when asked if he thought all children and young adults should be taught about the different types of menstrual products, Iain partially understood the benefits of doing this, but said, *"I would imagine that a woman would feel a lot better if they bought their own products. They've bought it and it's like their thing to deal with. They go out, they buy the products and it's part of their self-care."* During Iain's interview, I recall becoming increasingly alert to his position on this, especially in response to this reference to it being "their thing to deal with", which suggests Iain feels menstruation should not be a shared experience between partners, and instead be solely the woman's "thing" in this case. Iain's comment on it also being a form of "self-care" is unique here, in which menstruation is effectively positioned as a personal responsibility of the woman. Based on this one experience with his wife, which was not discussed any further between them at the time, it was clear during the interview with Iain that he did not feel comfortable, or confident enough, to be asked to buy any menstrual products again in the future. Instead, he was firm in his position that it is not something he, and other men, should do for partners.

As demonstrated, experiences around buying, or at least being asked to buy menstrual products for partners varied between participants, regardless of age, marital status, relationship duration etc. However, a significant finding is that even for some participants who shared how they had some open discussion with partners about their periods, it did not mean that they had talked about menstrual products with them or had been involved in any experiences with their partners related to menstrual products. For these participants, they held neutral or positive attitudes towards the prospect of buying menstrual products for a partner in the future if they were to be asked, but this would be only if their partner at the time initiated the discussion. The following quote from Benjamin (32) captures the complexity of this within a relationship:

Our conversations never go as far as products, or "what products do you use?", or "how do you manage the actual process of your period as far as products?". I think the summary of our conversation would go as far as how long do they last, the timings, the influences of contraception, the behavioural changes or hormonal changes that might come as a result of it. I've never been sent to the shops to buy something. I wouldn't even know where to start...I'd feel really trusted (laughs), I'd

feel really trusted about going to get it. I'd feel pretty adult, pretty mature going to get it. I probably wouldn't just buy it in isolation, I'd probably buy something else along with it. I feel like I'd be in a really committed relationship to be asked to go and do that. At this stage I'm at now, I wouldn't be weirded out by it, it's just another product isn't it. I wouldn't flinch about it. I would be so paranoid about getting the wrong thing, I'd be like oh god have I got it, because there are loads of options isn't there? 'Is this the right thing?' But if you sent me a picture of it, I'd go and get it and for me it's not a drama.

6.3.3 Offering Alternate Forms of Support

Beyond buying menstrual products for partners, some non-menstruating participants chose to reflect on how their awareness and understanding of menstruation as a lived experience had developed through their partners when it came to knowing their partners' needs around their period. Responses around this were often framed with some initial hesitancy when talking about what they do for their partners to support them, with some participants not acknowledging that they do anything extra or out of the ordinary for them. Interestingly at this point in the interviews, some participants questioned if they should be changing their behaviour or making more of an effort with their partners when they're due on their periods or menstruating, with a couple participants saying that they had not thought of it before, but perhaps that they should do more often. I acknowledge how being interviewed by a feminist may have prompted these reflections, which I previously discussed in the methodology chapter regarding participants additional knowledge-building questions they asked during and after the interview. For these participants, they did not associate themselves as having an obvious role to play in supporting menstruating partners, yet they demonstrated some acceptance of the various ways menstruation impacts their partners. Interestingly, some participants also shared how they experience occasional feelings of helplessness when their partners are menstruating, with frustrations and struggles around how to act and what to do. Jordan (25) understood that as a partner, he should not be the cause of any undue stress or "*a heightened state of emotion*", and that it would be good for him to pick up some ibuprofen if his partner is feeling bad physically, but he shared his own uncertainty towards his role, specifically as someone who does not menstruate:

There's also an element of feeling a little bit powerless and out of the loop in the role of the partner at that time. It's like just let it run its course, and ultimately, they know what their body needs. *You don't want to mansplain their period* (laughs).

Here, Jordan recognises the tensions between wanting to support his partner but feeling there are some barriers to him doing so. Most significantly, Jordan highlights how there is a risk of being *too* involved, what he brands as an act of 'mansplaining'. A recent rise in the use of the term 'mansplain' – a neologism generally referring to "a man explaining something to a woman in a tone perceived as condescending" appearing to hold expert status "due to arrogance and privilege" (Bridges, 2017, p.94), most notably on social media, has also drawn attention to the commonality of mansplaining specifically around menstruation, with social media users sharing their personal experiences and calling other users out for their mansplaining. Such instances have frequently been related to the call for free public access to menstrual products, with comments directed towards women's 'ability' to "hold" their periods in until they are home or sharing the 'low cost' of menstrual products and underestimating the quality and number of these products needed for the duration of a period. Given this, it is unsurprising that Jordan feels this way, recognising his lack of knowledge and understanding of menstruation as a man who does not menstruate.

For those who shared their experiences of offering alternate forms of support towards partners, it seemed to revolve around food, often chocolate or indulgent high calorie food items, practical methods of providing comfort to ease pain, being flexible with plans, or ensuring their partners have the space they think they need or have asked for during this time. Mark (27) said:

I've bought certain things knowing they're on their period that I know they enjoy. Also just cooking meals rather than them cooking or buying takeouts. Trying to get the things I know they like while they're on their period, because I know that they appreciate the comfort of having something they enjoy.

Similarly, for Benjamin (32), who is aware of how his partner's diet changes around her period, his support tends to come by tweaking his own diet and cooking at this time:

What she wants to eat is crazy different. The key thing is, once I know what's going on (laughs), I think I'm a bit more lenient with diet stuff if she's suggesting crazy things. You're a bit more like, 'okay, it's an experience I'll never go through, and I

want to be super empathetic and understanding at the time and help you through it'. What's 3 days of whatever diet change you want? Or, if she's not really up to cooking, just try to be a little bit more supportive there.

This sort of adjustment extended to changing plans they had with their partners due to how they were feeling around the time of their period, with symptoms experienced during menstruation often being likened to a sickness or illness, in which they expressed that their understanding and actions would be the same. Owen (28) said it does not factor in whether it's because his girlfriend is menstruating and is in bed with period pains, or whether she is in bed with the flu, "*you want them to feel better*". Although this support across the board may present itself as a positive approach to supporting partners during menstruation, it also suggests that in these cases that menstruation is being viewed as an illness, perpetuating menstrual stigma, and moving further away from normalising menstruation as a biological function.

Changing plans and maintaining some flexibility around partners' menstrual cycles, but most importantly reaching out to support partners, was viewed as being part and parcel of having a partner and being in a relationship. For instance, Stephen (30) said:

It's just part of what makes an adult relationship, you have to share burdens and help and look after each other, all that...If you're in a relationship where one of you isn't 100% physically or mentally, and the other person doesn't pick up the slack or help you, or isn't there to support you, I don't see that as being a relationship. I see that as being a very one-sided dialogue really.

Stephen went on to share how just the previous day to the interview, the plans he had in mind for him and his partner of six years were unable to happen due to her period, which he said was not the first time he had been okay with changing or rearranging plans:

The first couple of days when it's really uncomfortable and painful, it's more a case of what does she want to do? Like yesterday when she came on, I wanted to go for a walk because the weather was quite nice, and she was like well that's not happening because I want to lie on the couch. Fair enough, you're not going to drag someone out who's not feeling well, are you? I'm happy to change plans if the period comes. I don't drive, my wife is the one who drives and there was a time we were going to go for a drive somewhere, and she got her period, but you just change your plans.

An interesting area for participants to share, was how they had picked up on the practicalities of menstruation from partners, becoming more aware of how partner's

needs varied between cycles. As shown in Benjamin's (32) response, his current partner will *"want lots of space in the bed, or she'll want to lie down on the longer couch"*. For Jason (26), he understood how when menstruating, or when they are due on their period, partners have been *"more cautious"* when going out, *"making sure they know where restrooms are, so if they do need to go and change or anything like that, they've got access to do that rather than sort of being stuck"*. Accompanying these areas of interest with participants, was how they could try to ease the cramp pains being experienced by partners or support them by making them more physically comfortable. This was mainly related to making a hot water bottle, preparing a hot drink, and/or finding some pain relief medication. Participants demonstrated some understanding of menstrual symptoms in relation to their chosen actions towards easing their partners' pain and trying to ensure a more positive menstrual experience. This has a likeness to Peranovic and Bentley's study in Australia (2017), in which some male participants considered themselves as holding an active role when their partner is menstruating as they provide practical support, such as filling a hot water bottle for them and listening to their experiences of pain. As previously noted, practical means of support such as filling a hot water bottle, enabled men in the UK to demonstrate their support and closeness to their partners experiencing menstruation-induced pain (Laws, 1990).

In relation to ensuring partners have some physical and mental space during menstruation, it was common for participants to refer to changes in their partner's moods and behaviour, acknowledging how providing support to them may come in the form of trying to avoid causing arguments and limiting tension in the household or relationship. An example of this is Jason (26), who said he was *"careful"* in how he approached certain things early on in a previous relationship to prevent risking upsetting or annoying his girlfriend at the time, because he knew they could react differently if he said something that was usually taken as a joke. Iain (39) shared a similar experience with previous partners and his now wife:

I've just had to back off- My wife just goes very very quiet, and she just doesn't really say much or do anything. I know to back off and not try to be sarcastic or pass any comments, or anything like that...I would say definitely I know to back off, yeah, I know to back off...I tried [to support] earlier on when I was in my twenties when I was with another woman, and I learnt, or rather I found, it's best to just let a woman go through it. I think they probably, well the women I've sort of been dating and the

woman I'm married to now, I think it's just an unpleasant time and she would rather just have me back off, literally, and be able to let her feel sorry for herself.

Iain indirectly expresses his negative feelings in a passive-aggressive manner here, but he also recognises a literal distance between him and his partners when they are menstruating. Although not described as being a form of isolation or seclusion, this perspective of the need to “*back off*” and “*let a woman go through it*” suggests there is an othering of the menstruating woman here. It also adds to his previous comments about women needing to buy menstrual products for themselves, rather than partners picking them up when needed, as it's “*their thing to deal with*”. It was clear how based on his past experiences he shared, Iain was not fully involved in his wife's menstrual experiences, and he said he did not consider himself to have “*a formal role*” to play, but felt he knew what was needed from him at the time, which was “*to back off*” and “*not invade*” their space. However, explored further, Iain said, “*if you try and make light of it [menstruation], you could end up upsetting a girl, you could affect her self-worth or her confidence*”, so instead he feels it's about “*being sensitive to it because it's not a nice experience*” and as described by several participants, “*knowing when to be supportive and when not*”. In practice, this means for him to remove himself from situations related to menstruation.

6.4 Sex and Intimacy

Attitudes towards menstrual sex varied between non-menstruating participants, but some responses suggest that perspectives and experiences are dependent on, and at times shaped by, partners' preferences and the communication (or lack thereof) shared between them. Although this section looks specifically at physical intimacy, it is important to note here the relevance of emotional intimacy in sexual decision-making. Beyond conversations on menstruation in relation to emotional and behavioural changes, some participants acknowledged the potential impact of menstruation on when and how sex takes place with partners and within their relationships. It is evident in participant responses, how this disruption paired with the wider societal messages around sex during menstruation, contributes to how and what participants learn about menstruation, even if they are not having explicit conversations with partners about it. Dan (27) said, “*I think there's potentially a stigma when it comes to sex and periods and things like that, and that's sort of like a*

'NO' taboo subject, and I think that's because people see it as icky". Likewise, Dean (39) referred to how the topic of sex during menstruation is dealt with in popular culture, saying that alone is enough *"to see that there clearly are men who do have a problem with it"*. The varied participant responses mirror the same tension, complexities and considerations around menstrual sex highlighted by participants in previous studies conducted in the U.S. (Allen et al., 2011; Allen and Goldberg, 2009), Australia (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017) and the U.K. (Newton, 2016; Laws, 1990).

Just as Dan talked about needing to plan for travel to visit his partner around her menstrual cycle, Benjamin, who is also in a long-distance relationship, identified how another common time for discussions around periods with his partners have been related to planning sexual intercourse:

If we were going to meet up in a couple of days' time, you might go away and visit family for a bit and you come back and you're calling up your partner like, "I'll come check you" or whatever. Or, if you're going out and you're going to come back and have sex then absolutely, the expectation is you might be having sex because you're in a sexual relationship, but it might transpire that now is not a good time because it's the time of the month and you're like, 'ah snap fair enough'. If you haven't already figured out that she's on her period then during immediate sexual advance, or sexual planning for a couple of days' time.

For most participants, menstruation was acknowledged as having an impact on their sex lives with their partners, yet this was not an area which was always openly and explicitly discussed with partners. For example, Iain (39) shared how it is not communicated when his wife has finished her period, and instead he just has an understanding that it is usually finished within seven days and that's when he no longer needs *"to back off"* as normal life and their intimacy can resume. With an ex-partner, menstrual sex had happened once when they were drunk, and she was *"completely grossed out the next morning by it"*. Iain's views towards menstrual sex since then are that most women he's been with, if he had tried, they would be like, *"no, you've got no chance, you've got absolutely no chance whatsoever, roll over"*. He has never had a discussion with his wife about her feelings towards the possibility of engaging in sexual activity during menstruation but *"it's just an understanding"* between them which is unspoken, presenting another example of covert mis/communication within intimate heterosexual relationships:

I think it's a case of, if I was to try, it would be a case of, "no, roll over, go to the loo, have a wank, do something, you've got no chance". You can still have cuddles and kisses, but like, I don't know- erm, I think cuddles and kisses potentially, but to go any further it would literally be a case of "no, you're not getting any further, I'm not doing anything like oral or anything like that."

Jason's views on menstrual sex also seemed to have been shaped by his first and only experience of it with an ex-partner, who had been uncomfortable doing it based on the fact they were going to bleed on him, and he would then have to clean her menstrual blood off his body. He recognised how this discomfort around her menstrual blood touching him had impacted the sex, as well as influenced the extra considerations they had made to limit the mess made:

It was more the mental build up from her as well, having the whole mental block of being like "eugh, the blood" and that sort of thing. For me, it was just kinda like different consistency in texture and stuff in terms of when you're actually performing the act, so it was kind of weird in that sense, something I'd never experienced before so I didn't really, it wasn't really my cup of tea so to speak. We put a towel down and stuff on the bed because of not wanting to mark sheets and stuff like that but other than that there wasn't really much else to be fair, apart from her being adamant that the light didn't go on until she'd been and I'd got cleaned up in the bath but I was like how the fuck am I meant to see what I'm doing in the dark but other than that no, it was just kinda like a towel on the bed to cover the sheet and that's about it, nothing else was really different.

With other partners since then, Jason has not had any open discussions about the possibility of sexual activity during menstruation within the relationship context:

It was just one of those things where we both kinda went, "you're having your time of the month, we're not having sex for a week, we're just going to leave it sort of thing". Rather than having a discussion on it, it was sort of like, it was almost like we were on the same wavelength about it. She wasn't interested in doing it because she didn't ask about it, I wasn't interested in doing it so didn't ask about it, so it just kinda went from that.

Despite this, Jason shared how he was in fact open to giving it another go in the future with a new partner, but they would need to be confident and comfortable with menstrual sex, otherwise the mental block on it "*just becomes awkward*".

Participants' responses about menstrual sex indicate that their general feelings around the possibility of it has been, and continues to be, shaped by how partners have reacted towards it, particularly how they have expressed their views towards menstrual blood. As these reactions and attitudes vary between individuals, some participants described fluctuating thoughts towards engaging in menstrual sex dependent on their partner at the time and how they were towards it. For example,

Ed (28) shared how they had been with partners in the past who would not have sex during menstruation, but they had also been with partners who did not mind but were more worried about whether their partner did. As an outcome of this, Ed found that their personal attitudes towards menstrual sex and the practices they were involved in had shifted between relationships. Owen (28) also considered that his engagement in menstrual sex had depended on how his sexual and romantic partners had talked about their feelings towards it, and this would sometimes be related to his partners' libido, or the potential mess which would likely occur. He reflected on how his *"first real girlfriend at 17"* would sometimes come on her period during sex, and how this was not a big deal in their relationship:

I was with a girl called Amy and we'd be having sex, and she would come on her period at that point, like 'ah there's blood', clean myself off, wrap up the sheets, put them in the wash. Then she would quite comfortably put an applicator tampon in.

Owen shared how in some relationships since then, this had not been the case, but that he had considered logistical things such as putting a towel down to avoid blood stains on his mattress or suggested they have sex in the shower. Despite this, he accepted that some women are not interested or comfortable with the idea of having sex while they're menstruating but considered this to be *"potentially because of what they've been conditioned to believe about men's views of menstruation"*. This was a similar approach shared by Jordan (25), who acknowledged menstrual sex as being taboo and said he had got the impression when he was younger that it's something you should not do. This had been echoed by experiences in the past, in which he was unsure if he was *"doing something bad or not"* when girls had started their period during sex. He considered menstrual sex as being most likely to happen within a relationship, echoing men in the US who viewed menstrual sex as sign of maturation and part of being in a caring trusting relationship (Allen and Goldberg, 2009).

Although Jordan felt that he would not necessarily choose to have sex with a partner during menstruation, he would *"be okay with it if it happens, kinda thing"*. Jordan seemed to be more concerned about how the partner would be feeling if she started bleeding during sex, and how he would react to that situation based on his previous experiences:

I think the worst thing that can happen in that situation, is that you're having sex and one of you realises and then it becomes a big thing. I'm never going to make a big deal out of that, because I wouldn't want that feeling of embarrassment experienced.

Dan (27) shares a similar outlook to Owen and Jordan when it comes to menstrual sex, particularly in terms of how partners have experienced it in the past, and their general attitudes towards sex during menstruation. Dan acknowledges how the source of his feelings towards having sex with a partner during her period has always resorted back to what women have said about how they think he will experience it:

I know that all of the sexual partners I've had in the past, if they've been on their period, they've always been the ones to say, "let's not have sex because it'll be gross for you" - 'for YOU' - 'when I'm on my period'. I've always been like, "okay, cool". I've thought, well they know what they're talking about, because I have no idea, and if they're saying it's gross, I don't really want to find out kinda thing if that makes sense, so I've always been like, "okay, cool" - if she's saying it's gross, she doesn't want to do it. But I guess I've never really challenged it, like, 'why is it gross? Why would it be bad for me? What's going to be the difference?'

The experiences noted by Dan reflects existing literature on women's concerns about menstrual sex, most notably the risk of disgusting or discomfoting male partners (Fahs, 2011). Dan hesitantly reflected on the one time he vaguely remembers having sex with a partner during their period, which he says was "*fine*", but shares that what has been ingrained into him means he still thinks, "*you don't do that!*". For Dan, this combination of experiences and existing attitudes means he still feels some tension when it comes to his personal feelings about engaging in menstrual sex. He refers to a scene in the psychological horror movie about a murderous misogynist, *The Shining*, which he uses as a visual metaphor to explain his concerns towards menstrual sex: "*When the elevator doors open¹⁹, I don't know if I think that's what's going to happen...I don't know what I think is going to happen that's going to be so bad that we can't do it*". Yet, he shares how he also hasn't wanted to "*push a boundary*" by questioning partners who are saying they're uncomfortable with the idea of menstrual sex. This decision making and open conversations about the prospect of it within his relationships had often not existed,

¹⁹ This scene shows a large volume of blood leaving the elevator doors, filling the room in slow motion, splashing against the walls and eventually covers the camera lens.

with one partner choosing to redirect the focus onto him, without explicitly sharing her own menstrual status:

I had an ex-girlfriend who would never tell me [she was menstruating], but she would sort of say, what would she say- “it’s time for me to focus on you” (laughs). She would say that, and I’d say “okay”. I knew that was a code.

Similarly, Kevin (42) shared how with partners in the past, *“if it was mentioned ‘I’m on my period’, that was the key to say there’s no sex, and you just pick it up that way and so I just never tried”*. This was also like how Kieran (39) described the communication between him and his wife when it came to sex, in which she would usually say *“I can’t because...”*, with the unfinished sentence indicating that meant she was menstruating at the time. Unsurprisingly, it is not directly communicated when Kieran’s wife’s period ends, but he knows because his *“advances are accepted”* and sex resumes within the relationship. Peter (31) describes a similar set-up, in which he knows *“it’s [sex] probably not going to be happening”* once he’s aware of his partner’s period being due soon, so he leaves it to her *“to initiate”* and once she approaches him, *“it’s a sign that she’s past it”*. Mark (27) describes his current partner of four years as being *“shielded”*, as she does not directly share with him when she’s menstruating, but will inform him indirectly when it comes to him communicating his interest in having sex with her:

She’ll just make subtle hints. Like for instance she’ll say, “we can’t because I’m...”, but she’ll never come out and say to me, “...because I’m on my period.”

Liam (40) has never considered menstrual sex as being *“challenging”* for himself but shared how his experience has been that some partners have been against it. In his current long-term relationship with his partner of 20+ years, Liam describes a similar exchange to that shared by Kevin and Kieran when it comes to discovering his wife’s menstrual status through his sexual advances:

It’s more like- *nudge nudge*- “Not tonight, I’m on my period”- Okay I’ll go to sleep. It’s not openly communicated in the kind of mature way that you might think. It’s more of a kind of, “okay, I’ll ask again in a couple of days” ...Obviously there’s been a few occasions where I’d quite like to have sex with my current partner and she’s not up for that when she’s menstruating, so I’ve been disappointed for five minutes and that’s that.

This is a stark contrast from a recollection shared by Liam of an experience he had with an ex-girlfriend he was with before his current partner, which he considered as contributing to some early understanding of the varied levels of acceptability when it came to menstrual sex, but also how people's preference and openness towards menstruation and having sex during menstruation varied between partners:

I remember a very specific thing, which was just a bizarre comment. At one point, one of my earlier partners, she had a tampon in at the time and she said, "you can pull the mouse out" and it stuck with me 22 years later, stuck with me as a really odd thing. I think she was trying to normalise it, and make it not weird, and actually I was like 'what the fuck is that?' so that sticks with me...I can remember the room in college we were in, it's just a burned memory. But apart from that (laughs), we didn't talk about it. I was just like, 'that's a bit weird but okay'. I did pull it out (laughs).

For some participants, menstrual sex was understood and described as "*dirty*" and "*messy*". When asked why he was not comfortable with engaging in menstrual sex, Kieran (39) said:

The process of just sticking it in blood. I don't want to sound crude...It just seems a bit dirty- Aye, but, yet I don't agree with what I'm saying there. I'm trying not to say that, but that's what's on my mind when I think about it. I think messy possibly would be a better word to use than dirty.

Here, Kieran finds himself not wanting to admit to these problematic attitudes he holds towards menstrual sex, specifically menstrual blood being dirty and thus not wanting it to touch 'it' – meaning his penis. I recognise my positionality as being significant here in Kieran's questioning of his choice of words and beliefs, as he then moves towards 'messy' as an alternate term to replace 'dirty', a seemingly diluted adjective, but one which offers the same meaning. On the contrary, some participants acknowledged menstrual sex as being no messier than non-menstrual sex. For example, when discussing how he is "*easy going*" when it comes to having sex during menstruation, Dean (39) said, "*I guess I quickly came to terms with the fact that sex is messy, and that period blood is just another form of mess.*" Craig (26) shared a similar attitude towards being comfortable with having sex with his wife when she is menstruating: "*Sex is messy anyway, there's loads of different fluids and stuff involved in both those areas [penis and vagina] anyway you know, so like, I wouldn't be bothered about blood there.*"

For participants who shared positive, or at least neutral, attitudes towards penetrative sex during menstruation, it was clear how, for some, their views towards oral sex when their partner is menstruating were significantly different. When asked how they would feel about performing oral sex during menstruation, issues around tasting and smelling menstrual blood, or having menstrual blood on their faces, raised concerns for several participants. Jay (35), who has at times “*felt some resistance*” to having menstrual sex, considered oral sex as being “*more problematic*” when there is a change in smell due to a period, especially “*if it’s really strong*”, in which case it is avoided with his wife. Kyle (42) mentioned how “*there’s obviously some sexual acts that are definitely not okay at that time*”, going on to talk about how oral sex does not happen during his wife’s period, in which he responded, “*I’m not a vampire!*” when asked to elaborate on the reasoning. Jason (26) who had had penetrative menstrual sex once in the past with an ex-girlfriend shared how he was apprehensive about doing it again in the future, based on this experience where he found her to be uncomfortable and awkward throughout, and “*it just didn’t feel right*”. Expectedly, when it comes to oral sex during menstruation, Jason “*draws the line*”:

That’s a bit too far. I mean, like it’s all well and good having it on your body. I don’t mind the whole having it on you sort of thing, but putting your mouth in it- Hmm, probably be a different story, that’s probably somewhere I wouldn’t go to. I think it’s just because of like, you’ll be able to taste it and stuff as well. Do you know what I mean? If it’s on your body it’s on your body, you don’t know what it tastes like, what it is, it’s on you, it’s just a bit of liquid at the end of the day. Whereas when you’ve got it around your face, around your mouth and stuff you’re going to be able to taste it and it’s going to be going in your mouth and stuff and I think that’s just where I’d be like, ‘No, you know, happy for the blood, that sort of thing...but not in my mouth thanks’. It’s not something I’d eat or really fancy doing (laughs)!

Similarly, Jordan (25) did not share any explicit negativity towards penetrative menstrual sex, but his views and preferences noticeably shifted when it came to talking about the possibility of performing oral sex on someone who was menstruating:

I’d probably draw the line at going down on a girl, just because I feel like that’s not fun for anyone involved (laughs). Probably the taste would *definitely* be a part of it, (pause)-hmm-erm (taps on table)- I don’t know, I’ve never had to confront the idea.

For Craig (26), who is “*not bothered*” about getting blood on him if his partner is bleeding during sex, his concerns around blood on his face was in relation to it being

a potential cause for embarrassment for his wife, which meant he was unlikely to perform oral sex during her period:

If she had a seriously heavy flow situation going on, then I would be less likely to do oral sex or something like that because of the practical issues. I think that would, well I would worry that would be embarrassing for her if I got blood on my face off her. I think she, well I think society generally is funny about blood, people don't like having blood- It's a faux pas stigma, people aren't comfortable with blood and so that would be what I'd be worried about. There would be no chance she would risk doing that anyway, in knowing her she would be like, 'no chance, absolutely not.' It wouldn't necessarily be something that bothered me in particular, if something like that happened, because I think there's a misconception. Obviously when you're on your period, you're not like bleeding profusely all the time from there because that would be quite damaging, so it wouldn't be something that would bother me aside from that it would really upset her, she would be embarrassed.

Interestingly, despite Craig's casual and fairly accepting approach towards penetrative and oral menstrual sex, he went on to express some negativity towards menstrual blood when commenting that he would not expect someone to perform oral sex on him if their menstrual blood was on his penis:

If you're having sex with someone and they're on their period, I would not then expect them to perform oral sex on me or something. You know, for the same reason, like why they probably wouldn't want the sort of blood and the various gunk and that you get from it.

This aversion towards oral sex due to not wanting menstrual blood in or around the mouth area has parallels with men in Laws' UK study, who despite being "calm about penetration with the penis" if partners were menstruating, held anxieties around the prospect of oral sex, as this would mean being involved in "extreme closeness to the woman" (Laws, 1990, p.117).

Oral sex during menstruation was considered acceptable by a few participants, in which they recalled some incidents to support their acceptance. For example, Liam (40) said: "*I remember on other occasions having given oral sex, I can remember going to the bathroom afterwards and seeing it and thinking, okay I'll just brush my teeth again, I can remember that a couple of times.*" In this case, although Liam was happy to proceed with the act of oral sex, he displays the need to clean his mouth afterwards. However, it is not clear if Liam does this after non-menstrual oral sex. Kevin (42) said he was "*absolutely fine*" with menstrual sex, specifically with his current partner who was also comfortable with it, going on to share a story about an

incident involving menstrual oral sex at the start of their relationship which he considered to be of importance for shaping their current shared views towards the acceptability of menstrual sex within their relationship:

Funny story, but one of the first, well, early days with my current partner, we stayed in a hotel. She was in the bathroom sitting on the sink with her legs open, and I was kinda on my knees on the floor with my head between her legs, and I looked up at her and her face just dropped. I had blood all over my face. She had come on her period then and obviously it was just all over my face (laughs), and we just kept going. I think at the time we were in the midst of passion (laughs), so we just cracked on and well, we just carried on, it didn't really phase us really. I had never experienced it, I'd never been in that situation before, so it was something I had never come across. First time I'd tasted menstrual blood.

6.5 Contraception, (In)Fertility, Conception, and Birth

Building on discussions around their experiences with partners' periods, it was common for non-menstruating participants to draw on their understanding of contraception, and/or their experiences of conceiving and attending the birth of their child. Although it was not explicit to what extent these experiences with partners had improved their knowledge and understanding of menstruation, their responses certainly suggest these lived experiences add building blocks to their awareness of the menstrual cycle beyond the basic biological information taught at school. For Craig (26), awareness of contraception had started in his early teenage years through early conversations with his now wife and he considered himself to have a good understanding of the different methods of contraception she had used and the impact of those throughout their relationship:

Since we started going out, all of those things we had totally direct conversations about. I would have known all the way through, from the start of our relationship. She was on the pill and then she's been on the implant twice since then. That pretty much covers us for most of it. We've been open about that since in terms of contraception...She was lucky on the first one, she got no periods or anything. Then she used to get really bad period pain when she was on the pill, that sort of thing. So, when she switched to the implant for the first time, she got no pains and it was awesome, she was dead happy. On the second one she's got the thing where she can't predict it sort of thing, they call it spotting don't they. She's got a bit of that, but now she's onto the start of her third cycle on that and has sort of fairly regular periods like you would.

Liam (40) described learning about the contraceptive pill and its usage beyond contraception through his current partner in his mid-twenties, drawing emphasis on the fact it had taken him until this age to become aware of this information:

I remember being fascinated to learn...my wife, I say wife, we've been together 20 years, but we're not actually married, because 'partner' sounds ridiculous when you've been together 20 years! I was surprised to learn that you can just skip a period by taking the pill, like she did a couple of times when we were travelling. I remember being fascinated by this, that you could just keep doing it. I think that shows my naivety, that even at 26 I was like, 'oh wow you can do that?'. I can remember that conversation.

A similar experience was shared by Ross (38), who considered that he understands the contraceptive pill and its usage through his wife's earlier experiences in their relationship. Although Ross had been in previous relationships, he acknowledged experiences shared over recent years in his relationship with his wife as being responsible for his awareness of contraception and conception. Ross shared that his wife *"was on the pill, as much because she has very heavy periods and so it had been recommended in the past by the GP as a way to help that...as much as contraception"*. Ross was aware of this, and it was clear that he had talked about it with his wife in the past, however he commented: *"My sense is that that also had an impact on her emotional wellbeing, although I don't think I've ever had that conversation with her."* Experiences with his partner using the contraceptive pill had shifted when it came to trying to conceive. Ross shared how his awareness of his partner's menstrual cycle had increased during this time, extending to a greater awareness of *"the emotional side of things"* in relation to his wife's experiences and her decision making around using the contraceptive pill:

She came off the pill when we started trying for our first child which was 6 and a half years ago...I had a better understanding of the biology of it when we were trying for a kid. Like when I was 15 from GCSE biology, then I forgot it for 15 years and then when we started trying for kids, my understanding was greater...I think the big change has been my understanding of the emotional side of things. My wife for many years has taken the contraceptive pill and currently she has views about whether she wants to take medication to control her hormones or not, the idea of taking medication to impact on your personal emotional, that's what she thinks about. In the past she's taken it partly for contraception and partly to control her flow. My understanding has developed a lot more, understanding the emotional side of things that she feels.

Holding a greater awareness of partners' menstrual cycles when trying to conceive was also discussed with Liam (40) and Jay (35). Liam, who is a father to two children, had experienced some issues with his partner when trying to conceive their second child eight years ago. He recognised how this had meant he had had to become more aware of his partner's cycle, as they had started to monitor when she would be ovulating, and they had later gone on to conceive through IVF. Liam did not view this awareness as being as necessary when conceiving their first child through natural conception, which had happened in the first month of trying. At this point, Liam knew only *"to have sex in the middle-ish of the cycle"*, but when trying to conceive their second child, he was more aware of *"details about days"*. Interestingly, Liam shared how despite this being eight years ago, he still feels like he has some awareness of the timing of his partner's menstrual cycle:

There was a period of time for about two years when we were trying to have a second kid and I was very aware of it. We had our first kid and that was natural conception and fine and we were having trouble conceiving the second kid, so we did the thing of...she's menstruating here so she'll be ovulating here. So, for a period I was very aware then, and I suppose I remained...that was 8 years ago now...I suppose I've remained a little bit aware of it. I could tell you right now she's in the middle of her cycle. I don't know why I would know that, but I certainly wouldn't put it any more precisely than that. I don't know to any precision, like, 'oh it will be next Tuesday', or anything like that.

Jay, who at the time of his interview was a first-time expectant father, shared how open conversations with his wife and having a good awareness of her menstrual cycle had been crucial to the conception of their unborn child. This had been particularly important for easing concerns around potential infertility and given that they were living in different countries during this time. Jay reflected on how following his wife's withdrawal from the contraceptive pill, they discussed when they would like to conceive and then *"she became very meticulous in terms of planning when she was ovulating and things...we were specifically aiming for those periods where she was ovulating to have sex and conceive"*. Although this was described during the interview with a degree of humour, it was clear how Jay had been mutually involved in the *"precise monitoring"* but *"quite stressful"* planning with his wife following approximately 9 months of trying to conceive:

I was working in the UK at the time, and my wife said, “I’m going to come to the UK for one night and that is the night that we have to conceive so make sure you’re free and then I’ll go in the morning”. She took the Eurostar, stayed with me for the night, we conceived our child and then she went back in the morning (laughs). When we found out she was pregnant she was like “YEAHHH, I’m on this, I know what I’m doing” (laughs)...Like, bang right on the bullseye (laughs). So, we were like, ‘wow, that’s really impressive’!

This sort of indirect learning of the menstrual cycle in relation to conception discussed by Ross, Liam, and Jay is comparable to how men in Allen et al.’s study in the U.S. (2011) discussed learning about menstruation from sexual and romantic partners for the purpose of understanding timing for conception. By contrast, Iain (39), a father of two children, shared how he was not aware of what was happening in his wife’s menstrual cycle when they had started to try to conceive. Instead, “*it was literally a case of, ‘we’ll come off the pill, we’re going to have sex more often’*”. Despite this, at the point of his wife stopping using the contraceptive pill before their first child was conceived, he had become aware of the irregularity of “*periods*” (withdrawal bleeding):

I’d never known about irregular periods. I always just thought it was like, okay you go on the pill for 21 days, you’re off it for 7 while you’re on your period and then it’s a constant thing. I always thought of it as a constant thing. I’d never known about irregular periods so after my wife came off the pill, I think the first two months she was having her periods every two weeks. I knew nothing like that.

For Iain, the conception of both children had been “*a case of trying and trying*” over several months, yet “*there was no sort of communication*” with his wife during this time. The dialogue shared with Iain during his interview suggested that rather than a direct discussion with his wife, his awareness of the presence of her period indicated that she was not pregnant, and that they would continue trying to conceive after her period had ended.

Although these participants acknowledge their increased awareness of the menstrual cycle through their experiences of conception, some participants who are fathers did not identify this as a time where they felt this had been the case for them. For instance, Neil (37), a father of one, said:

Even when we [he and his ex-partner] got to 30, we always said we'd start thinking about kids. She came off the pill but there was never sort of like, 'let's look at diaries, when is the moment' or whatever, it just happened and then that was it.

However, participants' in-depth and emotional reflections on being present at the birth of their children suggests this lived experience shared with partners had contributed towards an increase in their awareness of, and appreciation for, the menstrual cycle, specifically in relation to reproduction. Dean (39), a father of one, described it as "*an amazing experience*" in which he was "*just so fully immersed in.*" Neil also described his experience of being present at the birth of his child as "*amazing*", and the opportunity to hold his son for the first time following an emergency caesarean section as being "*the best thing that ever happened*". Kieran (39), a father of two, was present at both caesarean section deliveries and commented on the moment of holding his children for the first time:

It was surreal holding Jenny and Lizzie. There was still blood there and bits of mucus, I don't know what the hell it is, but white bits. They kinda get all the blood, well the majority of the blood off her face, but there's still bits of blood here and there. Obviously, you still give her a kiss, the blood wasn't even a consideration. I'm sure after I'd been giving her kisses and that, I would have had blood on my lips (laughs). When it's your own, it doesn't even matter, blood, or anything like that.

This response is particularly interesting, given that earlier in the interview Kieran had expressed some negative attitudes towards menstrual blood and menstrual sex, using the words "*dirty*" and "*messy*", yet he does not mind having this blood at birth and associated fluids on his lips when it is from his new-born child, despite coming from his wife's uterus and potentially from vaginal tearing. When asked about his experience of being present at the births of his two children, Kyle (42) quickly commented that he was "*happy with all the blood and everything*" and that "*it [the blood] didn't faze him*". Kyle shared how he found this ironic, as when his eldest son had a catheter put in his arm years later, Kyle had woken up in A&E wearing an oxygen mask after having fainted. He viewed his experiences at the two births and the associated blood as being different to this, describing it as "*just birth, a natural thing*". Peter (31), a father of two, had experienced both a caesarean section and natural birth with two partners. He described the natural birth as "*nerve wracking*" and was happy to be at the top of the bed which was a decision he had previously agreed to with his partner:

Luckily, we were both on the same page, and she was kinda happy I was up at the top end too. You have that joke, like you'll be put off for life if you've seen that sort of thing. Just me personally, I've never really had the urge to see that happen. I mean, you see enough anyway, when the head does come out you see that, just not the bit before.

Peter also commented on the blood still present on his son when practicing skin-to-skin contact in the hospital, which he portrayed as being a non-issue for him:

He'd just come out so- like obviously you know it's blood and things, but obviously he's come out, and blood comes out as well sort of thing. You just get one with the other sort of thing, if that makes sense. In terms of getting washed and things, it can sometimes take a couple of washes to get all the bits off, and it can get stuck in hair.

Discussions around childbirth were also raised in some interviews with participants who were not (yet) fathers. Despite not having experience of being present at a birth, some participants held interesting attitudes towards how the blood shed during birth is often viewed differently to menstrual blood. For instance, Alex (26) said:

I think menstrual blood is seen- it's got weird shame-y elements to it, like something that should be hidden. I'm not saying that, but generally, what I think some people think is that, whereas the blood during childbirth is much more like- you can be proud of it in a way. All those tv programmes, like One Born Every Minute, you've got babies on there, covered in blood all the time. Call The Midwives, there's so much blood and childbirth in that! (laughs)

Benjamin, who is a paramedic, shared a similar opinion towards how they are viewed differently, stating that although both are natural processes and blood is expected during childbirth, "*menstrual blood is tolerated less, it's more of a taboo than giving birth*". He commented that the act of giving birth to a child, specifically through a vaginal delivery, "*overwhelms the blood that might be shed during that time*", and although any blood during pregnancy, labour or childbirth may present itself as a sign of danger or concern, it is still accepted more than menstrual blood. Interestingly, despite being present at the births of their children, and at times having close contact to the blood and fluids present, this did not necessarily mean there was a shift in all fathers' attitudes and comfortability towards menstruation in their relationships post birth.

6.6 Menstruators' Experiences

Across discussions with menstruating participants, experiences with previous and current cis male partners varied, but it was apparent how these participants recognised the influence and role of their partners during their period and throughout their menstrual cycle. More significantly, it is interesting how some of these participants acknowledged their own role as an educator to their partners, who they considered as having a lack of knowledge and understanding of the menstrual cycle, contraception, and conception. These stories echoed those shared by non-menstruating participants, further supporting the notion that learning about menstruation predominantly takes place through partners and within the context of relationships. Jasmin (21) who has been with her boyfriend for 4.5 years, shared how he has told her in the past that his awareness of menstruation had developed through her, as *"he was never really around that at home with him having a brother"*. For Megan (26) who was trying to conceive at the time of the interview but had been without a period for 21 weeks, informing her boyfriend of 2 years about the menstrual cycle, specifically details about the timing of ovulation, had become the norm as *"he didn't seem to know that"*. For Jade (31) who has been with her husband since they were teenagers, she considers that living together and him being *"exposed to the female body"* has likely given her husband some experience to be able to gain some understanding of menstruation, as *"he probably didn't have that much experience, apart from his mum, but they probably didn't talk about it"*. Kelly (45) reflected on how she had told her husband about menstruation throughout their relationship and considered this to be his main source of information since his twenties, especially as his first girlfriend:

To be honest, I've had to be the educator. I was Steve's first girlfriend; I wasn't his first dalliance, but I was his first girlfriend and he had to learn along the way. He had a sister, they were very closeted, they never talked about any of these things. I don't even know whether his sister spoke to his mother about it. They're different to me, which isn't a bad thing, but they're different. It was definitely a learning curve for Steve to find out the ins and outs of it. I think they'd kept it very private and hidden almost.

These participants expressed how a lack of understanding of menstruation and negative menstrual attitudes in their partners, had resulted in some negative menstrual experiences for themselves. Reflecting on a previous partner, Amanda

(25) shared how she had “*awkward experiences*” in the past in relation to her period, which she went on to explain was due to her ex-boyfriend’s extremely negative and volatile reaction when she had started to bleed during sex:

We’d gone away one time and we were having sex. Obviously, I was still on the same pill so I wasn’t expecting to bleed or anything like that, I certainly didn’t know about it and then we discovered I’d bled during sex, and he was shouting at me saying I was *disgusting* and that I should have known. He was like, “Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you let us go through with this? You know how I feel about blood.” and blamed me...I think the way he reacted in that situation was calling me disgusting, as if ‘*this disgusting substance is on me*, it’s your fault’ type thing.

A few participants discussed similar points around how partners felt towards menstrual blood, with this mostly being situated within the context of sexual activity. These reflections mirrored the complexities of decision making around menstrual sex presented by non-menstruating participants, bringing to light how a lack of open discussion around menstruation and specifically menstrual sex in relationships could be perpetuating menstrual shame and stigma. As discussed in previous sections, for some non-menstruating participants, their feelings towards menstrual sex have often been shaped by the preference of their partner at the time. What was also clear, was that some held positive or neutral attitudes towards taking part in menstrual sex, but they had not communicated this to their partner. This seemed to be related to an existing understanding, or assumption, that their partner was disinterested in menstrual sex, and/or existing personal beliefs around it being taboo and wrong based on what they had learned about it from external sources. This was unsurprising given the lack of open communication about their partner’s menstrual cycle within their relationship. Across menstruators’ responses, attitudes towards menstrual sex and their experiences with partners vary, but Lucy (21) offers an interesting perspective on this tension and lack of open communication, like that shared by Dan:

I feel like it’s way more a problem that lies with the person that menstruates, rather than a male. I think most men, if you said, “I’m happy to have sex on my period”, I don’t think they’d bat an eyelid. I think it’s more like they feel like they’re not allowed to have sex with you when you’re on your period, because *YOU* don’t want to have sex on your period, like it’s a huge thing that you couldn’t have sex when you’re menstruating- rather than an open conversation about the possibility of having sex [during menstruation].

Few participants had had experiences of their male partners responding positively to their emotional cyclical changes and most shared experiences of their partners using menstruation to explain a change in mood. However, some of the participants shared how their partners had offered support during menstruation, for example by ensuring they had pain relief during their period, with some partners having also picked up menstrual products for them from a shop if they were unable to themselves.

6.7 Conclusion

My research illustrates how intimate relationships and female partners shape men's learning around menstruation, and how men's understandings of the menstrual cycle develop within and throughout the course of these intimate heterosexual relationships. The chapter has drawn on participant responses to highlight four main ways and areas in which men learn about menstruation within the relationship context: through the sharing of menstrual status and menstrual experiences; supporting partners with menstruation; menstrual sex and intimacy; contraception, (in)fertility, conception, and birth.

My research echoes some research findings in existing studies in the UK (Laws, 1990), US (Allen et al., 2011), Australia (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017) and Brazil (Reberte et al., 2014), that demonstrate how intimate heterosexual relationships and menstruating partners play a crucial role for how men as non-menstruators learn about the menstrual cycle and menstruation as a lived experience into and throughout adulthood. Menstruating participants' accounts also support the notion that men as non-menstruators develop their understanding of menstruation within the context of intimate relationships through their partners and their menstrual experiences. As documented in this chapter, my research reveals how men's attitudes towards menstruation are shaped within these intimate relationships, in which for many, menstruation is viewed as a matter of disruption within the relationship and impacts intimacy with their partner, most notably in relation to cyclical changes in mood/behaviour and with physical intimacy and sex, although emotional intimacy around menstruation is also lacking at times. There were occasions where stereotypes around PMS were used by male non-menstruators to

reinforce perceptions of women being ruled by their bodies and perpetuating biological framings of female behaviour.

The covert mis/communication around menstruation within the context of the intimate relationship discussed in this chapter is problematic, as it plays a significant role in to what extent menstruation becomes an 'issue' or changes the course of the relationship each cycle, with this no doubt having an influence on how men view menstruation more broadly. In terms of the issues around a lack of clear and open communication about menstruation, an example of this is the decision-making around menstrual sex within the relationship context. For instance, Iain did not engage in menstrual sex with his wife, yet this was not something that had been discussed at a point in time and decided upon between Iain and his wife. Iain experienced a physical distance with his wife when she was menstruating, and a pattern of silence around menstruation more generally unfolded throughout the course of their relationship, even when it came to experiencing some issues with conception. Such cases of mis/communication were common with both menstruating and non-menstruating participants, documenting how men experience some exclusion from their partners' menstrual experiences, regardless of the length of their relationship. Thus, the shame and stigma around menstruation continues into intimate adult relationships, culminating for many in a silence around menstrual matters. As with consideration of the home environment, my research also suggests that female partners can be complicit in perpetuating menstrual shame and silence, and exacerbating stereotypes of the menstruating woman within the relationship context. Paired with some men's reluctance to approach and initiate the topic of menstruation with their partners, this means men may come to understand menstruation as something which will undoubtedly have an impact on both emotional and physical intimacy with their partners, as well as add to their own existing negative menstrual attitudes constructed in childhood and adolescence in both the school and home environments.

Communication and intimacy extended to the ways in which non-menstruating participants viewed their role in the relationship context when it comes to menstruation. It was clear that some participants were unsure of if, and how, to offer and carry out any form of support (emotional and/or practical) to partners during

menstruation, with some only considering the potential prospect of doing so because they had been asked the question in the interview. However, as found in existing studies (Peranovic and Bentley, 2017; Laws, 1990), some participants did acknowledge how practical means of support, such as buying menstrual products, ensuring partners had access to pain relief, as well as access to their desired choice of food at this time, meant they felt involved in their partner's menstrual experiences in some way. These acts can be seen as expressions of new ways to interact with menstruation that challenge and undermine social stigmas around menstruation and gendered divisions around reproduction and care. Thereby, such acts and involvement in partners' menstrual experiences can be seen as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity and represent new positive and caring masculinities emerging with men's engagement with menstruation (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018; Elliott, 2016). Furthermore, my research demonstrates how taboos lift a little during childbirth where blood/bodily fluids and women's leaky bodies are not considered to be an issue for men. Thus in line with the research of Dolan and Coe (2011), hegemonic masculine identities are at times challenged and redefined in this context.

With a focus on the menstrual cycle more broadly, openness to communication increased and/or improved for some participants when planning pregnancies and trying to conceive with their partner, as well as post-birth in longer-term relationships. Despite this lifting of taboos, my research suggests that where men are included in their partner's menstrual experiences, this communication is not always explicit or direct. For example, the chapter discusses the use of menstrual-tracking apps and their ability to create a shared but distanced experience for partners with menstruation, fertility, and conception. Similarly, for participants who were fathers and thus had additional experiences to reflect on in relation to their partners, this did not necessarily mean they always knew when their partner was menstruating because they had told them, but rather because they had picked up on subtle cues which suggested they were, such as a change in choice of underwear style.

There was not an obvious pattern between non-menstruating participant attitudes and experiences dependent on marital status or age. Being married to a partner or in a long-term relationship did not always equate to more positive menstrual attitudes, a

greater openness toward menstrual sex, or a greater number of menstrual-related experiences to reflect on within the relationship context, in comparison to those participants who were unmarried, in shorter-term relationships or had experiences with some casual sexual partners on which to reflect.

Chapter 7 | Peers, Products and Popular Culture

7.1 Introduction

Previous analysis chapters have focused on the places and people considered by non-menstruating participants as being the most significant in developing their awareness and understanding of menstruation and the menstrual cycle. Supporting these accounts of learning about menstruation in participant responses, are other key people and places my non-menstruating participants have encountered across different stages of their lives, where conversational exchanges or subtle messages have shaped and contributed towards their past and current attitudes and understanding of menstruation. Upon reflection of these participant responses, it seemed fitting to group these additional influences together to form this chapter, offering an exploration of how these additional areas inform non-menstruators' knowledge and understanding of menstruation in the background, beyond school and formal education, the home and family, and within intimate relationships and partners.

This chapter will firstly consider the role of peers in facilitating learning around menstruation from childhood into adolescence and throughout adulthood, ranging from school classmates to adult friendships and work colleagues. It will move on to focus on non-menstruating participants' attitudes towards menstrual products, including access to them and wider debates around UK policies, as well as the impact of menstrual product advertising as a supplement to the previous discussion of participants' purchasing of menstrual products in chapter 5. This leads to the final section of the chapter, which considers the role of popular culture and mass media in how these participants have made, and continue to make meaning around menstruation, specifically in relation to television and film, comedy, sport, news, and most recently, social media.

7.2 Talking about Menstruation with Male Friends

Responses indicate the importance of communication about menstruation for men and boys with their peers, ranging from within the school context, in adolescent and

adult friendships and within the work setting. This section looks at menstrual-related communication with male friends, with the next section exploring how they learn about menstruation through female friends and work colleagues. For most of the men I interviewed, direct and open communication about menstruation on the menstrual cycle with their male friends did not seem to be common. Several participants did not view menstruation to be a topic to discuss with their friends, sharing similar perspectives as Dan (27), who considered that him and his friends did not know enough about menstruation to be in a conversation together about it:

I think it is difficult for men to talk about periods. I think, I mean, I've never been with just a bunch of guys, and it come up, and I don't really know why it would come up, or what we would talk about. I think it would be like talking to a year 6 class if you got my friends together and said, "Tell me about the menstrual cycle". I don't think they'd do any better than a year 6 class of boys.

For Jordan (25), talking about menstruation with male friends had not been something he had engaged in, but he did take the time during the interview to consider how likely it would be to happen, and how he would manage that situation should it arise. Jordan described the prospect of talking about menstruation with his male friends as being *"something that you're actively choosing"*, acknowledging how if a friend came to him with an experience he wanted to discuss with him, and should he ask if it was something he had also experienced, he would not hesitate or have a problem in responding to that sort of situation in a constructive and supportive way towards his friend. However, Jordan was keen to stress that talking about menstruation in this type of context would be more of a one-off, and that he definitely *"wouldn't be down the pub like (claps hands), 'boys, menstruation sex is the one! You've got to try that, you've got to get your calendars out and start circling the days, you're in for a treat!' (laughs)"*.

For the few participants who did acknowledge that menstruation had been brought up in previous conversations with friends, or in an all-male group setting, it had been a passing comment made which was usually about someone's partner, or mainly directed towards an individual in the group. In asking these participants to elaborate on these situations by providing some examples, their responses demonstrated how menstruation is understood as a sexual topic in this context, as these comments are almost always negative and at times sexist and derogatory, usually because they

have been related to an individuals' lack of access to sexual activity due to a partner's period, and for some, changes in partners' moods. For instance, Andrew (25) said that when he has been *"in guy groups of friends, there have definitely been times when one of them is talking about how his girlfriend has been really grumpy that morning"* and how *"another guy would chip in and say, 'it must be her time of the month' and he's like 'yeah, yeah'"*. Owen (28) was certain that menstruation had *"never been a taboo subject with any of the lads"*, but he shared how menstruation had only become something talked about with his male friends since *"growing up"*, because *"you're getting girlfriends and going out with the lads and they're talking about girlfriends"*. Although Owen said menstruation was talked about openly now with his friends, what came to fruition was that he meant that menstruation is brought up in conversation when there is something related to menstruation which can be laughed about, especially when it's down to menstruation affecting their sex lives: *"Periods become a little point of, not fun, we're not really joking at their expense, but y'know, it's just 'Bloody period! We've not been shagging for a week. That kind of stuff"*. Kevin (42) described his experience of how menstruation was talked about in his friendship group when he was in his late teens and twenties, concluding that it's *"just all banter"*:

You'll get certain groups of men who are like, "Ah I didn't get my leg over last night because she's on the rag, she's on her doings!", and then it's not talked about. They don't really talk about the periods as such, they talk that they can't have sex because that woman is on her period. You don't talk about the ins and outs of her period; you just talk about having sex when she's on her period. It's like I just said, "Ah I couldn't shag her last night because she was on her rag", or like, "My lass is in a bad mood, it's her time of the month". It's all banter isn't it amongst lads, just all banter.

This is a continuation of the 'banter' within the school context, discussed in chapter 4, providing another example of how menstrual attitudes and this type of communication and behaviour between male peers can be covered up and excused through humour (Phipps and Young, 2015). Banter around menstruation between boys and men can also be understood as a form of bonding and means of othering, understood as a performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). When asked if anyone would call each other out for making such remarks, Kevin explained, *"that doesn't happen in a group of men, it doesn't in my generation anyway...it might now, it's completely different now"*. Kevin went on to

say that if you were to challenge someone for talking about menstruation or women in *“that way [...] then you run the threat of being called a different name from that group of lads, like, ‘Ah you pussy! You know about periods, you pussy!’ ...so you just keep quiet”*. This situation described by Kevin bears some resemblance with Neil’s (37) experience, which was that although he does not consider himself to be *“an old-fashioned man”*, there are certain topics that aren’t brought up with friends, and when they are *“it’s only sort of skin deep”* as opposed to talking about menstruation in a detailed, genuine, and knowledgeable way with one another. The interesting connection between these two participants’ responses is that they both touch on how if you are heard to be knowledgeable about menstruation within this group male context or talk about menstruation without using an element of humour amongst male peers, it could be seen as feminine, and thus menstruation becomes a threat to masculine identity and a gateway to subordination and marginalisation within the group. Neil discusses this further, with reference to a friend he has who he considers as being *“a bit more feminine”* than his other peers because of his greater openness to talk about such issues beyond the usual derogatory and negative references about partners:

“She’s on, she’s being a pain in the arse”, things like that...but it’s never sort of further than that. I think that comes from the friendship circle you have, and I think my friendship circle has changed of late. I’ve got closer to Graham who is a bit more feminine should we say, you know, with that. Later in life you sort of talk in and around it, but when I was 25 or something, it was just sort of face value...I think there is certainly a bit of a stiff upper lip. It’s not something I would have talked about with my friends growing up. It’s not something I’d talk about with my uni friends, or even with my work friends.

This association of menstruation with femininity in men’s communication is like what Macleod et al. (2022) identified in young men’s talk about menstruation in South Africa, where men distanced themselves from menstruation to avoid such marginalisation and subordination, aligning themselves closer to hegemonic masculine ideals through the othering of menstruating women.

The use of humour in how menstruation was talked about with male friends arose in responses from some participants who reflected on if, and how, menstruation was discussed when they were younger inside and outside the school context. These participants shared how when menstruation was talked about with male peers when

they were younger, it would usually be a related topic which they considered to be funny, meaning they would be laughing about menstruation, or laughing about a person who was thought to be menstruating at the time based on a girl's emotional behaviour. An example of this is described by non-binary participant Ed (28), who recalled doing this with their friends in school: *"It [menstruation] was definitely a source of jokes and it's that sort of classic thing of like, if a girl was displaying emotion, it was like 'Ah you're on your period!'"*.

The purpose of talking about menstruation to male peers was confidently challenged and inquisitively questioned by some participants during interviews, but two participants acknowledged how although they would not usually talk about menstruation to their male friends, they had found themselves doing so based on their father role: as a father to a daughter, and as an expectant father to an unborn daughter. Liam (40) expressed how he did not think he had ever spoken to another man about periods and certainly did not when he was in his twenties, but that he had done so recently because some of his friends have children the same age as his daughter, who he believed would soon be reaching menarche. For Ross (38), talking to his male friends about menstruation regarding children had happened when he had shared that he and his wife would be soon welcoming a daughter into their lives:

I remember being in the pub having a pint with a few friends and saying, "we're having a daughter", and they said, "how are you feeling about that?" and I joked saying "I'm terrified about periods" (laughs). That was down to my awareness and my lack of understanding of what she will go through.

Although this communication about menstruation between Ross and his friends is related to his now daughter as opposed to his partner, it is still worth highlighting how it is done so with an element of humour when Ross presents his concerns about being a father to a daughter due to being *"terrified about periods"*. This mirrors the foundations of, and process behind, the sharing of menstrual jokes within the school context discussed in chapter 4, in which humour is used to fill in knowledge gaps and enable some communication about menstruation between boys. It is also worth considering here the perceived acceptability of talking about menstruation and how it can shift within certain spaces and with certain individuals. For instance, it was not clear whether Ross had shared this concern with his partner prior to this, but in

knowing that menstruation will be a real-life lived experience to him through his future daughter, he felt it appropriate to raise it to his male friends in the pub, albeit using humour as a tool to do so. This is particularly interesting given that Ross would usually not mention menstruation with male peers, nor had talked to them about his wife's cyclical changes and significant varied experiences they had shared, which he was keen to discuss with me during his interview. This may suggest that Ross acknowledges his role in menstruation as a father more so than as a partner, or perhaps that he feels he would have a bigger role or responsibility with his future daughter when it comes to their menstrual experiences.

7.3 Learning Through Female Friends and Work Colleagues

As touched upon in chapter 4, awareness of menstruation for some participants came from female peers and their communication, or often lack thereof, around menstruation within the school context. At this younger age, some participants also acknowledged how their awareness of menstruation came from friendships with girls and their interactions outside of school. Kieran (39) recalled seeing menstrual products in a female friend's bathroom when visiting her home: *"At that age, it was a bit like, (makes retching sound, then laughs) gagging!"*. When asked if he remembered the first time he heard of menstruation, Kevin (42) shared a story about an incident with a girl he knew from school, which was the first time he had seen menstrual blood:

I remember when I was younger, I knew this girl from school, and we were out just in the streets with other people from school drinking our little bottles of lager. She lived in the next town to where I did. We went back to her house, she still lived with her parents, we were still at school. She was absolutely mortal drunk, and me and her mam got her undressed to go to bed, and we put her in bed. She had white knickers on and had obviously come on her period and it had come through on her knickers, she had blood all over her pants. That's the first time I seen it actually happen.

A similar situation was shared by Stephen (30) who had an interaction with a female friend who was menstruating when he was younger. This was the first time Stephen had been aware of a female friend being on their period, but this engagement with menstruation as a reality, had encouraged some discussion of menstruation and menstrual products between Stephen and his peers:

It was the after high school holiday. I was 17, 17/18, and one of my pals wasn't going in the swimming pool and I just thought she was being daft and so I chucked her in. I was walking back from the bar, and I chucked her in the pool. It turns out she was on her period, and she didn't use tampons and that was an absolutely mortifying experience for her, and obviously a horrific experience for me. I just thought she was being daft and didn't want to go in. She wouldn't say, "I'm not going in the pool because I'm on my period". She just said, "I don't want to go in the pool" and when you're that age, if someone says, "I don't want to go in the pool", the first thing you think is, 'I'm going to throw you in the pool because that'll be funny'. That was a group of about 8 women, and 6 or 7 guys, and that actually led to a kind of full conversation. The women were telling her how to use tampons, she was worried about toxic shock, and we actually had, for being 17/18, we actually had a grown-up conversation about what you can use, how you can still go in the swimming pool...But that person wouldn't have said, "I'm on my period and blood will go everywhere", it was more like not wanting to talk about it. The conversation shifted to, 'actually there's reasons why people don't want to go in the pool and you're an arsehole if you throw them in' (laughs).

Reflecting on his time in sixth form, Alex (26) acknowledged having a group of female friends who would talk about their menstrual experiences in front of him. He shared how he currently has a few female friends who *"have been vocal about it and are totally okay talking about it [menstruation]"*, yet he questioned to what extent they are comfortable talking about menstruation in front of him:

I think there is a bit of an assumption, I don't know- I've had women who have said, "Are you okay with us talking about this?", and it's like, "Why would I not be?" (laughs) But I can understand they might have got really bad reactions from other men.

Andrew (25) shared a similar experience of being in a mixed group setting where his female friends had been talking about menstruation, and although he felt *"mostly fine"*, he was consciously aware of what he could and could not say or do in this context, specifically that he knows jokes would be inappropriate:

It can be a bit of a difficult or embarrassing subject sometimes. You're in a group with mostly girls and there's just a couple of guys and then they start talking about it and it doesn't make me feel uncomfortable or anything, but it does make you feel like you can't just chime in with any jokes or sort of start talking about it with them, because they wouldn't always see it as the most appropriate thing to do or say.

Some participants shared how speaking with female friends about menstruation, and at times their own menstrual experiences, had contributed towards their

understanding of menstruation and related menstrual issues. An example of this is Dean (39), who said he learned from female friends when he was younger that the contraceptive pill can also be used as *“a way of coping with heavy periods”* as they had explained it to him and his male friends. For the two gay male participants interviewed, female friends have and continue to be a key source of knowledge on the menstrual cycle, as well as contraception, which is done through the open sharing of information with them. For Jake (21), one of his female friends had played a key role in his awareness of the regularity of menstruation and how the contraceptive pill worked after she had explained it to him when he was 18 years old: *“I suppose all of that’s kinda like come late teens early twenties, all of that knowledge”*. Similarly, James (25) recognised how *“having female friends has got to be massive for learning about it [menstruation] because they just talk openly about it”*. James had lived with women for a couple of years at the time of the interview, some out of choice and some as an outcome of moving away from home to a new city into student accommodation. He considered how those he lived with had been open with him about their periods, *“because we’ve got that friendship, that relationship”*, but he felt that even prior to living with women, he’s spoken about periods with his female friends or listened to their experiences. James shared how he had picked up on menstrual symptoms such as changes in emotions, cramp, and fluctuations in appetite from his female friends, as well as the impact of contraception on menstruation from his female friends talking about their experiences:

I’ve had friends before who have had birth control, like the implant, and they’ve either lost their periods entirely, which a lot of girls love...And one friend, who was on her period for about three months constantly, and she was getting really worried.

Not only did these close friendships and the open communication shared with his female friends mean James had some knowledge and understanding of menstruation to be able to contribute to discussions with them or to listen and empathise with their experiences, but it also meant he felt he could talk to his much younger sister about her periods too. He said, *“If I didn’t have female friends, I wouldn’t know how to talk to her about periods, about make up, boys, music, sports, fights, school, all these things that we talk about.”* Although this open communication and relationship with his sister that James describes could be indicative of a close friendship they may also share, his sister’s willingness to discuss menstruation and

her menstrual experiences may also contribute to James' awareness of menstruation and general openness to continue talking about menstruation with his female friends. James' openness towards talking about menstrual-related issues with those who menstruate may also be indicative of his mother and stepmother's willingness to share their experiences of menstruation and early menopause, as noted in chapter 5.

Female friends were a key source of information on menstruation above previous intimate and romantic partners for Jordan (25), who was the standout participant when discussing who he talks about menstruation with. Jordan acknowledged female friends as not only being a source of knowledge for him when it came to the menstrual cycle, but who are the central people in his life who he has learnt from regarding the lived experiences of menstruation. This was particularly interesting, as despite being a heterosexual male with previous intimate and romantic partners, Jordan exclaimed, *"I've learnt more from conversations with friends than actually being with girls in relationships!"* Jordan was keen to share how over the past few years he has gained friends who are more open to talking about menstruation and how he has friends *"who really suffer from it each month"*. From these friendships, he is now aware of menstrual-related pain and the anticipation experienced when knowing a period is coming and how you can't do anything about it, summed up as him knowing *"how much it sucks"*. Jordan reflected on how at some point in the 6 months before the interview, he had asked his female friends how a tampon worked. Although he knew what they looked like, he was unsure how *"the whole applicator thing"* worked. He recognised age as being a factor determining his ability to now engage in such *"deeply personal"* discussions with his female friends:

I guess it is more of an age thing, because people are less- I don't know, but I feel like the older you get the more open you get, and I suppose you just have less but deeper friendships, if you know what I mean, so more likely to come round to talking about personal things. I would consider that [menstruation] a topic of conversation that is deeply personal, it's obviously not something you'd talk to someone on the street about, so that's only the reason I've then come into thinking about those kinds of things, and how that might affect people.

Discussions with female friends were also a source of learning about lived menstrual experiences for non-binary bisexual participant Ed (28), particularly when it came to

picking up new knowledge on the realities of bodily changes throughout the menstrual cycle, in their case this being specifically related to breasts. Ed was keen to share how they had recently been discussing with a close female friend how *“people don’t always have periods while they’re breast feeding”* and how changes during certain stages of the menstrual cycle *“enlarges your breasts”*. Despite Ed being in a relationship with someone who menstruated at the time of the interview, as well as discussing previous partners who menstruated, it was interesting how this type of new knowledge had come from a female friend in a casual conversation just between themselves about the menstrual cycle, as opposed to a previous or current partner.

Some responses suggest that as relationships with peers gain more centrality in their lives and living arrangements change by moving out of the family home, openness towards talking about menstruation increases with peers, often facilitated by the environment. For example, for participants who had attended university, the transition from sixth form/college to university and adult life seemed to play a part in their understanding of their increased openness towards talking about menstruation as a normal topic with their peers, particularly for those living with young women. For Martin (25), an increase in menstruation being more openly talked about at university was down to *“people having more platforms- societies to start talking about stuff like that, and pretty much every university is left wing in that sort of sense anyway!”* Liam (40) said, *“I think it was when I went to uni and actually was friends with girls who were experiencing this [menstruation] that I learnt more about it”*. Jordan (25) considered university as *“a pivotal moment”* in becoming more open with peers, acknowledging it as a time when young adults have their first taste of independence and *“everyone is mingling and trying to work out what it means to be an actual adult”*:

That’s the first opportunity you have for that, so people are more open to engaging in different discussions like that. In my shared house in my first year in freshers, there was eight people in the dorm, and a guy and a girl were seeing each other and he was quite loud and would just talk about these things, and she was very chilled and thought it was funny. I guess there was more, well, it wasn’t something specifically hidden, everyone was candid- candid is the best word to use, I don’t think that in our age bracket there’s as much, what’s the word- there’s like a feeling like it needs to be concealed and hidden as a part of someone’s life.

As described by James (25) and Jordan (25), living with female friends at university had enabled them to be more open to such discussions and improve their understanding of menstruation. Andrew (25) also shared how menstruation was the topic of conversation early on in his mixed-gender accommodation at university, as well as how it became something which was openly discussed by his female friends in his presence who he lived with in university halls:

We had a bit of a funny story about it actually. In the second week, someone came around the flats to take away the bins that had been put in the bathrooms for girls to use, like the bins for that sort of stuff [menstrual products], and one of the guys got upset that his bin got taken away from his bathroom and he didn't understand why only the girls should have them. He was like, "Why shouldn't I have a bin too?" And that's how we got into a conversation about sanitary products and periods (laughs)...We had a communal kitchen area with sofas and stuff in it, so if I came in to cook something, they'd [female friends] be there often in their bathrobe eating chocolate and watching Netflix or something, like, "Andrew, I'm having a bad time right now" and we'd just start talking about it like that.

As recognised earlier by Jordan, some participants acknowledged that they had decided to be more open towards talking about menstruation as they had aged and moved through the life course into adulthood. Martin (25) felt that he is more comfortable and open to talking about menstruation and related issues now than when he was at school, which he puts down to making *"an active choice to be more open about that sort of stuff and talk about that sort of stuff"* with his female friends, who he considers as being vocal about *"that side of things"*. He goes on to say, *"it's the company you keep"*, explaining that because his female friends are very confident talking about their menstrual experiences and that they do not care what other people think or if you're grossed out by it, it has pushed him to be more open towards normalising menstruation and listening to what they have to say. On the contrary, Dan (27) said he could not recall talking about menstruation with his friends who menstruate and did not think he would in the future because of his lack of menstrual knowledge and how this could impact his existing friendships, saying:

I wouldn't feel like I was able to impart or be able to participate properly in a discussion about it because I don't know enough about it and I wouldn't want to offend I think, even accidentally. I wouldn't intentionally, but I would somehow accidentally offend or say something that was inappropriate maybe.

Openness with male peers varied between menstruating participants' experiences, but generally they shared some hesitation about openly communicating with male friends about their own personal menstrual experiences in both adolescence and adulthood. For non-binary participant Mel, they did not talk to their male flatmates in their university accommodation about menstruation because they *"would see it as something that is going to embarrass the guys, or make them uncomfortable so you wouldn't put them in that position"*, however they recalled how when they were younger, because they had *"very light periods"*, if the topic came up they would say to their male friends, *"Oh, well I barely even bleed!"*. Upon reflection of this during the interview, Mel understood this as being potentially related to their now non-binary identity, in that they were maybe trying to disregard an obvious difference they had to their male peers. Brit acknowledged how *"it was very open at uni"* and periods came up *"just like a normal conversation"* in mixed university accommodation, sharing how one flatmate had benefited from her openness about menstruation:

I lived with two boys and neither of them were sort of troubled, or changed the subject. One of them would ask loads of questions, like he just wanted to learn. He'd never had girlfriends, so he was like, 'when I get a girlfriend, I want to know what to do and what's happening'.

Brit's openness and willingness to communicate about her own experiences of menstruation and contraception extended to her current adult friendship with her partner's friend, who she referred to as her best friend. She reflected on this openness and how he had supported her alongside her boyfriend after she had her coil fitted and was experiencing some pain and heavy bleeding:

He's the sort of person I'd speak to about it. When I got my coil fitted it was really painful and I had really heavy periods and he stayed with me, my boyfriend's friend, which was unexpected, but he was really understanding about it and my boyfriend went to get me stuff from the shop and what not...I don't remember not speaking about things, thinking it was too embarrassing or too far when it came to periods.

This involvement of a male friend described by Brit is another example of how openness about menstruation and related issues can enable men to be more exposed to and involved in menstruation. More crucially, it indicates how menstruation can be normalised within mixed peer groups, but also suggests this learning for men from peers' experiences is dependent on their peers' openness and

willingness to welcome men through open communication despite any feelings of shame and stigma, and reluctance to do so in case of men's aversion towards menstruation.

Beyond female peers and friendships, some non-menstruating participants acknowledged how menstruation has been a topic discussed with female work colleagues. Although these participants did not identify these conversations as being a source of new knowledge on menstruation, they were keen to describe how such interactions have challenged their own perceptions of who they do and do not talk to about menstruation. For instance, Stephen (30) shared how prior to the Covid-19 pandemic he was out for some drinks with the female office staff of the university school he works in and felt he was able to openly tell them that his wife was menstruating, in a way he would not have had he been in the company of male colleagues:

The wife text me saying, "Can you come home and call at the shop for chocolate? My period has started", and I didn't mind saying to the company I was in which was all women, "I have to go". They were like, "What are you going for? What are you going for?", "My wife has just text me, it's day one of her period and she wants chocolate" and it was like, "You better hurry up and finish that drink and get home", kind of thing. I would have probably been different if it was men I was sitting in the pub with. I would probably have said, "I have to go" and divulged it. Not because of any embarrassment on my part, but probably because my wife would be more annoyed if I told a group of blokes she was on her period. The fact I was sitting with women, made that a conversation you could have.

Similarly for Peter (31), his female work colleagues talking about menstruation in front of him had become the norm and he considered them to be quite open about it, to the point where he *"could probably tell you when some people are due on"*. As he works with *"a load of women"* and *"all the other men work on a different department"*, he believes their openness around him is because they think, or now know, that he won't pass any judgement, *"or they just feel comfortable enough around me to be able to share things"* after talking about their menstrual experiences in previous conversations where he's been present. Another participant who chose to refer to their experiences with female work colleagues was Ross (38), who focused on how conversations with his colleagues, and at times debates, had challenged his existing attitudes towards menstruation as a subject:

I have some very strongly viewed female colleagues who I've had really enjoyable discussions and debates with, partly about awareness and attitudes. There's only been a couple of times at work, but I responded to a comment on social media made by one of them recently. Someone posted a book- I'm a member of the book club with people I work with, and I responded saying, "Perhaps not one of the book club", in a jokey way, but someone picked it up saying, "well why not?". I said it as a joke, probably because a popular choice for book club wasn't about periods, but actually, it led to a serious point of, it would be a very easy thing to dismiss, but actually it shouldn't be that easy to dismiss, why it should be something widely discussed.

For Owen however, menstruation being talked about at work by a female colleague was problematic, sharing an example of a recent experience with a junior colleague who had stated she was on her period at work:

Lorin complained that she was on her period and we all had to walk on eggshells around her. I didn't like that; I didn't like that. The way that she put that forward. She's very negative and she is very entitled as well. So, everyone is dealing with some battle, there's always something under the surface that you can't see. Someone so willing to say, 'You need to change the way you treat me because of this (menstruation)'. I don't want to say anything wrong, but I think that's wrong, you should always have in your mind that everyone is dealing with something. They were open, 'I'm having my period'... 'Is that why you're just being nasty and rude?'...because I've been with a lot of women, I've known a lot of women and been around a lot of women who have been on their period and it does affect them...they can manage it quite comfortably.

Here, Owen's response suggests he feels that menstruation should not be discussed at work, but mostly that it cannot be a reason to justify a change in performance and communication at work. It also indicates that Owen believes Lorin should be able to just "*manage it*", i.e., without displaying any mood/behavioural changes in this case. It is noteworthy to also mention that Owen's explanation for feeling this way suggests that he believes that menstruation affects people in the same ways and that menstrual experiences do not vary between individuals. Although these participants acknowledged the relevance of menstruation in their workplace, particularly in relation to their female colleagues, for other participants, menstruation had not been a topic openly discussed in their workplaces.

Some menstruating participants touched upon the silence around menstruation in the workplace, sharing how they are not generally vocal at work about their own menstrual experiences, which is especially the case when there are male colleagues

present. For these participants, they would also not openly talk about their periods with a male manager or be honest about their symptoms in work and absence from work. For instance, Helen said:

Sometimes at work, I do hide it a bit, but that's because I work with guys and I'm not sure how they'd react and stuff, which is stupid [...] but when I moved into the new office, this is going to sound really weird, but I think one guy monitored when I was on my period so he knew when to- I think it's sweet, some people will think it's weird, but he knew if I was being a little bit more emotional about stuff, to just leave it, like 'it's fine, don't worry'.

Helen went on to say how she felt it was okay to talk about menstruation with him, to the extent that she had advised him on how to support his daughter who was experiencing painful periods by talking about her own symptoms and experiences of going to see a doctor to be checked out. Jasmin shared a similar experience of working *"in a really manly orientated job"*, where her male colleagues would make her a cup of tea *"to shut you up"* on the occasions where she was *"a bit more moody"* than usual. Although Jasmin said, *"it was always fine"* and that *"it was never a horrible experience"* when she was menstruating or experiencing cyclical changes and symptoms at work, her response also stated that they would ignore her, suggesting that despite her male colleagues offering support by making her cups of tea, they were also equally demonstrating some aversion towards menstruation by masking her experiences. The fact there was some openness about menstruation at work was put down to her manager being *"very feminine"* and *"the lads"* who were her supervisors being no older than mid-twenties. In addition to their closeness in age, Jasmin said they *"were like a family, than work colleagues, so they didn't really say anything, they weren't really horrible"*.

7.4 Menstrual Products and Policies

Menstrual products appear in all previous analysis chapters, discussed by non-menstruating participants in the context of school, home, and intimate relationships. Discussions participants had shared with others about menstrual products tended to be for the purposes of buying menstrual products, or in few cases, participants recalled partners talking about switching to more sustainable options, such as a menstrual cup. Menstrual products were also the focus of some jokes between

school peers, and some participants had seen menstrual products in the home during childhood and adolescence. It was made clear at the start of each interview and often reminded to participants throughout the interview that their knowledge of the menstrual cycle and related issues was not being tested. Despite this, some participants initiated discussions of the different types of menstrual products they were aware of, often followed by a comment confirming that they did not feel they had a good awareness of the different menstrual products available to buy and how each product works. This was unsurprising, given that the education they had received was limited and most participants had not engaged in direct conversations about menstrual products with family members, partners, or friends. More importantly, what was unearthed from these discussions in the interviews was the negative impact of menstrual product advertising on participants' awareness and attitudes, and how these participants viewed the (un)necessary provision of menstrual products and thus menstruation as a normal, biological function more broadly.

7.4.1 Influence of Menstrual Product Advertising

Responses from these participants suggest advertisements for menstrual products provide them with unrealistic portrayals of menstrual experiences and menstrual blood. Some participants shared how they recalled seeing menstrual product adverts on TV when they were younger of *“people who are ridiculously happy that they’re on their period”* (Stephen, 30) and showing *“women still getting on with their daily lives, exercising with a massive smile on their face”* (Kieran, 39). Kieran observed how these adverts have neither got him in mind nor are for the purposes of educating people about menstruation, because *“it’s more about selling it to who needs it”*. Kieran also referred to the adverts' focus on product comfortability and the product's ability to hide periods, for both the person using the product and for wider society, adding that he felt the adverts for menstrual products were *“sexy”* at times because of the models used who *“perceive that it’s not all like, blood and pain”*. For Kevin (42), a Bodyform advert stuck out the most for him when thinking back to what he seen on TV when he was younger, despite at the time not knowing what it was for, to the point of him singing a snippet of the advert's background song in the interview:

Bodyform, for youuuuuuuuu! (laughs) That's how it went. It didn't tell you anything. Back then if I was that age and saw it for the first time, I wouldn't know what the hell it was about. I didn't know what it was about until somebody said, "it's a fanny pad" - "what's a fanny pad?" - "this is what it is" - "hehehehe" (laughs). This was our attitude back then because we didn't bloody know anything. If I got taught it at school then I'd know what it was, then I would question, 'why is the liquid blue, why is it not red?' But I didn't know, I didn't know anything.

Like these observations from Stephen, Kieran and Kevin, Mark (27) recalled the misdirected adverts he would see on TV, where *"you'll get women playing tennis or rollerblading or doing activities, but they'll be promoting a tampon"*. He went on to say:

As a kid, you'd be like, 'what?' But now I understand they're trying to show the comfort of what this tampon means, that you can do anything you want to do. Whereas as a boy, I was very oblivious to what they were trying to sell. It was never really clear what the product was. They'd show diagrams, so for pads they'd show absorption, but for me as a boy maybe I thought it was for urine or other things- It was always that blue colour, or clear, it was never a bloody colour.

Several participants mentioned the use of blue liquid in the adverts they could recall seeing on TV but most shared how it was not something they had thought about before the interview and that they did not question it as a child, often because they did not know exactly what the product was for in the first place. During his interview, Jake (21) commented that he now understood the use of blue liquid as a way of making *"it [menstruation and the need to use a menstrual product] seem kinda cute and inoffensive"*, and Jason (26) commented that seeing blue liquid being used to demonstrate absorbency rather than a red substance could *"cloud their [young boys] judgement"* as *"it always seems to be very thin, very watery liquid, rather than sort of menstrual blood style thickness and texture"*. Ross (38) shared a similar outlook, saying *"I assume it's designed by the manufacturers to be not getting too close to home"*, but that it's also *"trying to hide what should be a perfectly normal thing and normal day to day conversation"*. Dan (27) had a different take on trying to justify the use of blue liquid as opposed to a more realistic red colour, suggesting that *"blue is a more calming kind of colour and if they're trying to promote a calm stressless way of life, then blue makes sense"*. Andrew (25) recalled the choice of colour used to demonstrate the absorbency of the menstrual products and felt like this added to the

mystery of what they were and why they were used when he was a child watching TV:

I remember how in all the pad adverts, they'd have this big purple or blue droplet falling off something and then it would all go blue, and I'd think, 'What is that? Why do girls need something that has this blue liquid going into it?' It's just a really strange thing. Then there were lots of innuendos and hints in those adverts quite a lot of the time. It's not something that really did say exactly what it is, it's like 'discreet pads, you won't see them', stuff like that. I remember watching one of those as a kid and not really understanding what it was about.

Most participants talked about menstrual product advertising from their childhood/adolescence or earlier in their adult lives, however Alex (26) shared how his understanding of how a menstrual pad worked had recently improved after seeing an advert on TV that was "*talking about pads and things*":

There was a guy there that didn't know how it [a pad] stuck to their underwear, rather than to you sort of thing, and I was like, 'yeah I didn't know that'. Until that advert, I didn't know that I just didn't realise, you don't. Well, there was never a time when I opened up one of the packets and looked at them.

Advertisements for menstrual products contribute to the communication taboo of menstruation as they promote secrecy and avoidance of embarrassment (Delaney, Lupton and Toth, 1987), whilst corporations capitalize on negative attitudes about menstruation to sell a 'solution' to the 'problem' (Kissling, 2006). Standing (2018b) recognises this influence of advertising and the role it plays in shaping young people's understanding of menstruation and of the menstrual products available, arguing that "good advertising could help educate young people at key times in their lives". How participants discussed the advertisements suggests that they were significant enough to remember and comment on during the interview, despite most not knowing what they were for at the time, which is overall troubling given the ways in which this form of public discourse about menstruation diverts from the actual lived reality and experiences of menstruation. Although these participants are now aware that menstrual blood is not blue, the greater concern here is a potential inaccurate belief amongst men and boys that during menstruation, all people menstruating are always able to live an active lifestyle pain-free and leak-free, as presented in these advertisements for example. The ways in which these participants reflect on

menstrual product advertising, particularly what they picked up on during childhood, adds weight to arguments in favour of more realistic portrayals of menstruation in menstrual product advertising to normalise menstruation and to change wider societal attitudes towards menstruation.

7.4.2 Access to Menstrual Products

As highlighted in the chapter introduction, discussions around menstrual products unveiled a range of attitudes towards menstruation, some of which were particularly negative and demonstrated the lack of understanding many non-menstruating participants had of menstruation as a lived experience. Nonetheless, some participants did engage in, and at times initiate, a discussion of the politics and policies around menstruation, some making further reference to wider gendered inequalities and feminism. With a specific part of the interviews focused on the UK policy environment, participants were asked questions regarding their awareness of ‘period poverty’²⁰ which tended to lead into further discussion of the UK government’s response. A couple participants shared how they were aware of their past/current universities or student unions having campaigns about “*period tax and VAT on sanitary products*” (Andrew, 25), as well as campaigns and donation set-ups “*for free tampons and stuff like that for people from working class or poorer areas*” (Craig, 26). These two participants, in addition to Martin (25), recognised how they had just recently in the last few years become aware of the VAT on menstrual products and period poverty through their universities as students in those institutions. Martin shared how “*there was a big thing about period poverty*” at the student-run union at the university he attended, so “*it would sell tampons for really really cheap prices, and they’d have these charities you could donate to so that they can provide that sort of care for people who can’t afford it as well*”. Other than these participants, Benjamin (32) had some recollection of hearing and/or reading the news at some point in time that there was tax on menstrual products and that “*there was some uproar about the tax...people felt like the tax should be taken off*”, whilst Jordan (25) said “*there was an opportunity a couple of years ago to change shit, at the House of Lords or something like that*”, but neither participants demonstrated that

²⁰ I used this term first in nearly all interviews and provided an explanation.

they had fully engaged with this matter or had expansive knowledge on it through their responses. Although some of the younger participants had not heard of 'period poverty' or were able to refer to any menstruation related news or debates they were aware of through the news or social media in response to the interview questions asked, it was noticeable how the older participants were even less aware of tampon tax, period poverty in the UK and access issues to menstrual products globally. At this point in the interview, I provided a brief description of the 'toxic trio' of period poverty, as understood by Plan International UK (Russell, 2018; Tingle and Vora, 2018). Following this, some participants confirmed they had not heard of the term being used before, with some also stating that they understood how what I had described could cause some issues and is an important matter. For most, it did not come as a surprise to them that period poverty was being experienced by people in the UK, with many referencing an increase in poverty in general and other related issues in the UK that they were aware of. However, these participants also confirmed that it was not something they had thought of prior to me drawing their attention to it during the interview, specifically that they had not previously considered such potential challenges and experiences of people experiencing poverty who menstruate in the UK.

In response to questions asked, and at times initiated by some participants at an earlier point in the interview in relation to a separate related area of discussion, focus turned to debates on the removal of the 5% tax on tampons, pads, and menstrual cups in the UK. This led to non-menstruating participants sharing their opinions on whether they consider menstrual products to be 'luxury, non-essential items', as still categorised at the time of the interviews in 2020. Although generally these discussions on access to and affordability of menstrual products generated some interesting responses, at times they also encouraged some participants to question themselves when recognising the conflict in their existing ideas and opinions, or general anxieties around talking about it during the interview. This was particularly the case when participants either chose to compare menstrual products to toilet paper, soap and/or paper towels provided by different public venues or were prompted to as a way of encouraging them to further explain the rationale behind their understanding of menstrual products as (un)essential. For instance, Jay (35) said:

For some reason when you were describing it [free access to products] I was feeling a kind of tension, and I think it's because I fear that it's still controversial even though it shouldn't be. Yep, that's it, similar to the talking about it [menstruation]. There is a stigma still, I can feel it even though I don't agree with it. I can feel a fear even within me, a fear of like, 'oh this is going to explode and be controversial conflict with someone'. Not in this conversation with you, but it's a learnt instinct, like, 'oh watch out, this is a conversation about universal provision of tampons and pads, danger danger!'.

For most participants, affordability of and access to menstrual products was not something they had thought about before the interview as individuals who did not have a reason to require menstrual products for their personal use, which was a point many identified and, in most cases, apprehensively shared with me in their responses. Although this was not an outlook Owen (28) declared during his interview, he confidently and unashamedly voiced his opinion that he does not believe that menstrual products are essential items:

They're certainly not a luxury. They're not an essential product, because you don't need it to live, but there are ways of getting around it. I wouldn't say they were essential products, but you know, a razor isn't an essential product but every man shaves kinda thing. Soap isn't an essential product, you can live quite comfortable without soap, but who would want to do that? I wouldn't class soap as a luxury, is it classed as a luxury? I don't know, I'm very sheltered (laughs), first world problems...I understand a lot of people might disagree with that but there's a lot of things I don't deem as essential that others would deem as essential because *I'm quite humble* in what I need, in what I do. It's something I haven't really thought about in depth, but I can be quite bigoted.

This passage demonstrates Owen's lack of awareness and understanding of menstruation as a lived experience, with his comparison to men using razors unveiling additional dimensions to consider here. At this point in the interview, Owen revealed what I picked up on as being either discomfort with the subject area, or arrogance, as he swung back on his chair and then reached over the table across from where we were sat to rearrange some menus, diverting his attention away from the me and thus the interview. As Owen had demonstrated an open and generally accepting approach towards menstruation as a normal biological function, particularly towards his past and current partner, it was notable how there was an immediate switch here, unveiling these negative and inaccurate perceptions towards menstruation as a lived experience.

Other than Owen, participants were of the position that menstrual products should not be considered as luxury items, *are essential* and in some cases, that there should be free access to menstrual products for people who need them. The noteworthy areas of interest which came from these discussions were the explanations given for why these participants considered menstrual products to be essential, in other words, why people who menstruate *need* them. For Alex (26) and Dean (39), their focus was on the prevention of menstrual blood ruining clothes and having to buy new underwear regularly due to staining. Ed (28) and Jay (35) shared similar viewpoints to each other, commenting on how menstrual products have been marketed using the word 'sanitary', "*like you need this to be clean*" (Ed). For Jay, this led him to reflect on "*the most formative moment talking about periods*" he had shared with a friend when he was 14 or 15, about the relationship between uncleanliness and menstruation in the bible:

He was showing me a passage of the bible, I can't remember which passage, but it was a passage describing all of the things that are unclean and what you should do when you are unclean and most of them involved tearing your clothes, standing outside the gates of the city ringing a bell shouting "Unclean! Unclean!". We would joke about how ridiculous that was how low the bar was for you to have to do that. One of them was if a woman is *on her whatever*, she may not ride a horse, she must tear her clothes and stand outside the gates. It was like, 'this is ridiculous, who came up with this stuff?' I've now got this idea of taxation linked with this ridiculous kind of idea of what is good and bad, clean and unclean (laughs). The idea of taxation is as ridiculous as having to stand outside the city walls ringing a bell!

This viewpoint of menstruators upholding cleanliness by using menstrual products extended to Kyle (42), who spoke in support of menstrual products being essential. Kyle went on to ask, "*how else are you going to- catch all the blood if you don't have a sanitary towel or tampon to use?*". This notion of the necessity of managing menstrual blood by using menstrual products links closely with Jason's (26) and Liam's (40) justification of menstrual products being accessible and necessary because embarrassment can be avoided for the person menstruating when menstrual blood is absorbed and is therefore unseen. Andrew (25) offered a different perspective to this, focusing on health, asserting that menstrual products are "*something you need for your health, to stay healthy*". Benjamin (32), a paramedic, echoed this, saying:

It baffles me beyond belief. It's definitely an essential item. From a medical perspective, you just think, a woman needs this [a menstrual product] every month, most women are going to have a period and are going to need it to manage it.

In a separate discussion in his interview, Benjamin also commented that a lack of access to menstrual products would mean that “*you can't manage your period in a socially acceptable way*”, suggesting that he also understood menstrual products as being a gateway to keeping menstrual blood hidden. These responses indicate an understanding of menstrual blood as something which needs to be managed using menstrual products, to ensure menstrual blood is not visible. In turn, the ‘culture of concealment’ (Houppert, 1999) and the ‘menstrual mandate’²¹ (Bobel, 2019) means that using menstrual products enables menstruators to appear as non-menstruators and thus, the cultural norms and secrecy around menstruation are upheld, what Sharra Vostral refers to as using a ‘technology of passing’ (Vostrat, 2011). As argued by Bobel and Fahs (2020), “products serve merely to accommodate rather than resist the menstrual mandate of shame, silence and secrecy” (p.1008). Such responses around the need to ‘manage’ menstruation touch upon notions of women’s bodies as leaky and problematic, where controlling of the monstrous body keeps women in the menstrual closet (Ussher, 2006; Young, 2005; Shildrik, 1997).

Some discussions around free access to menstrual products extended to the government’s Period Products Scheme introduced in 2020 which provides free menstrual products ranging from single-use tampons to menstrual cups to schools and colleges for students, and similar initiatives around the country working towards eradicating period poverty whilst normalising menstruation. There was a mix of positive and neutral attitudes towards free access to menstrual products across participant responses. Jordan (25) thought it was “*super important*” because “*no one is choosing this [to menstruate], it's a very natural thing*”, commenting that he considered it unfair for people who menstruate to have to pay for menstrual products as doing so is “*to sell that inconvenience back to you*”. Ross (38) believed schools have “*a critical role*” to play and that “*it's right that the state supports access*” to what

²¹ This is the “the expectation that menstruation should be silent and invisible...the mandate requires vigilant menstrual stain management and creative concealment of products before, during, and after use. It also suppresses discussion about periods except in certain company and under specific conditions. The menstrual mandate is a gag order” (Bobel, 2019, p.9-10).

he would consider as being essential, because “*regardless of economic background, there will be girls at school who suddenly need a product and if they don’t have that then there will be huge issues related to managing that and the implications of that.*”

In contrast, some participants shared concerns about the logistical and financial impact of providing free access to menstrual products, which seemed to be a greater concern to them, as well as the fact that schemes such as these could be *abused* by people who could afford to buy their menstrual products if the schemes were rolled out across wider society. This suggests that for these participants, they may recognise menstruation as being *natural* and yet something to be *managed* by using menstrual products (which they consider to be essential) to conceal menstrual blood, but that menstruation is not *natural enough*, to warrant free access to menstrual products for anyone who wishes to use them, whether they can afford to or not. This feeds into wider contradictions across participants’ responses, particularly when it came to comparisons being made between free access to menstrual products and free access to condoms and contraception through the National Health Service, as well as general access to condoms in hospitality venues. It was common for participants to highlight the accessibility they personally had to pick up condoms for free from a Sexual Health Clinic or from a GP surgery, acknowledging how this should be the case for menstrual products too, although some participants were not aware that menstrual products could not be accessed in these ways at the time of the interview. The most significant finding from these discussions with non-menstruating participants was how despite some acknowledgement of the accessibility issues around menstrual products, and comments made about menstruation being *natural*, responses still suggest some participants lacked an understanding of the regularity, and often unpredictability of menstruation. This was clear in Neil’s (37) response to what he felt about free access to menstrual products in public toilets, hospitality venues, football grounds etc:

I think that’s a luxury. A woman, like anybody, if you’re leaving the house and going out for the day, you should be prepared for that eventuality that day. If they were available at those outlets and you’ve got to pay for them, it’s your own fault for not being prepared. If you got them free, or you’ve got them at home, but you’ve gone to the pub and have to buy them, then so be it.

This was a standpoint shared by Benjamin (32), who initially stated that he believed there should be free access to products for students who cannot afford them, and at a stretch for there to be free access to menstrual products in public places and social spaces, but like Neil, Benjamin returned to placing the onus on the person menstruating and made comparisons to access to condoms:

My expectation would be that most women would be better prepared for that situation...I'm not saying it would be a waste of money, or time, I just think that most women would be equipped to manage it before they go into a public space...If she is of the age of going to a restaurant, 18 onwards, you've had a good few years of your period and know what works for you, you know what doesn't work for you and you'd be better prepared. That's not to say- I could say the same about guys going out with condoms, you'd like to think that guys go out, you know what works for you, you've got one in your wallet, jobs a good'n. But we know for a fact loads of guys don't do that, loads of condoms in toilets and you get one in an emergency in case you're lucky that night. So yeah, it makes sense to me to have that universal emergency type of period product there.

These comments highlight a lack of knowledge and understanding of menstruation as a lived experience, but this shared narrative also indicates that these participants look at menstruation as being a choice, like sex, and is a personal responsibility of the individual to be 'prepared for'. These responses make clear the stark differentiation they make between menstruation and bodily excretions such as urine and faeces, which of course cannot be scheduled and, in most cases, are not practically prepared for by the individual, for instance by carrying toilet roll or paper tissues with personal belongings.

7.5 Making Meaning Through Popular Culture

Across non-menstruating participants' responses to where they had become aware of menstruation, or learnt about menstruation throughout their lives, it was clear how popular culture had played a role for some when they were younger, and in some cases had continued to throughout their adult lives. Ed (28) discussed popular culture in relation to how humour is often used to communicate about menstruation, but they felt like it is less common now than during his adolescence for subjects such as menstruation to be joked about on screen. Ed touched particularly on how the usual association is made between a woman being "*all aggy and nagging*" and thus, she must be menstruating:

I don't know if that's like just me growing up, or if it's like humour changes, and there's things that used to be okay to joke about that are less so now. I think there used to be a lot in popular culture, it was an easy joke right, woman is getting all aggy and nagging about this and 'oh she must be on her period'. Even on TV and stuff it kind of used to be okay, but maybe not as much now. There's much more awareness in the last few years of what is okay and what isn't okay to joke about.

Comparable to Dan's reference to *The Shining* in chapter 5, Jay shared his experience of watching a video by *The Slow Mo Guys* on YouTube, showing the male duo bursting a balloon filled with red paint in slow motion which "*looked a little bit like Quentin Tarantino's new movie*". Jay observed how the comments on the video "*were full of women, or girls, or someone, making jokes about periods, like 'this is exactly what a period feels like' because it was a humongous explosion of red, and I thought, 'that's very funny!'*". In a discussion on menstrual products during his interview, Jordan (25) was also reminded of a video he had watched of a little boy talking to his mother about her using menstrual pads when shopping in a supermarket, which had been recorded by his mother and later was shared and went viral (Hot Vines, 2015):

The little kid who picks up the massive box and he's saying to his mum, "you do use these though, at the old house, I've seen it, you do use them". Bless him, it's a little kid and he's picked up a massive box and he's seen his mum use them. It's quite interesting to see, because she's filming him and he's such a sincere little boy, and then at the end she kinda snaps at him and tells him to put them back. I've never thought about it before, but it is quite interesting that it's a guarded thing, do you know what I mean? The little boy is inquisitive, and he's got the wrong end of the stick.

These examples shared by participants demonstrate how menstruation can appear in various forms and on various platforms, but for these participants and others accessing and sharing such material, experiences of menstruation are ultimately portrayed through a lens of humour.

7.5.1 Influence of TV, Film and Comedy

In discussions around where non-menstruating participants had heard about menstruation, although examples of popular culture were shared, it was not highlighted or necessarily understood as an obvious method for learning about menstruation for these participants. During the interviews some reflected on how

menstruation had been portrayed in certain ways and demonstrated some acknowledgement of the inaccuracy and negative impact of this on general understanding of and attitudes towards menstruation. In Ed's earlier response, they focus specifically on how a woman's irritability and complaints are associated with her menstruating, and how this chosen point of focus is "*an easy joke*". This was touched upon further by other participants, who referred to some stand-up comedians and TV/Films, acknowledging how humour has for some time been used to portray menstruation, and the person menstruating, in a negative light. Stephen (30) shared his memories of picking up on menstrual humour when he was 10/11 years old watching the film of American adult animated sitcom, *South Park; Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, although at the time he does not consider himself to have understood what 'periods' were:

There's a joke in that [film] about periods. The schoolteacher complains about the mums who are complaining, he says, "ah, they must all be on their periods". One of the girls says, "that's really sexist", and the line he uses is, "I don't trust anything that bleeds for five days and doesn't die". I heard that and I know I heard that because I watched the film at that time, but I probably didn't know what it was, what it meant or anything else.

Similarly for Andrew (25), when asked during the interview where he had learnt that "*grumpy women = period*", an observation he had shared in an earlier discussion during the interview, he said:

Maybe entertainment. Probably something that happens in TV shows, but also, I remember comedians making jokes about them as well. Maybe not so politically correct comedians talking about the way they talk about women and that kind of thing.

For James (25), humour used in relation to menstruation and how it is experienced in comedy shows or in Stand-Up plays a key part in perpetuating menstrual stigma and associated taboos:

I watch a lot of comedy, so it's usually over the top dramatic emotional acting. Sometimes as well, there's an excuse to do something else, like stop a man from talking to you. They'll turn around and be like, "Ooo I've got massive period pain, massive cramp" and that'll shut the men up and move them on somewhere else. I think it perpetuates it [menstrual taboo]. I think fundamentally it's bad because it

turns it into a joke, it turns it into, like it's not real. If it's comedy then it's being laughed at, it's not real dialogue, it's taking the piss.

In comparison to this, some participants shared reflections which suggested that comedians and TV/Film had at times used humour to talk about menstruation in ways which contested negative or inaccurate ideas about menstruation. An example of this is Craig (26), who referenced a storyline in American adult animated sitcom, *Family Guy*, which challenged how menstrual product adverts use blue liquid when demonstrating the absorbency of the products, rather than a red blood-like liquid:

The thing I remember, is in Family Guy, where he goes, "the deal is that you make it blue." They're watching period adverts and when law and order breaks down, they start using real blood instead of the light blue dyes in sanitary products. All I can remember is them being there and laughing a lot at that joke, because all I remember from advertising growing up is that they use blue liquid instead of blood.

This was further demonstrated by Jake (21), Stephen (30) and Andrew (25), who each shared their own recollections of menstruation being discussed by comedians. Interestingly, these three participants talked specifically about female comedians and their use of humour to talk about menstruation in their work. Like Craig, Stephen also recalled references being made to menstrual product advertising and the "*clear liquid showing how well it [the product] absorbs it*":

That's part of a stand-up routine that I watched...It might have been Jo Coburn- the comedian, no- Jo Caulfield it was. I'm pretty sure she did a skit about bloody period adverts and how ridiculous they are. It's probably something I've not really thought about, but it is that kind of laundry detergent clear colour they always use, isn't it?

Female comedians challenging existing societal understandings of, and attitudes towards menstruation from the perspective of the person menstruating extended to Jake's (21) observation of watching American stand-up comedian and actress, *Amy Schumer*, who, as a sidenote, has been public about her diagnosis of endometriosis on social media:

I watched a funny Amy Schumer; I like Amy Schumer. There was a sketch where she said the most sexually aroused she's ever been, was when she told a man she was on her period and he said, "well let's get messy then!". It just made me laugh, because actually, she was very up for having sex and it doesn't bother her.

Although Andrew (25) acknowledged comedians and TV shows as being a negative influence on his perception of “*grumpy women*” and menstruation, he also shared how following female comedians on Twitter had contributed towards his general awareness of menstrual experiences through their use of humour in talking about their own experiences:

I think periods come up in humour quite a lot. I follow quite a few female comedians on Twitter for example and there's always tweets about it [periods] and how they've had a funny misunderstanding because of a period, or they've had a funny story because of it, or they just make a joke about it in general, turning it into a light-hearted moment.

During an interview with menstruating participant Brit (23), she considered where men and boys develop their understanding of menstruation if female relatives or partners are not open towards them about their own menstrual experiences, and emphasised the significance of TV and films in portraying unrealistic menstrual experiences and how this creates inaccurate expectations for men and boys in their own personal lives:

If a girl is on her period and in a film a fella comes in with a tub of ice cream and she's fine...and it's like, that's not how it works. So, I think a lot of people expect it to work that way. 'I've got you ice cream, why aren't you better?' Or 'I've got you a glass of wine, you've had it, what's the matter with you now?'

Collectively, these participant responses suggest that TV/Film and comedy sketches may be a source of learning about menstruation, but they more often portray menstruation in unrealistic ways and may contribute towards the perpetuation of menstrual shame and stigma. However, some responses indicate that when the individual is someone who menstruates, their approach in communicating about menstruation may be more realistic, and thus positive for men and boys to engage with. Media has been recognised as a dominant source that contributes to young men's sexual education (Epstein and Ward, 2008). Standing and Hughes (2019) note that, “our cultural narratives around menstruation are reflected and reaffirmed by the way periods have been presented in film, TV and popular books, and campaigns from the menstrual product industry”. Across mainstream media and within film and television, menstruation is most often portrayed as causing fear and offence, with negativity towards menstruation in media having constructed a negative

stereotype of ‘out of control’ menstruating women and of the premenstrual woman as ‘the menstrual monster’ (Tomlinson, 2021; Linton, 2019; Rosewarne, 2012).

7.5.2 Awareness Raising Through Traditional and Social Media

The growing presence of menstruation-related discussions on social media was addressed by some non-menstruating participants, in which they acknowledged how they have been drawn to certain menstrual-related issues and campaigns on Twitter and Instagram. When asked if they were aware of any current stories about menstruation in the news during the interview, Jay (35) referred to seeing “*an article from Ireland just the other day on social media*” about Tampax’s television advertisement²² that had just been banned in Ireland by the Advertising Standards Authority for causing widespread offence, which he considered as being “*really backwards*”. Ross (38) shared how he had recently noticed an increase in menstruation being discussed in the news he was accessing online, but that it was specifically in relation to “*the sporting side of things*”. He went on to say how the BBC sport page was his main source of sporting information online, and that he was aware of the BBC trying to “*raise the profile, or the level of coverage they provide to women’s sport*”. This meant Ross had read online articles specifically related to menstruation, women, and sport over the past couple of years, because it was presented to him on the usual platform he would use to access sport news. Ross shared how this had encouraged him to consider the impact of the menstrual cycle on female athletes, something he had not thought about prior to reading these articles:

I’m a fairly big sporting fan, and it’s noticeable in the last year or two, there’s been a bit more discussion about it [menstruation] around women’s sport and around how women are supported through that, how athletes are supported through that I guess and the choices they have to make to allow themselves to compete in a sport which is not going to be sensitive to people’s cycles. I have no idea what steps they take to control that, but I imagine it could have potentially a big impact on athletic performance. With the potential hormone impact, I’m presuming female athletes are

²² The Tampax ‘Tampons & Tea’ television advert uses a mock talk show to stage a conversation about how to use tampons correctly, specifically how if you can feel your tampon, it may not be positioned correctly. 84 complaints were received from the public, who argued the advert was over-descriptive, inappropriate, and sexualised the use of tampons (O’Connor, 2020).

forced to choose potentially to take some quite significant medication to control that, so I have a bit of an interest in that as well.

For Scottish participant, Stephen (30), a culmination of social media and sport had been responsible for his engagement in menstruation-related campaigns and his awareness of period poverty, specifically through the *On The Ball campaign*²³ founded in Scotland. Although the football club Stephen supported had already signed up to provide menstrual products to supporters at their home ground through this campaign, Stephen had continued to follow the success of the campaign through Twitter and had gone on to listen to podcasts with the three female founders. Talking about his awareness of and interest in the issue of period poverty in the UK, Stephen shared how social media had, and continued to play a significant role in his engagement with the issue in question. Stephen recognised how his time spent on Twitter had encouraged him to contribute towards the cause in a positive way, by raising awareness of period poverty through petition sharing and “*challenging people*” online:

I just kind of became aware of it through being left wing, following socialist politicians on Twitter, being feminist and following feminists- the positive sides of the echo chamber if you like- When you start hearing things you've not heard of before and you become much more attuned to. I think it wasn't something I've dived straight into in terms of being a campaigner, because I've been too busy doing a PhD and trying to get work (laughs), but it's been much more a kind of soft campaigning- retweeting, signing petitions and sharing petitions, talking about period poverty, and challenging people when it's discussed.

For one of the youngest participants, Martin (25), Instagram was recognised as a platform for learning about menstruation. Although he did not specifically identify Instagram as a source of knowledge on menstruation for himself, he demonstrated some awareness of how some accounts on Instagram, specifically those managed by “*younger women*” are contributing towards normalising menstruation as “*just a natural process*”. Martin also shared how people can gain information and advice

²³ Set up in March 2018 and led by three female Celtic FC football fans, Orlaith Duffy, Erin Slaven and Michaela McKinley, who wanted to increase the visibility of female fans and end period poverty by getting free menstrual products into football grounds in Scotland (Falkingham, 2018; Zipp and Standing, 2018). This was soon picked up by football clubs and other sports clubs across the UK and around the world, and the fans announced the end of their activism in March 2021 (On The Ball, 2021).

about the menstrual cycle from Instagram accounts which are set up to discuss related topics, which he believes will be having some positive influence on their followers by normalising menstruation as a natural process:

To me, it seems the people I know and the groups I know, it's just younger women that are talking about it on Instagram and posting stuff about it. I don't really see anyone else doing it or trying to normalise it, it seems. That's where the movement is sort of coming from anyway. It's just like, I don't know, but sort of positive things about it, how it's a process that happens and that's just what happens, and it shouldn't be viewed as anything else other than that, just a natural process. People have jobs on Instagram now, I follow a few sort of people on there who do like, Ask Me anything sort of things, and it will be on those sort of topics and they get loads of questions and they'll literally answer them so I can only assume that they're taking on advice given by these people because they seem to have a lot of followers and have quite a lot of influence in that.

The influence of social media on raising awareness of menstrual stigma and period poverty was also picked up by Mark (27), who shared how he had “*seen movements on social media*” about the cost of menstrual products and decision making around which menstrual products to use, or whether to use any at all, which he recalls as being presented in a visual way through the platform's engagement framework of sharing images:

I've seen movements on social media about having to pay for sanitary products, the use of sanitary products, like whether they should be used or whether they shouldn't be used and different movements like that. Images to go alongside it, so people wearing...women showing off white underwear showing they're going through menstruation without the use of a product. I've seen that sort of movement online to sort of put the topic out there, so people, whether it's healthy or normal to use sanitary products in that way or whether it should be accepted that you don't use anything and that's the way nature intended.

On Twitter, typical stereotypes of menstruation associated with physical and emotional changes, frustration and anger are prevalent, and menstruating women are seen as unpredictable and dangerous (Thornton, 2013). In the Always *It's Time to Talk* report (2021), findings suggest that the media contributes to the negative portrayal of menstruation in society, stating that whilst “nearly 1 in 4 young people have seen periods referred to negatively in a movie or on TV”, “nearly 1 in 5 have seen them referred to negatively on social media”. A survey in this report also found that boys in the UK use social media as a source of learning about periods online. In

another UK study, some boys had been exposed to derogatory and negative menstrual discourse through their use of social media platforms, for example on Facebook, however they were also aware of more positive content, such as an article on BuzzFeed about how men can help someone experiencing a period (Tingle and Vora, 2018). With the power to shape knowledge and influence attitudes on an individual level, social media has the potential to both exacerbate and change menstrual stereotypes. In these participant responses about content related to talking about periods more positively related to decision making around menstrual products and awareness raising of period poverty, social media platforms can be seen as a source of positive information on menstruation for their users. Whilst social media has been acknowledged as constructing and reinforcing some negative attitudes and stereotypes of menstruation (Thornton, 2013), in recent years menstrual activism has pushed menstruation into becoming a politicised issue across social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. This has the potential for constructing more positive attitudes towards menstruation. An example of this is through menstrual memes, which Tomlinson argues can normalise menstruation and “advance the objectives of menstrual activism” (2021, p.421). Responses indicate that Twitter and Instagram specifically are platforms which are providing users with the ability to post content which challenges stereotypes and pre-existing attitudes about menstruation through the dissemination of information, but content on these platforms also break the taboo of menstruation by presenting visual representations of menstruation, specifically menstrual blood. In Mark’s response, there is some indication of him seeing images depicting free bleeding on Instagram, in which menstrual blood is no longer hidden and becomes visible, in this case for Instagram users to see. Free bleeding and the refusal to use menstrual products is a form of resistance to the menstrual concealment imperative (Wood, 2020). This is a strong example of how social media can normalise menstruation, educate people on menstrual-related issues and promote more open and constructive discussions for all without menstrual shame and stigma, including for non-menstruators.

7.6 Conclusion

My research highlights how aside from school and formal education, home and family, and intimate relationships and partners, non-menstruators’ awareness of

menstruation is developed through interactions with their peers and through various forms of popular culture. My research acknowledges how relationships with peers change between childhood/adolescence and into adulthood in relation to menstrual exchanges, and indicates that along with menstrual product advertising, popular culture has some impact on how men and boys learn about menstruation throughout the life course.

Responses indicate that when menstruation is talked about between male peers, it is usually done so within a humorous context, although such exchanges lack detail and depth, with masculine identities being at risk if menstruation is discussed in a knowledgeable and serious way. The feminisation of menstruation means that in performing masculinity, men seek to distance themselves from menstruation as a means to assert their own masculinity, thereby conforming to hegemonic masculinity and upholding patriarchal practices. However, as documented earlier, humour in this context both cements and resists hegemonic constructions of masculinity around menstruation. My research shows that men can learn about menstruation from their female peers, including friends and colleagues, but age plays a crucial role here. In contrast to the school environment, this communication during adulthood is more positive and constructive with female peers, in which menstruation becomes a real-life experience to understand and empathise with through the sharing of personal experiences, as opposed to a topic to discuss in jest and laugh about towards female peers. Such is echoed by menstruating participants' accounts of communication with male peers in adulthood, although there is still some apprehension around talking to male friends and work colleagues. Overall, it seems that for some non-menstruating participants, they have experienced more comfort and openness towards talking about menstruation with their female peers than their male peers in adulthood. In these contexts, there is some evidence of men's agency in repositioning themselves in relation to menstruation, of seeking alongside women to deconstruct the taboos around menstruation, which stigmatise and shame women and construct a veil of silence around the menstruating female body. While these moves could be interpreted as examples of positive masculinities which seek to legitimate egalitarian relations between men and women, as discussed by Messerschmidt and Messner (2018), my research points to a mixed picture in which men can express both a willingness and desire to break down menstrual taboos and the gendered divisions

around menstruation, while at the same time also repeating and reinforcing those very same taboos.

General attitudes towards menstrual product accessibility did not vary much between non-menstruating participants, with almost all believing they are essential and should be freely accessible in some way to those who need them. However, responses around menstrual products revealed a lack of understanding about the regularity and unpredictability of menstruation across several participants. These discussions also unveiled some wider attitudes around the need to conceal menstrual blood and avoid embarrassment by using menstrual products, which perpetuated ideas of menstrual shame and stigma. Some discussions with non-menstruating participants revealed some deeper-rooted issues of how attitudes towards menstruation are still predicted on notions of women's bodies as unruly and unclean.

My research adds to existing literature on the role of popular culture in shaping attitudes towards menstruation, however it also demonstrates how boys and men as non-menstruators receive mixed messages from different sources about the menstruating woman and menstruation as a lived experience. Participant responses indicate that advertisements for menstrual products were uninformative for them when they were younger, especially for those who did not know what the products were for at the time. The unrealistic portrayals of menstruation in advertising, for example the use of blue liquid and the active woman playing sport, and how menstruation is portrayed and discussed in different forms of media; whereas menstrual product advertising paints a picture of the menstruating woman as being 'happy', 'normal', and free to do what she would do if she was not menstruating, as an outcome of using the product being advertised, in TV, film, and comedy they are presented with a negative stereotype of the premenstrual and menstruating woman as monstrous and out of control.

My research indicates that despite the often negative, inaccurate, and sexist portrayals of menstruation across popular culture discussed by my participants, some forms of popular culture can serve as a positive and educational springboard in challenging existing negative menstrual attitudes in men, as seen in Jake and Andrew's experience of engaging with female comedians who talk about

menstruation in an honest and realistic way. This can also be done through the provision of positive and accurate information on menstruation and the inclusion of menstrual-related topics across mainstream media outlets, for example through social media posts, as experienced by Stephen and Mark. An important takeaway point here though, is that my research also indicates this form of communication using social media to engage and educate men and boys on menstruation, is reliant, in part, on menstruators themselves sharing content to challenge menstrual shame and stigma. These findings however reflect and support the recent rise in menstrual activism working towards breaking down societal stigma and taboos around menstruation by using online methods.

Chapter 8 | Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the menstrual attitudes and experiences of men as non-menstruators in the contemporary UK context. Despite a recent rise in academic interest in menstruation and acknowledgement of the significance of men and boys in both popular culture and academia, there remains a paucity of research focused on men and boys in the context of menstruation, as well as limited studies on menstruation more generally in the UK context. The most notable study focused solely on men in the UK was conducted and published over thirty years ago (Laws, 1990), with Newton's work later capturing some men and boys' accounts and experiences within a wider participant pool (2016). However, since starting this research in 2018, there has been a growing interest in menstruation in the UK context (see, for example, Always, 2021; Hey Girls, 2019). To the most part, existing studies on menstruation do not engage with masculinity theory, however Macleod et al.'s work (2022) highlights the usefulness of the concept of hegemonic masculinity in extending understanding of men's menstrual attitudes. In response to the scarcity of research on men and menstruation in the UK, my research set out to provide an in-depth insight into the lived experiences of men as non-menstruators in the UK, centred around understanding their menstrual attitudes, how they learn about menstruation and how they view their role(s) in relation to menstruation. Thus, through this study, I was interested in addressing three research questions:

1. How do men view menstruation?
2. How do boys and men learn about menstruation?
3. How do men perceive their role(s) in menstrual-related issues and practices?

In my analysis I also sought to put my research findings in conversation with the conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity to start to explore ways in which a greater engagement with the theorisation of masculinity might further understandings of men and menstruation.

The structure of this thesis has been shaped by my non-menstruating participants' responses which suggested that thinking about pivotal stages of the life course between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is useful for exploring and understanding their menstrual attitudes and experiences. This chapter will highlight the key findings and contributions of this research in the context of the life course, drawing on hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and binarised gender. It will firstly discuss the practices of menstrual exclusion boys and men experience from childhood through to adulthood that are shaped by the feminisation of menstruation, moving onto further discussion of hegemonic masculinity and the possibility of non-menstruators mansplaining menstruation. The proposed analogy of 'Men as Menstrual Mortar' will be revisited and discussed further in the context of the research findings. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed, and the chapter will conclude with recommendations for moving forward in terms of policy change and necessary future research on men and menstruation, as well as a personal reflection on researching men and menstruation.

8.2 Menstrual Exclusion Throughout Key Stages of the Life Course

Exploring experiences with menstruation at key stages of the life course is useful for considering and understanding how menstrual attitudes are formed and how menstrual taboos and stigmatisation are perpetuated and reinforced at key stages through life. A key finding from my research is that boys and men experience some exclusion from menstruation throughout key stages of the life course, as discussed throughout chapters 4-7. This exclusion informs, and is informed, by the feminisation of menstruation. Practices of exclusion are apparent in non-menstruating participants' responses and echoed in experiences shared by menstruating participants. Early exclusion in school-based education is cemented by silences and further exclusion within the family unit, setting the tone for ongoing menstrual exclusion throughout the life course where menstruation is, and continues to be, seen overwhelmingly as 'women's business' even in adulthood. There are some moments of inclusion evident in participants' experiences shared, however such moments of inclusion serve to cement exclusion from menstruation.

In chapter 4, non-menstruating participant responses revealed how exclusion from menstruation starts in childhood and adolescence within the school context, upheld by cis heteronormativity and a gender binary which constructs people as boys/men (who do not menstruate) and girls/women (who do menstruate). For some of my non-menstruating participants, this exclusion started as early as primary school age when girls and boys were split up from their usual class format, with only girls being taught about menstruation. Alternatively, girls received additional information on menstruation at this age, but this gendered division is an indicator of difference for boys at this young age, and indeed for many of my non-menstruating participants their first recollection of viewing menstruation as being something which does not concern them. Menstruating participants also reflected on this gendered separation as being a sign to them that boys did not need to know about menstruation. Where non-menstruating participants report learning some information about menstruation at school, this formal education was focused on basic biology, often for the purposes of assessments, with no discussions of menstruation as a lived experience. Further encounters with menstruation in the school context add the silences around menstruation which is understood as an experience boys should not know about, with both girls and teachers further fuelling this notion in their communication with or in the presence of boys. Some examples of this practice include when girls needed to leave the classroom to go to the toilet during a lesson, or girls saying they were talking about “*women’s things*” to shoo away boys from their space.

In chapter 5 I discussed how boys encounter and experience some exclusion around menstruation within the context of home in childhood and adolescence. However, the home has also been recognised as an environment which offers some physical exposure to menstruation for boys through seeing menstrual products in the family bathroom, or menstrual blood in the toilet. Nonetheless, exclusion from menstruation in relation to the family occurs when boys are not taught about menstruation by their parents or are not included in conversations on menstruation in the home, including those with siblings who menstruate. Exclusion in this context also extends to limited awareness of mothers’ menstrual experiences, explained by some non-menstruating participants in relation to their vague awareness of their mothers’ hysterectomy procedures when they were younger, due to not being explicitly told what their mothers were going into hospital for, and what the impact of having a hysterotomy

would be for their mothers both short and long term. In this context, menstruating participants did not directly communicate about menstruation with their brothers, with one participant being told by their female relatives to hide her menstruation from her brothers. Similarly, menstruating participants shared how fathers were not involved in menstrual-related communication during adolescence, with any menstrual education taking place usually the responsibility of mothers.

Moving from adolescence into adulthood, my research indicates that men continue to experience some exclusion from menstruation within their heterosexual intimate relationships with partners, although this is where having to deal with menstruation becomes much more of a reality for many men. In this context, responses from both menstruating and non-menstruating participants highlight not only how communication around the menstrual cycle is often limited but also how mis/communication can impact on emotional and physical intimacy within a relationship. Even when menstruation or related issues are discussed as a couple, it is rarely direct and explicit, which, as explored in chapter 6, can further exclude men from their partners' menstrual experiences. In chapter 7, instances of exclusion continue externally from formal education, family, and partners, in relation to men and boys' communication around menstruation with female and male peers, in menstrual product advertising, and across various forms of popular culture.

In drawing on the key stages of the life course discussed by my participants, my research offers an insight into how these practices of exclusion both follow on from one another and add on to each other, exacerbating and perpetuating men's perception of menstruation as being 'not for them' and creating negative menstrual attitudes in men and boys. For instance, Iain, who was 39 at the time of the interview, is a useful example of this. Iain's relationship with menstruation throughout his life is interesting and yet, unsurprising. In chapter 4, Iain talks of attending a boys independent boarding school, which is where he recalls being taught about menstruation at age 12. Iain shares how his mother would never have discussed menstruation with him, and so this is the only education he received during adolescence. Beyond the classroom, Iain's boarding arrangements meant he did not share any physical space with girls during his time at school, and so when being taught about menstruation, he recalls the sniggering and laughter from boys,

because menstruation was not something he or his peers had or would encounter. Fast forward to adulthood and the home context, at the time of the interview Iain had been with his wife for 11 years and married for 8 years. Iain's responses indicated that he does not experience regular open communication about menstruation, or the menstrual cycle, with his wife. At times he is aware that she is menstruating because she will sometimes mention it, but Iain described being more aware of the signals and changes in behaviour which suggest to him that she is menstruating. It was clear from Iain's responses that he did not associate himself with menstruation and held a strong position on knowing he must "*back off*" during this time. What became clearer to me was that Iain's understanding of menstruation and his role at this time as a partner, had been shaped by his experiences with an ex-partner, in which he learnt that it's best to just "*let a woman go through it*", and see her on the other side, so to speak. In chapter 6, we see how Iain had a negative experience with his wife when he purchased the wrong menstrual pads for her, what he refers to as "*a disaster*"; this experience reinforcing his understanding that it's best to let women deal with menstruation on their own. Iain and his wife did not engage in any sexual activity when she was menstruating. There had been no communication in their 11 years together on whether menstrual sex was something either of them were happy and comfortable to partake in, yet because Iain's ex sexual partner was "*completely grossed out by it*" at the time, this previous negative experience meant Iain did not think it was okay to do, or to talk about, with his now wife. Shifting to a focus on fatherhood, Iain, a father of two at the time of the interview, did not know what was happening in his wife's menstrual cycle when they were trying to conceive. Despite their initial struggles and it being "*a case of trying and trying*", there were no conversations between Iain and his wife about menstruation during this time, and instead Iain would acknowledge the start of his wife's period (when he knew) as an indication that she was yet to conceive. This lack of open communication about menstruation both in his childhood home and now adult home he shares with his wife and children, means Iain's reluctant position on talking to his daughter in the future about her periods comes as no surprise, instead believing his wife will take the lead on that and he will need to know just so he can "*back off*". Iain is just one example in my participant pool of how the construction of boundaries around menstruation, especially concerning mis/communication, may have both exacerbated and

perpetuated my non-menstruating participant's negative menstrual attitudes and their continual exclusion from menstruation as only a 'woman's issue'.

I argue these practices of exclusion boys and men as non-menstruators experience throughout key stages of the life course are rooted in a patriarchal gender order and perpetuate menstrual shame, stigma, and silence. These practices of exclusion in childhood, adolescence and adulthood can both challenge and reinforce one another, resulting in boys and men understanding that to some extent, menstruation is 'not for them'. The feminisation of menstruation equates to boys and men lacking the menstrual knowledge, language, and confidence to communicate positively about menstruation and menstrual-related issues with each other with women, girls and people who menstruate. Furthermore, my research suggests and that underpinning this exclusion is a construction of women's bodies as unclean and problematic, as demonstrated in discussions with some participants about menstrual sex in chapter 6 and menstrual advertising in chapter 7.

8.3 Hegemonic Masculinity

Given that menstruation is a "key symbol of femininity" (Macleod et al., 2022, p.3), gender is relational, and femininities are constructed in opposition to masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), I acknowledge hegemonic masculinity as a useful concept for understanding men's menstrual attitudes and experiences. The analysis of my data shows how in a binarised gender environment where dominant modes of masculinity are constructed in opposition to womanhood, manifestations of hegemonic masculinity informed men and women's experiences of menstruation, in some instances, to reinforce the perception of menstruation as purely a woman's issue, and to distance men from women's bodies (which are perceived to be leaky and shameful), but also sometimes as something to be negotiated with/resisted, as seen in moments of pushback in the data. As discussed below, there are spaces in which positive and caring masculinities are emerging in relation to menstruation.

My research follows Macleod et al.'s recent publication on hegemonic masculinities in the context of male peer talk about menstruation (2022), in which they recognise how interviewing men individually may have presented "different and possibly kinder

versions of masculinities” (p.15), what Messerschmidt and Messner (2018) might see potentially as examples of positive masculinities. By using individual interviews, my research offers an insight into how hegemonic masculinities are upheld, negotiated, and resisted on an individual level with men as non-menstruators. Furthermore, my research paints a picture of how constructions of masculinity and gender more broadly shape men and boys’ engagement with menstruation throughout their lives.

My research highlights how men and boys experience practices of exclusion throughout key stages of the life course, which is the outcome of patriarchal ideas and negative attitudes towards menstruation which stigmatise women’s menstruating bodies as leaky and shameful. The analysis also highlights how some non-menstruating participants have at times distanced themselves from menstruation (including physically) and/or held some negative attitudes towards menstruation, thereby confirming and perpetuating their privileged position in the gendered hierarchy. For example, in chapter 4, partaking in banter around menstruation with boys in the school context can be associated with performances of hegemonic masculinity and as a tool for strengthening and validating heterosexual masculinities. Nonetheless, my research also points to ways in which the non-menstruating participants in my research also acted in ways, because of the social stigma around menstruation, that perpetuated menstrual taboos and in turn legitimated wider gendered inequalities and power hierarchies. In general there was a silence around menstruation in the home, but where this silence was broken, any work that was done on educating children on menstruation was carried out by mothers and conformed to existing gendered divisions of labour in which women tend to do the most reproductive and care work. It is a complicated picture because many of the menstruators and non-menstruators expressed some dissatisfaction with this current situation (for example in relation to the lack of communication around menstrual sex), but also at the same time expressed some reticence and discomfort around on how to challenge existing practices.

Hegemonic masculinity is a useful concept to consider in relation to men and menstruation as it enables a discussion of how the social organisation of menstruation is bound up with cultural constructions of masculinity and wider gender inequalities, particularly the ways in which menstrual taboos denigrate and ‘other’

women by associating them with bodily functions, which are in turn shamed and stigmatised. Shaming is a way to put women in their place and to assert male power, thus menstrual taboos can be understood as part of hegemonic masculinity's legitimisation and justification of a patriarchal gender order. Connell views hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy as interrelated. In my research, we can see how menstrual taboos can silence both men and women with the stigmas around menstruation stymying communication between menstruators and non-menstruators, with some women also unable to open up conversations about menstruation with sexual partners for example. The feminised stigmatisation of menstruation means that men's active engagement with menstruation is seen as potentially shaming and de-masculinising for them too. Kimmel (1994) suggests two key points relevant to my findings: firstly, that conformity to hegemonic masculinity involves the repudiation of the feminine and secondly, that masculinity is something to be proved. In the context of menstruation, men's sexist banter with other men is an example of both. Confronting and challenging these menstrual taboos by both menstruators and non-menstruators is one way to erode masculine hegemony and patriarchal structures. In my research, there are instances where challenging taboos and hegemonic masculinity can occur, for example in the planning of pregnancies and during childbirth. There are thus examples of both positive and caring masculinities in my research (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018; Elliott, 2016), evident in discussions of supporting both partners and children in menstrual matters. My research does not provide final or definitive answers, but points to the usefulness of interrogating further the ways in which studies of men and menstruation can benefit from greater engagement with masculinity theory, including theories of hegemonic masculinity.

8.3.1 Menstruation as Feminine

Practices of menstrual exclusion and the feminisation of menstruation go hand in hand. The feminisation and othering of menstruation is contingent on the construction of a gendered binary, informed and reinforced by the exclusion of men and boys from menstrual matters. Through the analysis chapters we see how the gender binary, cis heteronormativity, patriarchal and hegemonic masculine ideals interact with one another to present menstruation in this way. For instance, non-menstruating participants experiencing gender-segregated lessons at school and not

receiving any information on menstruation at home because they were not going to personally experience it, yet in some cases were aware of their mothers and sisters talking about menstruation. Additionally, some male non-menstruating participants' justifications for not receiving such education at home was based on not having sisters. Not only does this disregard their mothers as menstruators, as discussed in chapter 5, but in this way, they are of the opinion that they did not need to be included on anything related to menstruation in the home, because they were boys. This notion of a gendered division in the household is strengthened in cases where fathers were present in the childhood home, but did not discuss menstruation with any children, or be seen to be involved in any menstrual related discussions. Such a gendered division extends to intimate partner relationships, where non-menstruating participants acknowledge any distance or disconnect with their partners around the menstrual cycle as being related to their position as men, with no experience of menstruating.

Viewing menstruation as feminine is echoed in chapter 7, when Neil and Kevin's discussions of male peer-to-peer interactions suggest that if men are heard to be knowledgeable about menstruation within a group male context or talk about menstruation in a non-humorous way amongst male peers, then they could be seen as being "*a pussy*" (Kevin) and "*a bit more feminine*" (Neil), thus, less masculine. To talk about the 'feminine' topic of menstruation in an informed or serious way as a man or boy in this context may be a threat to the individual's masculine identity and thus, an open invite to subordination and marginalisation within the group. However, my research highlights how men and boys share banter around the subject of menstruation during adolescence and adulthood as a form of bonding and means of othering, as explored in chapter 4 and chapter 7, yet this is most often related to their sexual access to women (i.e., partners' menstruating = no sex). Such responses illustrate how men and boys avoid subordination and marginalization within the patriarchal gender order by enacting a gender identity in line with the hegemonic system (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 1987). Conforming to norms of masculinity involves men either distancing themselves from menstruation or making fun of menstruation as a means to distance themselves from the 'feminine' and to assert their masculinity. Here it is evident that deploying the concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful in explaining gendered experiences of menstruation. As

indicated above, Kimmel (1994) argues, conforming to norms of masculinity centre on the repudiation of the feminine - thereby men's distancing from menstruation and from femininity is an expression and performance of hegemonic masculinity.

As non-menstruators, men and boys' alignment with hegemonic masculine ideals informs, and is informed, by the view of menstruation as 'women's business', as hegemonic masculinity rests on a binary understanding of gender, and masculinity is perceived as that which is not feminine. The association between menstruation and women, femininity, and womanhood is apparent in participant responses to the two initial questions I asked non-menstruating participants at the start of their interviews. When asked what comes to mind when I say the word 'menstruation', several participants referred to "*women*" (Iain), "*a women's problem and health issue*" (Benjamin), "*women having to deal with their body doing what it does*" (Dan), "*a female's time of the month*" (Jason), "*women bleeding*" (Martin) and Jay said, "*female underwear with blood stains*". Similarly, when then asked how they would describe menstruation in one word, some responses were, "*women or female*" (Craig) and "*essential, but femininity and womanhood come to mind, so it's needed for reproduction*" (Jay). Furthermore, broader discussions throughout the interviews indicated that for most non-menstruating participants, menstruation was deemed to be something only cisgender women and girls experience, with few participants demonstrating an inclusive understanding of menstruation through their responses that acknowledged trans and non-binary people who menstruate.

8.3.2 Menstruators and the Perpetuation of Menstrual Shame, Stigma and Silence

My research suggests that women and girls can be complicit in perpetuating menstrual shame, stigma, and silence through menstrual etiquette (Laws, 1990), in their concealment of menstruation and in the facilitation and enforcement of exclusionary practices around menstruation with men and boys.

My analysis of participant responses in chapters 4 to 7 illustrates how menstrual shame and stigma impact how menstruation is discussed. My research underlines how taboos and secrecy around menstruation lead to pockets of silence on menstruation through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Fishman refers to this as "a type of vicious cycle" (2014, p.50), in which the silence surrounding

menstruation continues because of how and what both menstruators and non-menstruators have been told about menstruation, further contributing to the communication taboo. This is present in the life course example with Iain and his ex-partner, and current partner. Additional examples throughout the analysis can be seen in chapter 4, when female teachers at school would refer to 'women's issues' and take girls out of the classroom, and in chapter 5, with how Stephen's mother reacts negatively to the fact his girlfriend had told him she was menstruating. Menstruating participants also share several examples of how they have had limited communication about menstruation with men and boys in their lives and have felt uncomfortable talking to them about menstruation. Such examples suggest that women, through the social construction of menstruation as shameful, may also become complicit in the perpetuation of menstrual taboos, and the ghettoization of menstruation as a 'women's issue'. Practices of hegemonic masculinity reinforce structures of patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), and the feminisation of menstruation which can evoke menstrual concealment and silence and serves male power by othering women and positioning them as different and inferior to men.

My research indicates, however, that complete silence around menstruation is not evident. For example, some women referred to by non-menstruating participants, when reflecting on their experiences, had tried to talk to them about menstruation as a way of challenging the menstrual taboo. Similarly, some menstruating participants shared how they have occasionally talked about menstruation openly in the presence of men and boys, including work colleagues, peers, and family members. However, I acknowledge McHugh's position on 'menstrual moaning' (2020) to explain how when this communication is not positive, stigma around menstruation is not resisted and is instead affirmed by such communication. When women's communication about menstruation is focused on pain, discomfort, and moodiness, it draws on the illness narrative around menstruation and may echo negative cultural constructions of women's bodies as flawed and deficient. McHugh suggests that when this communication is paired with menstrual secrecy and silence, it can perpetuate menstrual shame (2020). Negative perceptions of menstruation as a lived experience are apparent in non-menstruating participants' responses to the two initial questions they were asked at the start of their interview. For instance, when

asked how they would describe menstruation using one word, some said “*hormonal*” (Mark), “*hassle*” (Alex), “*painful*” (Andrew), “*unpleasant*” (Iain), “*burden*” (Kevin), “*pain*” (Martin), “*frustrating*” (Ross) and “*messy*” (Stephen). This extended to some alternate words such as “*complicated*” (Kyle), “*inconsistent*” (Benjamin), “*unfair*” (Jordan), and “*unknown*” (Dan and Jason). Although it is not clear from all non-menstruating participants whether their negative perceptions of menstruation are drawn from their own experiences with menstruators, some do refer to the influence of such encounters on how they perceive menstruation. An example of this is Alex, who elaborates on his choice of the word ‘hassle’, saying, “*It’s someone else’s experiences I’m trying to summarise- it always seems like a bit of a hassle*”. Similarly, Kevin elaborated on ‘burden’, saying, “*In the past with my girlfriends, they’ve all been completely different, they’ve had different levels of inconvenience let’s say when they’ve been having their periods, going through pain and everything.*” Although most non-menstruating participants have absorbed negative perceptions of menstruation, some also did display some empathy towards menstruators during their interviews.

8.3.3 Resistance, Rebellion, and Reconfiguration: Challenging Hegemonic Masculine Ideals

It has previously been argued that although hegemonic masculinity legitimates and justifies the gender order in which women are subordinated, hegemonic masculinity is a problem for men as well as women on many levels (Jewkes et al., 2015), and is something that can be resisted. In the context of menstruation, my research suggests that this is the case, and some men resist and challenge hegemonic masculinities as they navigate their masculine identities.

My findings offer a nuanced insight into how men as non-menstruators view menstruation and understand their role in menstrual-related issues and practices. No definitive answers can be drawn, however importantly, my research shows how some men want to know more about menstruation and be more involved in menstrual-related practices. This means rather than complying with a hegemonic masculinity that feminises and others menstruation, at times men are resisting and challenging such hegemonic masculine ideals which ‘other’, stigmatise and denigrate women. As termed by Macleod et al. (2022), a “rebellious stance” (p.11) was taken

by some non-menstruating participants I interviewed, who demonstrated alternate positive masculinities in their responses. For these individuals, menstruation was not something they felt should be hidden from them, nor should it be an experience they cannot be connected to just because they do not personally menstruate. Not only are there examples of *positive* masculinities in pockets of my research, but also relatedly instances of *caring* masculinities (Elliott, 2016). In chapter 5, some non-menstruating participants discussed wanting to ‘do things differently’ than their own fathers when it comes to menstrual matters with their children in current and future fatherhood. Similarly, in chapter 6 some male non-menstruating participants shared how they are, or would like to be, aware of their partner’s menstrual experiences, as well as how they try to communicate and support their partners during menstruation. Such accounts and examples of counter-hegemonic practices suggest that although menstruation is framed as feminine and ‘not for them’, some men are chipping away at hegemonic masculine ideals they are expected to uphold, thus challenging gender hegemony. Likewise, my research indicates how some menstruators are also some engaging in the resistance of menstrual taboos and shame, for example in talking openly about their menstrual experiences with male colleagues and friends. Ultimately, my research offers some hope, providing an insight into how hegemonic masculinities can be challenged and resisted in the context of menstruation towards a more equitable gender order.

8.4 Mansplaining Menstruation

The concept of mansplaining, specifically the risk of mansplaining menstruation as a non-menstruator, arises in a discussion of supporting partners during menstruation in chapter 6. Jordan comments how he feels “*a little bit powerless*” and is “*out of the loop in the role of the partner at that time [during menstruation]*”, going on to say how you “*just let it run its course, and ultimately, they know what their body needs*”. Jordan recognises the tensions he experiences in this situation, as he wants to support his partner but feels there are some barriers to him doing so, but more crucially, he expresses how “*you don’t want to mansplain their period*”. I discuss in chapter 6 how Jordan sees a risk to him being “*too involved*” in his partners’ menstrual experiences, that is to be in a position where he is involved in something he acknowledges he does not know about as well as his partner does, due to both a

lack of experiential knowledge and inclusion in menstruation more broadly throughout his life. It is pertinent to note here that in chapter 7, Jordan shares with me how he feels that he has learned more about menstruation from female friends than from partners. This highlights the different dynamics and openness Jordan has experienced in friendships compared to his intimate relationships. I see Jordan's comment about not wanting to mansplain menstruation to a partner as representative of many experiences shared by my non-menstruating participants and discussed throughout the course of this thesis, hence my choice to quote Jordan and his reference to the risk of being perceived as mansplaining menstruation in the thesis title. For a man to 'mansplain' something, they are explaining "something to a woman in a tone perceived as condescending" whilst appearing to hold expert status "due to arrogance and privilege" (Bridges, 2017, p.94). I am not arguing that all non-menstruating participants consciously fear being accused of mansplaining menstruation and so they do not engage in menstrual-related communication or interactions with menstruators. Rather, that responses in my research indicate that my non-menstruating participants are often conscious of their lack of experiential knowledge, which, paired with their experiences of exclusion from menstruation and therefore their understanding of menstruation as being 'not for them', they face some personal conflict and uncertainty in understanding their role(s) as peers, sons, brothers, partners, and fathers in menstrual-related practices and issues. This uncertainty is no doubt exacerbated in contexts where menstrual shame, stigma and silence is prevalent, and at times perpetuated by women, girls and people who menstruate. Not only does this demonstrate an appetite for learning about menstruation and the importance of men and boys' inclusion in menstrual education and matters, but such could also be seen as a potential space for positive masculinities which seek to legitimate a more equitable gender order.

8.5 Men as Menstrual Mortar: Taking Down the Wall

'Men as Menstrual Mortar' was presented in the thesis introduction as a useful analogy to visualise and understand the role of men and boys in menstrual shame, stigma, and taboo. My research has highlighted how men and boys experience menstrual exclusion and how constructions of masculinity contribute towards this. As

the built wall acts as a barrier to more positive menstrual experiences, it is crucial to consider how to take down the wall.

In my research, male non-menstruating participants share their experiences of exclusion from menstruation throughout key stages of their lives. These participant responses paint a picture of where and how boys and men learn about menstruation, and ultimately, their responses indicate the importance of boys' early inclusion in menstrual education and conversations during childhood and adolescence. Although for some, their positive learning about menstruation had mostly taken place through their intimate relationships with partners, or within adult friendships, the initial early messages (centring around silence and misinformation, for example) about menstruation picked up during childhood and adolescence still form the foundations of their knowledge and attitudes towards menstruation now as adults. I argue that boys are mortar at its workable paste stage; malleable and adhesive, being comprised of a ratio of different materials and yet to become a hardened substance in a fixed structure as men with rigid held beliefs and attitudes. In this way, the ratio of different materials being the lack of menstrual education and exposure, the small often inaccurate pieces of information and the subtle but influential messages they have picked up so far about menstruation from different sources. My research indicates that within the patriarchal framework in which menstruation is culturally constructed, menstruators (alongside non-menstruators) experience shaming and stigma and can in turn perpetuate menstrual taboos, and some exclusionary practices. With reference to hegemonic masculinity, some women and girls demonstrate emphasized femininity and compliance by not talking about menstruation with men and boys (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 1995; 1987). It could be argued that women also form part of the mortar in the wall, as women's ideas about menstruation are also shaped by patriarchal perspectives of menstruation (Laws, 1990) and as a result they can be complicit in perpetuating the feminisation of menstruation, due to prevailing social norms.

As described, over time hardened mortar may absorb moisture and experience some erosion and cracking, but the structure of the wall remains, albeit weakened to an extent. In this way, men may experience and seek *some* inclusion in adulthood through open communication about menstruation with a partner or female friend for

example, which may impact and slightly change their fixed hardened state, being their existing negative attitudes. It is evident in my research that hegemonic masculinity can be challenged and resisted in the context of menstruation, for example some men wanted to be more involved in menstrual discussions and practices (and this was at times welcomed and supported by some women and girls). As Erchull (2020) argues, “while these negative attitudes may develop early, they may also soften as men age and gain more knowledge of and experience with menstruation” (p.398).

To look ahead and envision the positive inclusion of men and boys in menstruation, I argue that to dismantle the wall, what goes into the mortar mixture can and should be changed to weaken its adhesiveness. That is, that boys being given more accurate information on the menstrual cycle, including knowledge on menstruation as a lived experience, tackling menstrual taboos, and experiencing openness from others around menstruation during the early stages of the life course during childhood and adolescence, has the potential to disrupt the order by weakening the role of boys, and then men as ‘menstrual mortar’ in the structure, by decreasing their adhesiveness and durability. Through practices of inclusion, and challenging the feminisation and ghettoization of menstruation, I suggest menstruation can be normalised, and positive menstrual attitudes can be formed in both boys and then men, beneficial in their personal lives and across wider society for themselves and women, girls and people who menstruate. Connell’s understanding that masculinity is produced and reproduced, and that masculinities are constantly shifting and being contested is relevant here. As gender hierarchies are subject to change with new forms of masculinity replacing older forms, there is a possibility for “more humane and less oppressive ways of being a boy or a man” (Messerschmidt, 2019b, p.28). In line with Macleod et al.’s study (2022) there are some ‘rebellious’ masculinities and examples of positive masculinities in my research, which seek to challenge and chip away at menstrual taboos and the constructions of masculinity that uphold them. Better yet, over time such inclusion has the potential to lead to the demolition of the built brick wall - the crucial and long-overdue demolition of the patriarchal structure of menstrual shame, stigma, and taboo.

'Men as Menstrual Mortar' can be used as a resource in teaching about menstruation to explain in a simplified visual form how hegemonic masculinity upholds patriarchal practices in the context of menstruation. The mortar is where agency lies, and the bricks are part of the patriarchal gender structure. Bricks within the wall are the structures of silencing, stigmatising and othering that underpin the gender order, maintaining menstruation as something feminine and 'other' that contributes to the larger gender order in which male power is preserved. Mortar constitutes the actions that keep the bricks there, however this mortar can be eroded, and the wall undermined.

8.6 Study Limitations

Although this study was planned and conducted with the methods and recommendations of previous studies in mind, there are some limitations to my research. Firstly, due to the impact of Covid-19 on my fieldwork, the study used only one method of data collection. This also meant some initial interviews were conducted in person, with most carried out online. The study uses a limited sample size, with predominantly white British participants, and despite an extended focus on the UK in response to Covid-19 related study changes, all but one participant attended a school in England. It is also worth highlighting here the gender and sexuality of my non-menstruating participants, as the majority are heterosexual males and my study included only one AMAB non-binary participant as a non-menstruator. Researcher bias is also important to acknowledge, especially given my position as someone who menstruates researching menstrual attitudes and experiences and interviewing non-menstruators. Given their willingness to participate in the research and talk about the taboo topic of menstruation with me, it could be argued that my participants held neutral or more positive attitudes towards menstruation than the general population, thus participant bias during the interviews is also relevant to bear in mind here.

There are some limitations to recognise regarding the inclusion of menstruators in my research. Firstly, moving from in-person focus groups to individual informal interviews online in response to Covid-19 meant responses from menstruating participants were more detailed, drawing on their personal menstrual experiences

throughout their lives in more depth than would have been the case in a focus group setting. Although this enabled me greater insight into these participants' menstrual experiences as individuals, the focus of this study is on non-menstruators and therefore their inclusion is limited, providing me instead with more contextual data to analyse the non-menstruators' experiences. Secondly, within the small number of menstruators recruited to this study, most are female; there is only one AFAB non-binary participant and trans male participant in the study. However, despite these limitations, contributions from menstruating participants included in this thesis offers valuable insight into their experiences with non-menstruators, particularly within the context of relationships and intimate partners.

8.7 Recommendations

8.7.1 Policy Recommendations

Recent research in the UK highlights the impact of gendered social norms on the lives of men and boys, illustrating the “urgent need for more gender-transformative engagement with men and boys from an early age” (Burrell et al., 2019, p. 74-75). My research raises several areas of consideration for future policy changes in relation to breaking down barriers around menstruation as ‘a woman’s issue’, as to include men and boys as non-menstruators. Firstly, my research indicates the necessary inclusion of *all* students in formal menstrual education, regardless of if they will or do menstruate. My research supports the inclusion of menstruation as a subject to be taught as part of compulsory Relationship and Sex Education in England from 2020. It highlights the need for the curriculum to address the menstrual cycle by moving beyond biological information to menstruation as a lived experience. This should include discussion and exploration of different menstrual products, as well as a collective debunking of menstrual myths and associated stigmatised topics such as menstrual sex. This formal education should address the menstrual cycle throughout the life course, from menarche to menopause. The content and delivery of this formal education should be age appropriate and developmentally appropriate, as well as taught in a sensitive and inclusive way, with some early introduction at primary school and later extended at secondary school level. My research has demonstrated the importance of educators addressing and challenging constructions of masculinity in this context, both in the delivery and content of menstrual education.

The humour and banter around the topic of menstruation between boys can be utilised by the educator/facilitator during this delivery as to encourage their inclusion through the acknowledgment of their expected exclusion, and with a focus on their potential role(s) in menstrual-related practices and issues both at present and in the future. For children and adolescents who do not attend traditional schooling, for example those who are home schooled by their parent, policy should reflect the additional barriers these individuals may face in receiving menstrual education in alternate environments due to menstrual stigma and taboo.

With a focus on adulthood, my research highlights the necessary inclusion of men as fathers-to-be regarding being well informed and supported in healthcare settings, specifically in relation to conception, infertility, and birth. Beyond this, my research draws attention to a necessary wider shift around fair paternity policies and towards equipping fathers to be able to support their children with menstruation. Workplaces can be utilised to reach adult non-menstruators, with menstruation and related issues such as endometriosis and menopause being included in employer training and company policies. The recent launch of Bloody Good Employers, a HR initiative from Bloody Good Period in the UK, is an example of how employers can create long-term positive change to normalise menstruation in the workplace (Bloody Good Period, 2021).

8.7.2 Research Recommendations

To build upon the findings of this study moving forwards, future research needs to pay greater attention to intersectional experiences of both menstruators and non-menstruators. To understand and engage with men and masculinities in greater depth, an intersectional approach is necessary (Burrell et al., 2019). With a focused consideration of gender, sexuality, class, race, and disability, an intersectional lens could explore how attitudes and lived experiences of menstruation are shaped by these overlapping factors. I purposely did not ask participants questions related to religion and few participants referred to religion in their responses, however a lack of current research on menstruation and religion necessitates future research on attitudes and experiences of non-menstruators within different religious groups in the UK, as this could reveal some different menstrual beliefs and experiences than

documented in this thesis. As initially planned with this study prior to the impact of Covid-19, there is value in cross-cultural comparative research toward offering an in-depth insight into the influence of cultural factors on menstrual attitudes and experiences within different global contexts. Although this study looks at attitudes and experiences throughout the life course, the oldest non-menstruator is 42 years old, thus future research with older participants would offer a greater focus on experiences with men as fathers of older children of menstruating age, and with pre-/post-menopausal partners. There remains a paucity of research on these areas, thus such research would enable a greater focus on generational similarities and differences.

Drawing on the contributions of menstruating participants in this study, there is value in future research focused on menstrual-related experiences within heterosexual relationships conducted with couples. Such research is limited at present and is focused on specific areas related to menstruation such as PMS and marital sex (for example, Fehlnner et al., 2018 and Morris and Udry, 1983). Some non-menstruating participants suggested I interview their partners as part of their responses when being interviewed, or after participating via a follow-up email, with some participants also informing me that their partners were interested in taking part in this study. Most participants talked about current or previous partners in their responses, but these individuals' experiences could not be explored further in comparison to their partners' accounts within the scope of this research. Future research with couples could also extend to the context of menstruation in queer relationships, building on current research (for instance, Ussher and Perz, 2008). Beyond my personal experiences of menstruation with intimate female partners who menstruate, my interest in this space for future research was further ignited by Emma (34), who reflected on how when she was dating a woman who menstruated, their shared experience and understanding of menstruation meant she could not "*milk it that much*" around pre-menstrual symptoms and in fact, "*it was the opposite to what you'd think it would be actually*".

8.8 Reflections on Researching Men and Menstruation

Since embarking on this research in 2018, the menstrual landscape has significantly shifted, with several key events and policy changes happening throughout the duration of this PhD study in the UK and globally, as outlined in the thesis introduction. There has also been a welcomed increase in research on men and boys (for example, Gundi and Subramanyam, 2020), menstruation in the UK context (for example, Williams, Craddock, and Weckesser, 2022; Always, 2021) and *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* was published in July 2020. Simultaneously, the ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic started in the second year of my PhD programme and went on to shape the future of my research project from March 2020. The move to a UK focus brought its own personal challenges and setbacks, however, this significant change to my research became one I was able to make sense of and capitalise on, as menstruation-related progress continued in the UK and the value of this research has increased in both theoretical and practical terms since.

I approached this research following some raised eyebrows from various individuals I spoke to about my ideas, who appeared to not value my focus on men and boys as non-menstruators in the same way I did, like that experienced by Sophie Laws (1990). My prior feelings towards the importance of including men and boys when it comes to menstruation have evolved and strengthened throughout the duration of my study and I am confident they will continue to in the future. Similarly, my awareness and understanding of the experiences of people who menstruate, including trans and non-binary individuals, has developed through my research focus on non-menstruators and because of the necessary change in how menstruation is talked about beyond cisnormativity in both academic and activist spaces over recent years. The significant shift in my ideas during this study has been in my perception and understanding of how menstrual shame, stigma and taboo is constructed and perpetuated by us all, often unconsciously and in the most subtle ways. Despite being a menstrual researcher and an advocate for 'period positivity' (Quint, 2020b), throughout the process of conducting this research I have admittedly become more aware of my own occasional subconscious concealing of menstruation when

communicating about my personal menstrual experiences with both menstruators and non-menstruators across different spaces.

To conclude, this thesis offers a key contribution to the area of men and boys and menstruation, offering an updated insight into the menstrual attitudes and experiences of men in the UK beyond the work of Laws (1990) and Newton (2016). My research demonstrates the necessary inclusion of men and boys in the social organisation and practices related to menstruation, as well as the need for new research to improve understanding of gender relations by focusing on their experiences of menstruation as non-menstruators throughout the life course. Ultimately, this thesis highlights the importance of educating and better supporting men and boys as non-menstruators. Not only could this mean they would be better equipped to play an active role in menstrual-related practices and issues, which would no doubt improve the menstrual experiences of women, girls and people who menstruate, but this shift towards the inclusion of men and boys supports the degendering of menstruation, meaning a move beyond the historical cis heteronormativity of menstruation as a function of the female body that only affects women.

Appendices

Appendix A | Participant Demographics²⁴

	PSEUDONYM	INTERVIEW LOCATION	AGE	GENDER	SEXUALITY	TYPE OF SCHOOL ATTENDED	OCCUPATION	HIGHEST LEVEL QUALIFICATION
Non-menstruating Participants								
1	Jake	In person	21	Male	Gay	Co-Ed Private Boarding	Bartender	Undergraduate Degree
2	Martin	In person	25	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State Christian (Infants + Juniors) Co-Ed State (Secondary)	Musician and Music Teacher	Undergraduate Degree
3	James	In person	25	Male	Gay	Co-Ed State (Church of England)	Barman	Postgraduate Degree
4	Andrew	Online	25	Male	Gay	Boys Private	Product Executive	Undergraduate Degree
5	Jordan	Online	25	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Senior Data Analyst	Undergraduate Degree

²⁴ Information correct at the time of interviews (January-August 2020).

	PSEUDONYM	INTERVIEW LOCATION	AGE	GENDER	SEXUALITY	TYPE OF SCHOOL ATTENDED	OCCUPATION	HIGHEST LEVEL QUALIFICATION
6	Alex	Online	26	Male	Bisexual	Co-Ed State (Primary) Co-Ed Private (Secondary) Boys Grammar (Sixth Form)	Research Assistant	PhD
7	Craig	Online	26	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	PhD Student	Postgraduate Degree
8	Jason	Online	26	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Restaurant General Manager	NVQ Level 4
9	Dan	In person	27	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Freelance Magician	Undergraduate Degree
10	Mark	Online	27	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Secondary School IT Technician	Level 3 Diploma
11	Ed	Online	28	Non-binary (AMAB)	Bisexual	Co-Ed State	Freelance Theatre Maker and Writer	Undergraduate Degree
12	Owen	In person	28	Male	Bisexual	Co-Ed State (Primary) Boys Grammar (Secondary)	Restaurant Supervisor	A-Level
13	Stephen	Online	30	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed Catholic State	Postdoctoral Researcher	PhD

	PSEUDONYM	INTERVIEW LOCATION	AGE	GENDER	SEXUALITY	TYPE OF SCHOOL ATTENDED	OCCUPATION	HIGHEST LEVEL QUALIFICATION
14	Peter	In person	31	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Sales Assistant	NVQ
15	Benjamin	Online	32	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Paramedic	Postgraduate Degree
16	Jay	Online	35	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Classical Musician	PhD
17	Neil	Online	37	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Chartered Building Surveyor	Postgraduate Degree
18	Ross	Online	38	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State (Primary) Boys Private Boarding (Secondary)	Careers Advisor	Postgraduate Diploma
19	Kieran	Online	39	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Web Developer	GCSE
20	Iain	Online	39	Male	Heterosexual	Boys Independent Boarding	Project Manager	Undergraduate Degree
21	Dean	Online	39	Male	Bisexual	Co-Ed State	Management Consultant	Postgraduate Degree
22	Liam	Online	40	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State (Primary) Boys Private (Secondary) Co-Ed Private (Sixth Form)	University Lecturer	PhD

	PSEUDONYM	INTERVIEW LOCATION	AGE	GENDER	SEXUALITY	TYPE OF SCHOOL ATTENDED	OCCUPATION	HIGHEST LEVEL QUALIFICATION
23	Kyle	In person	42	Male	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Sports Scientist and Lecturer	Postgraduate Degree
24	Kevin	Online	42	Male	Bisexual	Co-Ed State	Hospitality Manager	GCSE
Menstruating Participants								
25	Joe	In person	21	Trans Male	Asexual/ Bisexual/ Queer	Co-Ed State Church of England (Primary) Secular (Secondary)	Student	In final year of Integrated Masters
26	Jasmin	Online	21	Female	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Student Nurse	BTEC
27	Lucy	Online	21	Female	Queer	SCE (Germany) Co-Ed Private Boarding (England from Yr9)	Student Midwife	Undergraduate Degree
28	Brit	Online	23	Female	Heterosexual	Girls State Catholic	Marketing	Undergraduate Degree
29	Amanda	Online	25	Female	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State Catholic	Sixth Form Teacher	Undergraduate Degree/PGCE
30	Megan	Online	26	Female	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Nurse	Undergraduate Degree

	PSEUDONYM	INTERVIEW LOCATION	AGE	GENDER	SEXUALITY	TYPE OF SCHOOL ATTENDED	OCCUPATION	HIGHEST LEVEL QUALIFICATION
31	Mel	Online	27	Non-binary (AFAB)	Queer	Co-Ed State	Grants and Fundraising Officer	Postgraduate Degree
32	Jade	Online	31	Female	Heterosexual	Co-Ed State	Restaurant Assistant Manager	A-Level
33	Emma	Online	34	Female	Participant did not know	Co-Ed State	Designer	Undergraduate Degree
34	Helen	Online	35	Female	Pansexual	Co-Ed State	Systems Support Specialist	Postgraduate Degree
35	Kelly	Online	45	Female	Pansexual	Co-Ed State	Housewife	NVQ Level 3

Appendix B | Interview Guide²⁵

Rapport building

- What are you up to today other than coming to talk to me about periods?
- When I say the word 'periods' or 'menstruation', what immediately comes to mind?
- If I was to ask you to use one word to describe menstruation, what word would you choose?

1. **Stigma and taboos**

- How do you think periods are viewed? Would you say there is stigma attached to periods?
- Do you think menstruation is a sensitive topic for people to talk about?
- Do you think it's difficult for men to talk about periods?
- Have you told anyone about coming here today to talk about periods with me?
Were you comfortable telling them?

2. **Education and knowledge**

- Where did you first hear or learn about periods/menstruation?

Did you receive any information about menstruation at school? Who from and what did you learn?

Did you receive any information about menstruation at home or from family? What did you learn and who from?

- Could you tell me a little about your education/school as a child?
- Can you describe how menstruation was understood and treated in school?
- How was menstruation treated or discussed at home?
- Do you think you know more about menstruation now than when you were younger?

If yes, how has your knowledge improved?

Would you say there are some gaps in your knowledge about menstruation?

- Was menstruation something you were aware of at university?
(Living away from home in halls, union campaigns etc.)
- Do you think menstruation should be taught at school?

Why/why not? Who should be present? Who should teach the subject?

- What is your understanding of different menstrual products? Are you able to differentiate between the choice of products in terms of what they look like and how they're used?

²⁵ Example of semi-structured interview guide used with non-menstruating participants. Changes were made to this throughout the course of the interviews, including in response to Covid-19 changes.

How would you feel about buying these for someone at a shop if they asked you to?
Have you had experiences of this in the past? Who for?

3. Roles in menstrual-related practices

- Do you think it's important for men to know about menstruation? Why/why not?
- Can you describe your own experiences of menstruation, whether that be with a partner, mother, sister, daughter, or friend?

Has there been/is there clear communication about menstruation?

- As a [partner/son/brother/father/friend], do you think you have a role in supporting your [partner/mother/sister/daughter/friend] when it comes to menstruation?

If yes, how have you supported them in the past? Do you feel comfortable offering them support in this way? Were you asked to support them, or did you act on your own initiative?

How do you think you can support them in the future when it comes to menstruation?

4. PMS/T, PMDD and pain management

- When I say 'PMS', 'PMT', or 'mood swings', what comes to mind? What are your experiences?
- Would you say you had a good understanding of the symptoms of pre-menstrual syndrome/tension?

Do you have experiences of what you'd consider to be PMS/PMT that you can recall? If yes, what?

Are you aware of pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder? If yes, do you have knowledge of how this differs to PMS/T?

- What symptoms would you associate with menstruation?
- What do you understand about different pain management strategies used to manage these symptoms? Can you recall any experiences of this?

5. Sexual activity

- Do you think having sex during menstruation could be challenging for some men? Why/why not?
- What are your feelings towards engaging in any sexual activity during menstruation?

Do you have any personal experiences of this? Who with and how was this negotiated? If no, are there other forms of intimacy during menstruation?

6. Blood and birth

- Do you think menstrual blood is viewed differently to any other blood, for example from a wound?

If yes, why? If no, why not?

Do you feel differently when you think about/see menstrual blood compared to other blood?

- Do you think menstrual blood is viewed differently to blood shed during or after birth?

If yes, why? If no, why not?

- Have you been present during a birth? How was this experience for you?

Do you plan to be present at a birth in the future? How do you feel about this?

- Are you a father or do you hope to be a father in the future?

Have you thought about the potential challenges you might face? (Conceiving/IVF)

How much involvement do you hope/expect to have?
(Conception/birth/childcare/menstrual education and support)

- Have you been present during a birth? How was this experience for you?

Do you plan to be present at a birth in the future?
How do you feel about that?

7. Current affairs in the UK

- Have you noticed periods being discussed in the news or on social media platforms over the last few years?
- Are you aware of anything happening in the UK right now related to periods? Have you become aware of any specific issues in the UK related to periods?
- Have you heard the term 'period poverty' being used across these channels or anywhere else?

If yes, what has this been in reference to and what can you tell me about period poverty?

If no, what do you think this could mean?
(Provide brief overview if required for next question)

- Are you surprised that period poverty is being experienced in England? Is this something you have thought about before when thinking of poverty?
- In the UK, menstrual products such as tampons and pads are currently taxed at 5% and are considered as luxury non-essential products. What are your thoughts about this?
- The government have now committed to providing free menstrual products in schools in England and the Scottish government are already providing products to all students at all stages of education. What are your thoughts about this?
- What do you think about free access to products in other places such as football clubs, workplaces, restaurants/coffee shops etc?
- Beyond school, home, and relationships, where do you think boys and men learn about menstruation in the UK? What are your experiences? Where else did you learn about menstruation and the menstrual cycle?

Closing

Appendix C | Participant Information Sheet²⁶

Date: 00/00/2020

Exploring men's menstrual attitudes and experiences with women pre-menstruation, during menstruation and post-menstruation in England and Kenya

PhD Researcher: Bethany Suggett

This study has been approved by the ELMPS Ethics Committee, University of York.

You are invited to take part in the above study. Before you decide if you would like to participate, please take some time to read the following information and ask any questions you may have.

Why is this research being carried out?

I am a PhD student in the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York. The study aims to understand how men's attitudes towards menstruation and their experiences with women pre-menstruation, during menstruation and post-menstruation compare across two different contexts: England, UK, and Kenya.

What will participation in the study involve?

If you choose to participate in the study, you will need to sign a consent form and retain a copy of this information sheet. You will take part in a semi-structured interview with the Researcher. The interview will involve talking about your knowledge of and attitudes towards menstruation. There may be discussions of menstrual sex, (in)fertility, pregnancy, and birth. You do not have to answer a question if you do not wish to. The interview will last up to approximately 1.5 hours. It will be audio recorded and then transcribed by the Researcher.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to participate in an interview. If you decide to take part, you can withdraw from the study at any time and do not have to provide a reason for this. If you wish to withdraw data already provided, please contact the Researcher within 2 months of taking part in the interview.

Will it be confidential and anonymous?

All names and identifying data will be anonymised. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the analysis. All information given will be used in the context of the study, where the quotes and opinions will be used explicitly to inform the research. While this information will not remain confidential, it will remain anonymised.

On what basis will you process my data?

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the University has to identify a legal basis for processing personal data and, where appropriate, an additional condition for processing special category data. In line with our charter which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, the University processes personal data for research purposes under Article 6 (1) (e) of the GDPR:

Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.

Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j):

²⁶ Content was amended to reflect Covid-19 changes (online interviews) and the wording was slightly changed for informal interviews with menstruators. This initial version was approved by the ELMPS ethics committee, with revised versions checked by my supervisor.

Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes.

Research will only be undertaken where ethical approval has been obtained, where there is a clear public interest and where appropriate safeguards have been put in place to protect data. In line with ethical expectations and in order to comply with common law duty of confidentiality, we will seek your consent to participate where appropriate. This consent will not, however, be our legal basis for processing your data under the GDPR.

How will the data be used?

The anonymised data will be used for the purpose of the researcher's PhD thesis and any related publications. Only the researcher will have access to the data generated by the study.

How will you keep my data secure? How long will you keep my data?

The University will put in place appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect your personal data and/or special category data. For the purposes of this project, the data collected from the interview will be stored securely on a password protected computer. Information will be treated confidentially and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. The anonymised data will be archived for a minimum of 10 years using the Research Data York service.

What rights do I have in relation to my data?

Under the GDPR, you have a general right of access to your data, a right to rectification, erasure, restriction, objection, or portability. You also have a right to withdrawal. Please note, not all rights apply where data is processed purely for research purposes. For further information see, <https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/generaldataprotectionregulation/individualsrights/>.

Should you feel you need to seek support for any sensitive issues discussed during your participation in this study, relevant helpline information is outlined below.

Relate	Visit www.relate.org.uk/ Call 0300 003 0396
Samaritans	Email jo@samaritans.org Call 116 123
Fertility Network UK	Visit www.fertilitynetworkuk.org/ Call 01424 732361
CALM	Visit thecalmzone.net/ Call 0800 58 58 58
The National Childbirth Trust	Visit nct.org.uk/ Call 0300 330 0700

If you have any questions about the research, concerns about how your data will be used or wish to withdraw your data from the study, please email Bethany Suggett (bs1121@york.ac.uk) or mail: Centre for Women's Studies, University of York, York, YO10 5DD in the first instance. Concerns may also be raised with Dr Rachel Alsop (rachel.alsop@york.ac.uk). If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Acting Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@york.ac.uk) or ELMPS Ethics Committee Chair (tony.royle@york.ac.uk).

If you are unhappy with the way in which your personal data has been handled, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting a concern to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

Appendix D | Participant Consent Form²⁷

Exploring men's menstrual attitudes and experiences with women pre-menstruation, during menstruation and post-menstruation in England and Kenya

Researcher Name: Bethany Suggett

PhD Supervisor: Dr Rachel Alsop (rachel.alsop@york.ac.uk)

ELMPS Committee Chair: Prof Tony Royle (tony.royle@york.ac.uk)

Have you read the interview participant information sheet dated 00/00/20 about the above study, or has it been read to you so you understand it, and have had the opportunity to ask questions? Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you understand that you do not have to take part and can withdraw from the study and know how to? Yes ☐ No ☐

Are you aware that the interview will be audio recorded and that the audio recording will be transcribed? Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you understand how data will be used and that it will be archived with the Research Data York service for a minimum of 10 years? Yes ☐ No ☐

Do you understand that all data will be anonymised? Yes ☐ No ☐

Would you like to take part in an interview? Yes ☐ No ☐

Exceptions where information given may be used in a non-anonymous manner or for measures outside the realms of the study are where a) Child protection issues are raised as a result of the information given b) Admission of criminal activity, which requires me to report any parties to a local or international authority under law.

Participant Name: Date:

Researcher Name: Date:

²⁷ Content was amended to reflect Covid-19 changes (online interviews) and the wording was slightly changed for informal interviews with menstruators. This initial version was approved by the ELMPS ethics committee, with revised versions checked by my supervisor.

Appendix E | Transcription Conventions

Code	Meaning
...	Pause in speech
[...]	Some material omitted from original full quotation
word-	A break in thought and speaker does not finish sentence
(action)	Action of speaker while talking e.g. (laughs)
[subject]	Indication of what speaker is talking about if not directly said
<i>italics</i>	Author's emphasis

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