Everyday Discourses of Menstruation

Cultural and Social Perspectives

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Foreword

It's a genuine privilege to be asked to write a few words introducing Victoria Newton's book about the everyday social construction, and individual and collective experience, of menstruation, just as it was a privilege to supervise the PhD on which it is based. This is, however, more than just a proud supervisor talking; she has, I believe, written an important book, in a number of senses.

To begin with, the subject matter *matters*. Women, who comprise half the world's population, for a significant portion of their lives—several decades—have a recurrent body management issue, one way or another: they bleed without being wounded, and they do so vaginally, in a place that is in all cultures regarded as an intimate, if not utterly private bodily place. It is a hugely important place, symbolically and biologically: at the centre of ovulation, fertility, and human reproduction. To bleeding, we must add, for a great many women, a complex array of 'side effects' of the cycle of ovulation, which may include—for these are individually highly variable—greater or lesser pain, sickness, and emotional or psychological disruption. The experience of being a reproductive woman is shaped and organized around the menstrual cycle. This is true not least with respect to time: from month to month, and, with respect to the life-course, women's experience of time is different than men's.

Women reading this would be completely justified in pointing out, perhaps even with a degree of impatience or irritation, that they knew

this already, so what's new? Quite so, but this is, I hope, not just a book for women. And women will find something worthwhile, too, because, despite the reorientation of social science since the 1970s, positioning the study of women's lives, and of gender relations, bang in the middle of our intellectual agendas, it's striking how relatively little serious evidence-based research attention has been given to menstruation. Compared to fashion, or sexual orientation, or the domestic division of labour, or wage differentials, menstruation remains largely 'hidden from social science', to paraphrase Sheila Rowbotham. Menstruation may be among the most important factors shaping women's lives, but you'd never know it if you relied, for your news, on sociology, anthropology, or social psychology.

There is not, of course, a complete absence: as Newton shows us, there is some really excellent work out there. There is just not very much. So, the next reason that this book is significant is its important empirical contribution, both to our knowledge in general, and to the, I believe necessary, job of putting menstruation at the heart of our understanding of women's lived experience. That she has included male voices in this study, and informants from all across the generation range, further underlines the debt that we owe her.

The lack of social science attention to menstruation is so striking that one might be forgiven for concluding that everyone has been looking in the other direction: nothing to see here, apparently. Given that there is something to see, and something important, why has there been this blind spot? If menstruation matters as much as I believe it does, how are we to explain this collective inattention? There are several possibilities: One obvious answer is that the concealment of menstruation and the sequestration of menstruating woman have applied as much in social research as elsewhere. Alongside this dismal conclusion we can set the fact that menstruation is not seen as a *social* problem that needs to be addressed as a policy issue; it is, rather, seen as simply a fact of life, for individual women to sort out as they always have done. Not much scope for research grants, then.

The final explanation—which does not conflict with the above—is that menstruation messes with the distinction between the sociocultural and the biological. The social construction of gender and sexuality and the rejection of biology as having a role to play in our understanding of

sexuality and gender are the first and second commandments of intellectual feminism. Given the ways in which the allegedly inflexible realities of biology underwrote male domination—and still do—this is completely understandable. It may, however, in 2015, be time to move on. 'Corporeal feminism', in the person of authors such as Elizabeth Grosz or Lynne Segal, has, to be sure, attempted to dent the hegemony of unsubtle social constructionism, but the orthodoxy remains, as yet, secure. Nor is this solely a problem of, and for, feminism. Disciplines such as sociology and social anthropology, for example, have yet to find a comfortable place in their thinking for the biological; social constructionism still rules.

Which brings me to the third reason why this book matters: Victoria Newton has little truck with either purist social constructionism or biological determinism … and is correspondingly unafraid of transgressing the boundary between the sociocultural and the biological. Hers is an approach that holds on firmly to the gains of the social construction framework—without which modern social science is impossible—while acknowledging that the biological realities of menstruation cannot simply be put to one side as, at best, that which is socially constructed. The human experience of menstruation, and the ways in which it is socially constructed, cannot be understood without embracing the messiness of biology.

This approach reflects her intellectual history. Trained as a folklorist in the, sadly now-defunct, English Cultural Traditions programme at the University of Sheffield, Newton completed her PhD in Sociological Studies at Sheffield. She came to us unencumbered by either the albatross of fetishized theory that hangs around the necks of so many PhD students (who may spend as much time on theory as on data collection), or the kind of uncritical, orthodox faith in social constructionism that I have just referred to. As a consequence, her sociology flourished as she found a voice of her own that allowed her to respect the data more than established preconceptions. This says something about both folklore studies and sociology and, in particular, dramatizes the tragedy of the underdevelopment of the former in the UK, and its unhappy estrangement from social science. It is a very different picture in North America, for example, or Scandinavia.

This is also a delightfully readable book. In respecting her data, Newton has allowed us to hear the voices of her informants. Serious or ribald in their takes on 'the blob', coarse or delicate in the ways that they talk about 'having the painters in', they all have something to say, and we should listen to them.

Richard Jenkins

Acknowledgements

The present volume arises directly from a research project I undertook on contemporary popular knowledge and belief about menstruation (Newton, 2011). A topic which, in the years since 2011, has only grown stronger as the focus of my research, and has led me to examine many new aspects of women's sexual health as they now appear in medical science, sociology, and everyday informal knowledge.

In presenting my findings here, my main thanks must go to my mentors at the University of Sheffield, Professor Richard Jenkins and Professor Jenny Hockey. To Professor Jenkins, my debt is for his invaluable guidance in the formulation and direction of my research, and for his continuing support throughout my career. I am also grateful to him for his comments on the draft manuscript of this book, as well as for his kind agreement to be author of its foreword. Professor Hockey also helped me along this journey, and I am thankful to her for offering ideas and insights throughout the project, particularly for her ability to see the wider picture, and to help me maintain some distance between myself and my work. More generally, thanks to the Department of Sociological Studies at Sheffield, which was a supportive and enabling research environment.

My thanks must also go to Dr Julia Bishop of the University of Sheffield's School of Education for inspiring me to have a continued interest in folklore research, and also for encouraging me to pursue the publication of this volume.

Nor can I forget my thanks to my parents for their continuing financial support and patience with me when I progressed my BA on into an MA, and finally into a PhD. They have greatly encouraged me to keep up my efforts throughout my educational journey. I am especially grateful to my father, who kindly provided me with English translations for the German items and with guidance on the preparation of my manuscript.

I must thank John Stewart, too, for being there in support throughout the project, from start to finish, and for listening to my menstrual musings over endless cups of coffee, and for his unwavering support through the cyclical ups and downs of life.

I am grateful also to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for perceiving value in the interdisciplinary aspects of my study and providing me with the grant I needed to carry out my research.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my informants for giving up their time to help me with my research, and for their willingness to speak to me about a subject that is still perceived as 'sensitive'. To them, I am very grateful indeed, since without their interest in the project and their openness to talk no study would have existed.

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List of Abbreviations

OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PD or PDE	Personal Development Education
PE	Physical Education
PMS	Pre-Menstrual Syndrome
PMT	Pre-Menstrual Tension
TSS	Toxic Shock Syndrome
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

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The 'Folklore of Menstruation': Researching Vernacular Knowledge and Everyday Experience

Menstruation is an experience common to the majority of women who are not using hormonal contraceptives to suppress or control bleeding during their non-pregnant reproductive years.[1] Even so, it is something which is shrouded in etiquette and circumlocution in terms of how it can be referred to and how the menstruating body should be managed. Conducting a study into sensitive subjects such as this can be challenging. This first chapter will discuss the approaches I developed in order to access vernacular knowledge and belief about menstruation, a physical process which is so very commonplace and ordinary for women, and yet so sensitive that it is difficult to talk openly about it.

My research addressed ways in which lay knowledge and everyday experience influence the social and cultural constructions of menstruation. As a trained folklorist working within a department of Sociological Studies, my research was interdisciplinary and drew its inspiration from social anthropology, cultural studies, and folklore studies. My approach to the research reflected this and gave my project two primary objectives.

[1] Menstruation may also be inhibited by breastfeeding.

V.L. Newton, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*,
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The first was to document the greatest possible range of everyday vernacular knowledge and discourse about menstruation in the north Derbyshire area of England where I carried out my fieldwork. The second was to interpret this corpus of data in light of relevant anthropological and sociological concepts and theories. I thus not only document and categorize what is known and discussed in the survival or innovation of menstrual beliefs and practices, but also offer an interpretation of this data, and indicate how 'knowledge' can influence attitudes, behaviour, and experience, as well as how different discourses intermingle and influence the position and behaviour of menstruating women in contemporary society.

Why Study Vernacular Knowledge About Menstruation?

Much of what we 'know' about the world we live in is learnt through informal interaction with parents, friends and family. Understanding how people talk, in their own words and in their own way, about the world they inhabit and their position in it can offer insights into matters of health and the body. Sexual health researchers have, to some extent, recognized that lay knowledge, misperceptions, and folklore can, for example, influence contraceptive choice (Kuiper et al. 1997; Clark et al. 2006; Asker et al. 2006; Glasier et al. 2008). Folklorists in turn recognize the impact that the study of folklore can have on health research and education (Whatley and Henken 2000). Relationships towards the human body differ from person to person, and this can impact on the choices that people make. Bransen (1992) demonstrated that concepts of embodiment varied from woman to woman, regarding their experience of the menstrual cycle, while different attitudes towards the body and bleeding patterns can be influential in contraceptive choice (Newton and Hoggart 2015; Cheung and Free 2005). Relationships to the body and the meanings of bodily processes are not therefore always interpreted in the same way. Meanings vary between different groups; for example, Clarke et al. (2006) showed that side

effects of hormonal contraception (HC) could be understood differently by practitioners and patients:

> These 'side effects' presumably are the same ones that health care providers might enumerate and about which they might counsel young women, but whether the 'side effects' to which the young women refer are actually the same as providers' understanding of HC side effects is not known. The question has not been studied. (Clark et al. 2006, p. 214)

Experience is also interpreted differently depending upon culture. Body experience is not conceptualized in the same way by everyone and one group's sense might be different from another's. This is also the case for how menstruation is viewed and dealt with culturally (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). As I shall later discuss, although there are commonalities of experience, we cannot take it for granted that one group's, society's, or culture's experiences of menstruation are the same. If we are to make sense of the experience of menstruation, each must be studied in context in order to identify the cultural framing of menstruation, how it is perceived, what symbolism is attributed to menstrual blood, how it is culturally defined, what the gender roles are, and so forth. In order to make sense of this, it is necessary to examine the groups' shared cultural knowledge.

There are many different social forces that help shape body experience. Meaning is produced in, and by, different contexts, and it can help us to formulate understandings of how gender is produced, and to understand menstruation in terms of gendered body experience. Although social constructivist arguments account for the 'construction' of the body through discourse, it is important to remember that the body is not produced solely by discourse, and it is therefore necessary to find a way to unite the social and cultural aspects with the physical body. One way to do this would be to investigate how people make sense of it in their own words, taking into account their own experiences and belief systems. In answer to this, my project focused on researching menstruation and the vernacular knowledge and language surrounding this common bodily process. I hope to demonstrate, therefore, in this first chapter the value offered by interdisciplinary research that draws on folklore studies for its methodological inspiration.

The Folklore of Folklore: Problems of Definition

The commonplace understanding of 'folklore' is not the same as the academic definition. The day-to-day use of the word has evolved to represent something quite different from its academic meaning, where 'folk-lore' as a term and a subject for study was first coined in 1846 by William Thoms who, under the pseudonym of Ambrose Merton, wrote a letter to the *Athenaeum* (28 August 1846) suggesting this as an alternative to 'popular antiquities', the phrase then in use for studies in the antiquarian tradition of survivals of ancient beliefs and practices (Thoms, 1846). As 'folklore' developed as a discipline, and since the 1960s, discussion has arisen amongst academics as to what was, and what was not folklore, and what the study of folklore entailed, as well as what the value was of such research. As the American folklorist Alan Dundes wrote:

> There is a vague sense that folklorists wander out into the field with their tape recorders and their note books, jotting down quaint turns of phrase or documenting some archaic village festival. But not many academics are aware that folkloristics is a separate and distinct discipline, straddling the humanities and the social sciences, with its own set of periodicals, bibliographies, methods, and theories. (Dundes, 1989, p. vii)

Indeed, over the last 150 years, the study of folklore has shifted away from the documentation of antiquities and curiosities, towards the presence of folklore in the everyday and the belief that we are all 'folk'. This is especially obvious in the study of urban or contemporary legends and the role of the media in the dissemination of folklore (Clarke, 2015, Jenkins, 2014, Bennett, 2005).[2]

However, the academic discipline of folklore has suffered from problems of definition since its inception, which has led to it being somewhat overlooked as a viable discipline, at least in the UK. There is no longer

[2] In the UK, the Folklore Society (based at the Warburg Institute, London) does much to publicize recent developments in folklore studies with its journal, *Folklore* and the *FLS News*.

a department for the study of folklore in any English university,[3] and, perhaps dogged by its 'everyday' interpretation as something 'quaint', the study of folklore fell afoul of the trivialization of the word's application. 'Folklore' in its day-to-day sense not only denotes a type of performance, knowledge, or craft associated with 'tradition' or 'culture', but also has come to represent the very opposite of 'fact' and of scientific understanding. As the British folklorist John Widdowson writes:

> The compound word *folklore* suffers not only by being juxtaposed with *fact*, but also because it is used to signify what is untrue, old-fashioned, inconsequential, and irrelevant, especially among educated people in England. (Widdowson, 2010, p.127)

During the time I was conducting my research, I became increasingly aware that the original title of my project 'The Folklore of Menstruation' was problematic. It hindered access to data because of the popular allusions it carried. The fault was entirely my own, since I had assumed that the title of my project would have little impact on the collection of my data. The title of the study was, however, something which drew the attention of my informants. They were eager to discuss it and there was a general assumption amongst informants that 'folklore' does not persist into our present-day society:

> Yeah, I suppose that when you think of folklore, perhaps it's just what you think… something, what? medieval?…something quite historic. (F8C)

Some asserted that folklore about menstruation was a thing from the past, or else something that 'other cultures' had:

> I don't really know where, or, … but I know that, like, in some places … aren't women sent away from the village, or whatever, because they are seen as unclean? (F12B)

[3] NATCECT 'The National Centre for English Cultural Tradition' part of the School of English at the University of Sheffield was closed in 2013.

This perception of 'others' as representing folkloric survivals is consistent with the assumption that folklore is something that is on the decline in British society. As one informant noted, our understanding, especially of things concerning the body, is informed by science and medicine, and these discourses take the place of 'folklore':

> I don't think there are, in our society, quite the taboos they had—I think they've been disproved, and I think that's because of the freedoms we have today, and the knowledge—the medical knowledge—I think that's dispelled. (F3D)

Another woman (18–30) noted on her questionnaire:

> I don't feel I was able to provide longer answers to the last few questions because I have a thorough understanding of the facts on periods and have not been exposed to superstition, folklore, etc.

Thus, the project title at first hindered access to data because of the popular understandings of 'folklore' that it called up. I had naively assumed that the title of my project would attract interest, which it did, but I also underestimated the impact it would have on the collection of data. I found that accessing the types of knowledge I wanted was not straightforward. There were general problems about the recruitment of participants, but, more specifically, also with respect to my chief concern, which was to gather data derived from living vernacular discourses.[4] These discourses are not something an informant would necessarily bring immediately to mind when told about the research topic, and they proved to be difficult to collect. As Whatley and Henken state:

> So ever-present in the background of people's lives that it becomes almost invisible, folklore nonetheless shapes people's behaviour and reactions to events. A large part of what many of us know about our bodies, in both

[4] I use the term 'discourse' in two senses, firstly to describe simply 'talk' and conversations, and secondly, as more or less definite and distinct bodies of language, knowledge and attitudes, which can be linked to specific groups, contexts and institutions by which the human world is perceived, produced and reproduced. It is not, however, intended as a specific reference to Foucauldian and other post-structuralist approaches to discourse analysis.

> health and disease, we have learned informally, from kids on the playground or colleagues at work, from piecing together the information contained in folk beliefs, jokes, legends and personal experience narratives. (Whatley and Henken, 2000, p. 8)

Thus, I faced challenges in communicating the kind of knowledge I wanted to access, i.e. the 'everyday' and the informal. As I shall discuss shortly, I overcame this difficulty by employing a mixed-methods approach to data collection. However, although I found that the term 'folklore' was not very useful when addressing my informants, since it led to misunderstandings about the sort of knowledge I wished to document, contemporary folklore about menstruation does exist in British society. Ultimately the term 'folklore' became too problematic, so I decided that perhaps a better way of referring to what I was interested in would be 'vernacular knowledge'.[5] I redefined my study more broadly as 'menstruation: contemporary popular knowledge and belief', which encompasses both 'vernacular knowledge' and 'informal discourse'.

Menstruation and My Research Path

Menstruation is an individual, subjective experience and studying it led me in that direction, too. This project proved to be a personal journey, of which at the beginning I was unaware. Firstly, I had to face up to and overcome my own reservations about the topic, and secondly, I needed to learn to be resilient when challenged over my research and the reasons for it.

From the outset, whenever I mentioned my project to people, their reactions were polarized and either very enthusiastic or hypercritical. Typical of the first would be, 'Oh that's interesting; I didn't know that folklore about menstruation existed, but now you mention it, I suppose it does'. This was a fairly positive reaction, where the individual was interested in my topic and took time to think about it. The second

[5] I have to acknowledge my supervisor Professor Richard Jenkins in helping to formulate ideas about the use of 'vernacular knowledge' as an alternative and useful term.

and perhaps more popular reaction would typically be, 'Why are you studying that? What use it is?' At first I had been unprepared for this, and these questions were not easy to answer, with the two topics 'folklore' and 'menstruation' being problematic in themselves. 'Folklore' still tends to be generally interpreted as 'Old Wives' Tales', indicating ideas, superstitions and beliefs in decline, while 'menstruation' is something not often spoken about in everyday 'polite' discourse. On reflection I think I often apologized for my topic. I felt very much discomfited when a 'why' response was accompanied by a smirk, a laugh or sarcastic overtone. Sometimes it was hurtful; one woman (over 60) on her questionnaire response wrote only: 'Why not do a real PhD? Do you want to be known as "the rag doctor"?' indicating that even an association with the topic was distasteful. In her response many perceptions collided: the notion of 'folklore' as somehow unacademic; of menstruation as stigmatizing and distasteful; and the weighting of different disciplines against one another. When questioned as forcefully as this, I regret that my initial response was defensive: 'It's not because I have an unhealthy obsession with menstruation.' At the outset I was not resilient enough to stand up to criticism. Later I would try and work through the questions, and verbalize and justify my reasons more, explaining the lack of academic work on the subject, but I still found this unsatisfactory.[6] I had to ask myself—why did I want to study it?

My motivation for studying the topic has probably come from my own experiences of menstruation. For me, it was a big challenge during my teenage years and into adulthood, and the more I spoke about it and studied it, the more interested I became in the injustice I felt: firstly, as a woman whose own lived experience of menstruation has been problematic, and secondly, because of the ways I learnt about menstruation, when the information in the 'polite' public sphere was limited to a few sex-education lessons and advertisements for menstrual products. Back when I was a teenager, there was no 'period positivity' that I was aware of. Like my peers, I coped with my own sense of shame and my feeling that

[6] Raymond Jameson (1950, pp. 809–10) indicated that research into obscene stories or jokes had similarly been afflicted and were neglected by folklorists 'due in part to the difficulty of publishing the results of such studies, in part to the monotony of the data, and in part to the danger that the student might get tagged as "person interested in *that* sort of thing".'

my body was constantly trying to betray me. Thus, my personal feelings, together with my academic interest in folklore and popular culture, have motivated me to provide insight into where and how our informal views and discourses about menstruation originate, grow, and develop.

Because of the nature of my research, I had to invest something of myself in the interview situation. I had no intention of shying away from this, because as a female I had been subject to, and had knowledge of, the discourses under study. My own personal identity as a menstruating woman had also been shaped by these societal discourses that define and model what it is to be female and feminine. What I learned from my informants' accounts was subjective as well as objective (in the sense that these accounts were their voices, not mine). It was impossible to detach myself entirely emotionally from the interviews. There were times during my research interviewing when I was struggling with my own menstrual cramps. During the first course of interviews at the school, I wrote the following field note:

> The first day I was interviewing adolescents I came 'on' in the morning. It was the first natural cycle after I had come off the Pill. My body had taken time to settle down and it brought back memories for myself of having been at school 10 years earlier in the same position and struggling with (very bad) cramps. I was brought down to the students' position. The interviews that day were as interesting as the experience was rewarding. I wasn't so aware of a researcher/researched barrier. We were young women speaking together about an experience which has, and will, link us.

The Menstrual Data

I carried out the fieldwork for my study in north Derbyshire during 2007 and 2008. The geographic area studied was in the North Midlands. Once an industrial area, this region has declined and given way to more retail and service industries. The area is predominantly white 'working' and 'lower middle' class. In total, I collected 590 questionnaire responses and conducted 62 interviews with adolescents, young adults, people in their

middle years, and the over-60s.[7] I divided these responses into the age-ranges 12–14, 18–30, 31–45, 46–60, and over 60, in order to compare different generational attitudes towards menstruation. Young people aged 15–17 are missing from the sample due to restrictions to accessing this age group at the school where I carried out my research. The majority of participants were white British, and lower middle class, reflecting the demographics of the research area.

The age-range 12–14 covers teenagers who are going through puberty and experiencing and managing menstruation for the first time. At this age, the teenagers might be forming relationships and becoming more sexually aware. They might also have body management concerns. I am aware that there are 'early' starters and 'late' starters, but I felt that this age-group (Years 8 and 9) best illustrated young people going through the changes and challenges of puberty. They might also be the group most subject to media influences and the ways in which women and menstruation are represented in mass media, such as advertising, magazines and the Internet. I chose not to study Year 7 (11–12 year olds), because these students would have just moved to the senior school and would already have a lot to deal with, such as new timetables, teachers, teaching methods and school rules. I did not do research with teenagers aged 15–17 because of the restrictions of access: time pressures prevented me from accessing this age group since they were preparing for GCSE, AS and A-Level examinations and could not accommodate my research.

I split up the adult groups (18 to over 60) for mainly pragmatic reasons: in order to make the data easier to analyse and to enable generational comparisons. However, the groups are also representational of different stages in the adult life course. Members of the 18–30 group were most likely to be forging meaningful personal relationships, and would be subject to the more social issues of menstruation, such as how to manage

[7] I collected a total of 590 questionnaire responses. 324 of these were from school students aged 12–14 (162 girls and 162 boys); 134 were from young adults aged 18–30 (98 women and 36 men); 58 from the 31–45 age group (45 women and 13 men); 48 from the 46–40 age group (39 women and 9 men) and 26 from the over 60s (22 women and 4 men).

I conducted 62 interviews of which 14 were with school students aged 12–14 (9 girls and 5 boys); 20 with 18–30 year olds (14 women and 6 men); 9 with 31–45 year olds (8 women and 1 man); 11 in the 46–40 age group (8 women and 3 men) and 8 in the 'over 60s' (5 women and 3 men).

their bodies on a 'night out', or how to approach sexual issues with a new partner. They would also just be starting out on their chosen career path, and the need to perform well at work might be a further concern.

Members of the 31–45 age group were more likely to have young families dependent on them. The majority of women in this group would still be in their reproductive years and experiencing menstruation, or using contraceptives to control their fertility. In the 46–60 age group, if they had families, their children were likely to be older, either teenagers or young adults no longer living at home. This age group would be growing free of family commitment. The women would be approaching the end of menstruation and could be facing problems with the menopause, or enjoying the freedom of no longer having periods. The final age-range (over 60) might either be approaching retirement, or already have retired. This group could give a broader life overview and reflect on changes in attitude over time. These women could comment on starting and dealing with their periods, issues surrounding pregnancy, and the freedom or problems of the menopause. This group could give an overview of what menstruation had meant to them as individuals, and they would have first-hand experience of their experiences with menstruation in the past that is still within living memory. Since data was gathered from a broad age range of people, the material collected introduces historical depth into the study, providing insight into consistency and change. I shall discuss this historical perspective with regard to specific data in future chapters.

In order to collect my data, I used a mixed-methods approach. I initially distributed an open-ended questionnaire in order to give a broad insight into a number of different topics. The questionnaire allowed for participants' interpretation of the questions, and for them to answer in their own words. I used the questionnaire as a tool of recruitment for my interviewees. The questionnaire was anonymous, but upon completion, participants were invited to write down their name and contact details, if they agreed to be interviewed further about the topic. The questionnaire was useful not only in collecting data, but also in helping to facilitate discussion and prompt memories. Many of the interviewees told me that they had found time for reflection before the interview, and as a consequence, had remembered more things to discuss. Comments were made such as: 'I think it's really interesting,' and, 'It's funny what you remember when you start to think about it.' (Interviewee F4D).

Participant Recruitment[8]

To recruit the young teenagers (12–14 age group), I approached schools in the study area. I made contact with these institutions at the beginning of the research because I felt that it might be difficult to get schools to cooperate, since they experience a great deal of research and inquiry in connection with OFSTED reports and other educational matters. In addition, there was the possibility that the research would require a lot of planning with regard to timetabling and obtaining parental consent. I contacted seven schools and received one positive reply from a co-educational state school.

At the end of the summer term in 2007, I met with the head of Personal Development Education (PDE) at the school and it was decided that the research could commence in the autumn term of 2007. There were, however, some concerns. The head of the school stipulated that a teacher had to be present during all of the interviews, and that the list of potential interviewees would have to be 'vetted' by staff to ensure that the candidates were 'suitable'. This was not ideal, because it was possible that the presence of a teacher would prevent the students from talking freely. In addition, the 'vetting' of potential candidates meant that the types of students I was allowed access to interview would be controlled, and the results might be biased. However, as it happened, all of the interview candidates who put themselves forward were acceptable to the school, and the school did not intervene with respect to which candidates took part. It was agreed that my questionnaire would be handed out to all students in Years 8 and 9, and that the questionnaire would form part of the lessons concerning 'changes' (puberty) and sex-education.

To aid the recruitment process, I was invited to a number of the classes where the questionnaires were being handed out, and this allowed me to explain my project to the students in person. I was careful to point out the consent form at the top of the questionnaire and to tell the students that they did not have to fill in the questionnaire if they did not want to. Being present at these lessons also provided me with the opportunity to

[8] Prior to conducting any fieldwork, the study was ethically approved by the Department of Sociological Studies Ethics Committee at the University of Sheffield.

do some participant observation, monitoring the reactions of the students and whether the way in which the teacher discussed the questionnaire reflected entrenched gendered stereotypes. Of one occurrence I wrote in my field notes:

> The teacher introduced me, and then invited me to talk about my study. Once I had introduced my project and asked the pupils for their help, the teacher once again took control. She handed me half of the questionnaires and directed me to hand them out to one side of the class, whilst she handed them out to the other side. As we were doing this, she said to the class: 'I expect the girls will be going *sighs* and the boys *ugh*!'

The students were told not to write their names on the questionnaire, but if they were interested in the study and were willing to be interviewed, they were invited to place their name in the box provided at the end of the questionnaire. If students had written their name on the front of the questionnaire and not in the box provided at the end, this information was discarded: students are usually told to write their name on their work, and they may have done so from force of habit. I also had to take care in deciding who had written their name down seriously and who had not. Some questionnaires appeared to have been tampered with: friends had possibly written names on them, or fictitious names appeared, and names were crossed out and rewritten many times. The name-list I drew up comprised of all the names I was sure had been written by the students themselves.

I had to obtain informed consent from the students and their parents/guardians prior to the interviews and to make sure that the aims and objectives of the study were clear to each party. Prior to any interview, the students were given a letter to take home to their parents/guardians, explaining the study. The letter had a consent form attached for the parent/guardian to sign. In the letter, the parents or guardians were informed that if they consented to their daughter's or son's participation in the study, the student would not have to participate if this went against the student's own wishes. Contact details were provided in the letter for the parents to discuss the nature of the study with me if they so desired, and also as a means for them to withdraw their daughter or son from the

study at a later date, should they or their daughter/son so wish. As regards the students, at the start of the interview I explained the project verbally to them, to avoid potential misunderstandings. I also presented a consent form to the student to sign.

For adults, recruitment took the form of a snowball approach. In the first instance I relied on acquaintances to hand out the questionnaires to members of to their social networks; this gave me some success in collecting and accessing adult informants. However, I felt that I needed to try out some different approaches in order to access more people. In a closing push to collect more data, I circulated my questionnaire via e-mail on the Sheffield University e-mail network. I sent a request asking for volunteers from north Derbyshire (Sheffield is the nearest major city to the research area). The e-mail contained a link to an online version of my questionnaire, using the (online) survey site 'Survey Monkey', which allows participants simply to click on the link and complete the questionnaire at their own computers. This was a very productive approach, and I received a further 131 usable questionnaires. With regard to obtaining informed consent, the questionnaires were clearly headed with a consent acknowledgment stating that completion of the questionnaire would be taken to mean that the informant consented to the use of her or his data in the study.

The questionnaire provided both basic quantitative and qualitative data. Where the question prompted a written paragraph about personal opinion, experience, or knowledge, for an answer, I used a form of thematic analysis, looking for any recurring themes arising from the data. In other instances (such as with names and euphemisms) I used a basic quantitative approach for analysis. In this case, the frequencies of response were expressed as percentages, in order to give a clear overall view of patterns and trends. No statistical tests were applied since the sample was not designed to be representative.

I then approached the topic using single and group interviews, in order to give insight into how people talk about and articulate their understandings of menstruation. For the adult interviews, I explained the project to individual participants, and covered such issues as how the data would be used, where it would be stored, and any concerns that they might have about confidentiality. I also answered any questions that they had about my project and the interview itself. Because of the sensitive nature of

the subject matter, the participants were assured that they would remain anonymous, and that any identifying data would be removed from the interviews. Since these interviews were recorded for later transcription, a statement of the participant's consent to the interview appears verbally at the commencement of the recording. At the end of the interview, an information sheet was provided which included details of how to withdraw from the study at a later date, should they wish to. Finally, written consent was sought at the end of the interview.

The interviews were semi-structured. This allowed me to plan some of the questions I wanted to ask, especially with reference to any interesting answers the participant had written on their questionnaire. I was, however, careful not to lead the participant too much. My aim was to allow them to talk freely about their own thoughts, to ensure that if they made interesting and relevant digressions I could then probe further and investigate their reasons for holding a certain opinion and the influences that had produced these thoughts. As a result, although I had some set questions, the direction of the conversation was driven by the interviewees who spoke about what was important to them and on subjects they wanted to talk about. I only guided the interview when it diverged substantially from the topic, or when there was a long pause and it was clear that the interviewee had come to the end of one particular topic of discussion. Because the interviews were conducted face-to-face, I was able to observe participants' actions, reactions, and behaviour. It is worth noting that since the sample was self-selecting, this may have meant that I interviewed people with a greater interest in the topic than a representative sample may have produced.

With regard to the topic itself, the interviews explored the cultural and social aspects of menstruation, and examined features of continuity and change, within an intergenerational and gendered framework. Among the substantive themes explored were the euphemisms and terminology employed to describe menstruation, jokes and stories concerning menstruation, menstrual etiquette and appropriate conduct, and the transmission of informal knowledge and information on body issues and body care.

The study focuses on menstruation and menarche, the interview did not address the menopause, since menopause is the cessation of menstruation,

rather than its occurrence. Discussion of this aspect would have overloaded the interviews and the research.

The next two chapters will locate the study in the broadest possible historical, cultural, and social contexts. The book is not intended to be an in-depth analysis of all the different discourses under study, but rather, to be a comprehensive introduction to the range of topics that have previously been largely overlooked.

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2

Periods: Historical and Cultural Interpretations of Menstruation

It is perhaps not surprising that throughout human history menstruation has attracted much attention. Speculation about the biological process itself has given rise to many hypotheses as to the purpose and qualities of menstrual blood. It has many associated rituals, with each culture having its own particular beliefs and practices. Although this book deals mainly with contemporary menstrual beliefs, practices and lore, as recorded in Derbyshire, England, it may be useful first to situate historical and cultural interpretations of menstruation within a comparative framework, illustrating how menstruation has been perceived in other societies and in the past.

Historical Accounts

One idea that can be found in many places and historical eras is that menstruating women have been seen, and are seen, to be both polluted and polluting, and their menstrual blood seen as dangerous. Menstrual blood was often marked down as needing to be expelled from the body because it would cause the woman harm if retained. It has also been

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viewed as a sign of women's inherent sinfulness and subsequent subordination to men. Thus, it was an issue of personal, social, and moral hygiene. On the other side of the coin, however, menstruation has also been seen as a demonstration of women's perceived power, both creative and destructive.

Beliefs concerning menstruation and menstrual blood have been the subject of discussion in literature since at least the Old Testament's Book of Leviticus[1] (Grabbe 1993) and the classical times of Greece (Dean-Jones 1994) and Rome (Delaney et al. 1988). The Book of Leviticus taught that menstruation made women 'unclean' and that their menstrual blood was a sign of moral as well as physical impurity. This impurity was considered to be contagious, and anyone coming into contact with it was in need of 'cleansing'. The menstruating women themselves were to be 'put apart seven days', and whosoever touched them would 'be unclean until the even' (Leviticus, XV, 19–31).

This biblical code informed ideas about the separation and uncleanness of women during menstruation, and forbade menstrual sex by highlighting the contagious nature of women's uncleanness, which did not include just the woman herself, but the places and persons she had been in contact with. Delaney, Lupton, and Toth write:

> The words of Leviticus […] speak most clearly of the horrors of menstruating women and about what they must do to erase the stain […] The position of women in all the books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, depends on these rules in Leviticus (1988, pp. 37–9).

Moreover, the idea that menstruation was a sign of women's sinfulness was reinforced by popular interpretations of the biblical Book of Genesis, which held that the pain of childbirth, and, by extension, the discomfort of the menses, was a reflection of the punishment of Eve for her 'Original Sin'.

[1] 'This material [Leviticus] is dated according to one theory in the 7th century BC' (Encyclopædia Britannica online: www.britannica.com/topic/Leviticus). This and all other biblical passages are quoted from the King James Bible, in the edition of 1953 (London: Collins). There are also brief mentions in Babylonian sources dating from around 2000 BC: 'The Babylonians had a religious cult which prohibited a man from having contact with a menstruating woman and after menstruation an expiatory sacrifice was ordained' (Castiglioni 1941: 70).

Menstruation was thus an affliction, a burden for guilt, and an ailment levied by God.[2]

Menstruation features in a number of early sources. Early medical theorists approached menstruation through its possible role in reproduction. The 'corpus Hippocraticum' is a collection of treatises that have been linked to the Greek physician Hippocrates (460–377 BC), although 'many of the treatises have little in common with the Hippocrates' school' and a few were not even written during his lifetime (Arata 2005, p. 13). Within these 60 treatises, menstruation was approached in 'The Nature of Woman', 'The Diseases of Women', and 'On the Child' (Phillips 1973, p. 59). The latter text concentrates on ways in which the semen and the menstrual blood were thought to be brought together in the formation of an embryo: 'If the semen from both the male and the female remains in the uterus of the woman, first it is mixed together, since the woman is not quiet, and it collects and thickens as it is heated' (quoted by the Roman physician Galen, translated by De Lacy, 1992, p. 147). Menstruation was regarded as crucial to the general health of women by the physicians of the Hippocratic school (Arata 2005, p. 21) and 'cures' were developed to bring on menstruation when the blood did not flow (see King 1993 and 1998 for further discussion of the female body in Ancient Greece).

The writings of the Greek natural scientist and philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) drew comparisons between the menstruation of women and periodic bleeding in animals. Aristotle observed the patterns of menstruation in women and compared these to the occurrence of oestrus in animals:

> Menstruation occurs in female animals, but in none of them on so great a scale as in women. In ewes and she-goats, when the breeding season has arrived, it appears before they copulate; after copulation it is still present, then it ceases, until they are on the point of giving birth. (Aristotle, trans. Peck 1970, vol. 2, pp. 303–5)

Aristotle contrasted women's sexual difference to men. He saw men's souls as more active than women's and 'concluded that they [men] add

[2] Genesis III, 16 (on banishment from the Garden of Eden). See also Briffault (1927, 2, p. 666): 'Among the Jews it was common Rabbinical opinion that menstruation owes its origin to the serpent having had sexual intercourse with Eve in the Garden of Eden'.

more active energy to their blood, transforming it into sperm. As sperm can leave the body with great energy, he further concluded that sperm has more force than menstrual blood. It was equally evident to Aristotle that women's souls have less energy, which means that, because blood cannot be sufficiently fermented, it becomes menstrual blood which leaves the body with little energy' (Hiltmann 2005, pp. 27–8).

Both these early representatives of Ancient Greek medical thinking thought that menstruation was important to women's general health and needed to be regular in order to rid the female's body of excess substances. Aristotle says of the menses and 'whites' (vaginal discharge), 'these secretions of residue, if moderate in amount, keep the body in a sound condition, because they constitute an evacuation of the residues which cause disease' (quoted by Dean-Jones 1994, p. 124).

There was much concern that if menstruation did not occur, women would become ill, because of the build-up of menstrual blood in the body. Thus, menstruation was problematic, in need of supervision and control. These early gynaecological texts authored and constructed a female body that both reflected and reinforced the social position of women in society (King 1993, p. 124). Lesley Dean-Jones (1994, p. 50) writes that in the classical Greek era, puberty was perceived as a socially determined age:

> at which young girls were thought to have an accumulation of blood in their bodies. This blood drained into the womb and from there issued as menstrual blood if the girl was 'opened up'. However if it could not flow out of the womb […] it could move off to the area around the heart, where it caused a deadening sensation leading to symptoms similar to those of epilepsy and often ending in attempted suicide.

In these early writings, 'women' were defined in terms of 'what man is not'. The authors were male, and their science accordingly used menstruation to construct a female body that was inherently weak and in need of regulation:

> For the Hippocratics, the weakness of the woman's body (her porous flesh) caused menstruation; the release of excess matter in menstrual blood once a month prevented a woman's body from becoming diseased. Even if menstrual fluid had no role to play in childbearing, a woman

> would have had to produce it, as it was only thus that she could approach the male ideal of health. For Aristotle, on the other hand, the production of menstrual blood for the sake of generation caused woman's physical weakness […] While Aristotle considers the male of almost every species as physically superior to the female, the ascendancy in humans is more marked. (Dean-Jones 1994, p. 109)

In addition to these early medical hypotheses, we can find records which outline menstruation as a symbol of women's (often destructive) power. One of the most commonly cited and comprehensive sources of menstrual supernatural power is found in the works of the Roman natural philosopher, Gaius Plinius Secundus ('Pliny the Elder', 23–79 AD), who in Books 7 and 28 of his *Natural History* chronicles a number of the most enduring Roman beliefs about menstruation. The following passage from Book 7 demonstrates the perceived poisonous effects of menstrual blood, and the damage that contact with this blood could cause:

> But nothing could easily be found that is more remarkable than the monthly flux of women. Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees falls off, the bright surface of mirrors in which it is merely reflected is dimmed, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison. (Pliny, trans. Rackham 1999, p. 549)

In Book 28, Pliny outlines many further examples of the 'mysterious and awful power of the menstruous discharge' (Pliny 2000, pp. 54–62). Examples demonstrate how, once exposed to the fluid, things are robbed of their prime or fail to reach their full potential. With regard to the natural elements and cycles: 'hailstorms and whirlwinds are driven away if menstrual fluid is exposed to the very flashes of lightning', and 'if this female power should issue when the moon or sun is in eclipse, it will cause irremediable harm'. Man-made artefacts are damaged: 'the edge of razors is blunted, brass contracts copper rust', while 'purple too is tarnished then by the woman's touch'. Living things are repelled or unable to reproduce: 'when their hives are touched by women in this state bees

fly away', 'mares in foal if touched miscarry', and men should avoid sex at this time, since 'at such seasons sexual intercourse brings disease and death upon the man'. (Pliny Book 28, trans. Jones 2000, pp. 55–7)

However, amid all this destruction, women's power could also have a positive effect so long as great care were taken:

> If women go round the cornfield naked, caterpillars, worms, beetles and other vermin fall to the ground. Metrodorus of Scepsos states that the discovery was made in Cappadocia owing to the plague there of Spanish fly, so that women walk, he says, through the middle of the fields with their clothes pulled up above the buttocks. In other places the custom is kept up for them to walk barefoot, with hair dishevelled and with girdle loose. Care must be taken that they do not do so at sunrise, for the crop dries up, they say, the young vines are irremediably harmed by the touch, and rue and ivy, plants of the highest medicinal power, die at once. (Pliny Book 28, trans. Jones 2000, p. 57)

In addition to its agricultural uses and dangers, Pliny also records menstrual blood as having some medical curative properties: 'if applied to the forehead, relieves headache, especially that of women', and 'by her touch a woman in this state relieves scrofula, parotid tumours, superficial abscesses, erysipelas, boils and eye-fluxes' (Book 28, trans. Jones 2000, p. 59).

Other Roman records of similar beliefs can be found in the 12 books on agriculture composed by Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella around AD 60. In Book 10 of these, Columella states (in Latin verse):

> But if no medicine can the pest repel,
> Let the Dardanian arts be called to aid,
> A maiden then, who the first time obeys
> Her youth's fixed law, bare-footed and ashamed
> Of the foul blood which flows, with bosom bare
> And hair dishevelled, thrice about the beds
> And garden-hedge is led. What wondrous sight,
> When she with gentle pace her course has run!
> E'en as when from a shaken tree rains down
> A shower of shapely apples or of mast
> Sheathed in soft shells, so roll in twisted shapes

To earth the caterpillars.
(Columella, trans. Forster and Heffner 1968, p. 39)

In Book 11, he adds:

> Care, however, must be taken that a woman is admitted as little as possible to the place where the cucumbers and gourds are planted; for usually the growth of green-stuff is checked by contact with a woman; indeed if she is also in the period of menstruation, she will kill the young produce merely by looking at it. (Columella, trans. Forster and Heffner 1968, p. 161)

In these writings, women's menstrual blood posed a threat to men, as well as to men's creations, causing agricultural crops to fail and man-made material things to lose their lustre. Thus women harnessed an innate power to harm through their biology, and if left to their own devices they posed a threat. Conversely, however, if women were controlled, their power could be harnessed to heal illnesses, as well as to be productive in agriculture. In addition to this fear of menstruation, the natural function of the cycle was questioned, as was the role it played in reproduction.

The classical writings of Aristotle and Hippocrates inspired ideas about physiology for many centuries. Galen of Pergamon (130–210 AD) was a philosopher and physician who, although living in Rome, wrote his treatises in Greek. In *Galen on Semen; Galeni de Semine* (English translation by Phillip De Lacy 1992), Galen's main concern was to speculate on the causes of certain biological phenomena, and his arguments take the form of an imaginary dialogue between himself and Aristotle, in which Galen discusses how semen interacts with menstrual blood to produce an embryo:

> In developing his account Galen finds opportunities to discuss the anatomy and physiology of the reproductive organs, the process by which semen is generated, the complementary roles of male semen, female semen, and menstrual blood in the formation of the fetus. (De Lacy 1992, p. 47)

Galen writes:

> And yet Aristotle does not permit the menstrual blood to share in the quality from the semen; […] But what need is there to speak of the stomach, that

> so clearly either rejects what pains it through vomit or excretes it by way of the gut, when we see the uterus acting in the same way? For it was shown in the treatise on the natural faculties that this organ also, like all the other parts, attracts and retains what is congenial and rejects what is alien. But it rejects the menstrual blood as superfluous. Therefore it can never retain it as congenial. For it is not this, but the semen, that is congenial to the uterus, and nature made it an organ receptive of semen. (De Lacy 1992, pp. 83–5)

Galen's ideas continued to be upheld into early modern times. He was 'an expert anatomist who left a continuing legacy of heroic bloodletting in Western medicine' (Smith 2007, p. 120). Of his influence Stoddart wrote:

> His merit was that he argued the importance of anatomical knowledge. Otherwise, he dictated a system of medicine fusing theory and practice—retrograde in itself, not developed from the sound principles of Hippocrates and Aristotle—so imposing in its reduction of all departments of knowledge to authoritative assertion that it prevailed over all Europe for twelve centuries and dissent was accounted sacrilegious. (1911, p. 35)

While most Europeans continued therefore to reverence the works of Galen, the Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus (1493–1541) made a strong attempt to break away from traditional thinking and to examine disease directly:

> He supplemented his lectures with practical demonstrations […] Experience, he said, was better than all the anatomy lessons of the lecture-room. If his students wished to understand disease, let them look it in the face. (Stoddart 1911, p. 27)

However, other physicians considered Paracelsus arrogant, and his ideas on allowing the common people to gain knowledge of academic medicine caused him to be expelled from most Swiss universities, as did his unswerving opposition to the methods of Galen. In ways that others did not, Paracelsus wrote directly of the 'French Disease' (syphilis), suggesting mercury as a cure. He was, however, unreconstructed in believing the menstrual blood of women to be 'venom whence proceeded flies, spiders, earwigs, and all sorts of loathsome vermin' (Belfort Bax 1894,

p. 152), while 'wine, beer and mead is damaged no more greatly than by unclean females when they are in their time' and 'a true cattle-mistress must pay careful attention to the milk-maids that at this time they handle no milk food products or are in the vicinity of the same […] for then the milk turns sour and congeals' (*HddA*, 6, 267).

The Early Modern Period

In the early modern period menstruation was seen as 'required to correct the female body's inherent ability to remove unwanted humours through other means in the way the male body was thought able to' (Read 2013, p. 15). It followed that regular menstruation was required for the purification of women's blood, and for the removal of excess blood:

> The idea of purification came from Hippocrates who had argued that women were of a colder and less active disposition than men, so that while men could sweat in order to remove the impurities from their blood, the colder dispositions of women did not allow them to be purified in that way. Females menstruated to rid their bodies of impurities […] The other view contradicted that of purification of the blood. This idea was that menstruation was the shedding of a plethora. Women's bodies were inferior to men's. They could not use all the blood they 'concocted' from the food they digested [and so the excess was discharged]. (Crawford 1981, pp. 50–1)

What was consistent was the idea that menstruation was necessary for women's health:

> Menstruation formed the bedrock of medieval concepts of how the female body functioned […] In medieval Europe, menstruation was seen as the end result of a whole bodily process of purification, one unique to the female body. (Green 2005, p. 53)

The notion that if suppression of menstruation occurred, women would fall ill, was consistent with the ideas of the classical Greek era, and many physicians followed these concepts, insisting that women needed to menstruate regularly in order to remain healthy. Those who

favoured the purification theory thought that poisons would be trapped in the body, and those who favoured the elimination of excess blood thought that blood would travel from the womb to the brain and cause illness. Examples of remedies suggested to promote menstruation in *The Midwives' Book* of 1671 are to let blood by opening a vein in the foot or ankle, to take syrup of mugwort or figwort, or to use pessaries, though none of these remedies was to be taken at the waning of the moon (Hobby 1999, p. 216). Jane Sharp, the author of *The Midwives' Book*, also reflects on whether menstrual blood does actually contain harmful impurities: 'But were the blood venomous itself, it could not remain a full month in the woman's body and not hurt her; nor yet the infant after conception' (Hobby 1999, p. 216). This suggests that long-standing beliefs about menstruation were beginning to be questioned as advances in medical science were made.

A number of these medical advances concerned the sex cells and their operation. Castiglioni (1941, p. 543) relates that in 1651 William Harvey (1578–1657) first showed that the embryo developed from an *ovum* (egg). Then Marcello Malpighi (1621–1694) and Regnier de Graaf (1641–1673) showed how the *ovum* developed from the ovarian follicle. Johann Ham (1650–1723) discovered the *spermatozoon*, and by the end of the eighteenth century, Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729–1799) had shown that a *spermatozoon* was essential to fertilize the *ovum* (Castiglioni 1941, p. 674).

Harvey's work and hypothesis concerning the mammalian *ovum* discredited in particular Aristotle's theory that a woman excreted the impure menstrual blood, leaving a pure substance from which the foetus was formed (Crawford 1981, p. 51).

However, the archaic medical theories concerning menstruation still dominated; it took time for important new discoveries to be accepted, and 'many physicians still tried to fit new ideas into the framework of the ancient classical medical theories' (Crawford 1981, p. 48). By referring to classical writers, a physician's words gained acumen and authority. So, although important discoveries were being made, new theories were not widely accepted, and beliefs such as Pliny's list of menstrual 'superstitions' had not fallen out of medical use. Crawford (1981, p. 61) relates that in the seventeenth century, 'menstruating women were not forbidden contact with other people, nor were routine household tasks taboo for them,

but some tasks, such as pickling pork or salting bacon […] were to be avoided by them'. Thus, beliefs concerning the adverse effect of menstruating women on the production of foodstuffs were still alive and well known. Another main influence on menstrual beliefs came from religion, and the menstrual sex taboo was still widely acknowledged. One popular medical work, for example, taught that conception during menstruation would result in birth abnormalities and was very dangerous: 'the Seed mixing with menstrual Blood contracts an unnatural mass of corrupt matter, which either turns to miscarriage, abortion, or a Monstrous and deformed Birth' (*Aristotle's Masterpiece* 1684, p. 49).

Although there had been many medical advances in the seventeenth century, ideas about menstruation had not been revolutionized by the eighteenth century. This can, for example, be seen in the writings of Johann Storch, who was a medical doctor practising in the town of Eisenbach in southwestern Germany around 1730. He noted that his female patients were worried if their menses did not flow, thinking that the blood would stagnate inside them and cause problems. He writes:

> A noble girl's birthmarks swelled up when her menses were 'stopped up' owing to a fire; the spots diminished when the menses appeared in 'proper order' […] A 'choleric girl, nineteen years old,' complained of 'an absence of her terms'; and now 'as the time of the flow should be approaching again, she was getting painful red lumps on her shins'. (Quoted by Duden 1991, p. 122)

All kinds of things were said to inhibit the menses: 'A sudden shower could chill the blood, drive it inside, cause it to stagnate' (Duden 1991, p. 140). According to Storch, a widow reported that 'during the time when her monthly blood was flowing, she had tired herself out with washing, and had thereby caused the flow to become stagnant' (Duden 1991, p. 140).

In the eighteenth century it was thought that menstrual blood needed to come out, and if necessary, it could come out of other places. 'The wife of a clergyman, who had her courses stopped by a fright, maintained instead bleeding piles'; […] 'a tall, choleric female cook, who was in a kitchen where she could eat well and also drink a glass of good

wine,' disclosed to Storch that her 'menstrual blood came by the stool' (Duden 1991, p. 120). (This idea also occurred in my own twenty-first century research data. One male aged 13 wrote on his questionnaire: 'someone once told my mum "if you don't start your periods by 14 it comes out of your mouth").

Storch, like his contemporaries, was not in fact sure where the blood discharged from the vagina came from. Other exits mentioned for the 'monthlies' to discharge are from the nose, in the urine, or in vomit (Duden 1991, p. 120). If menstruation was problematic, the menstrual blood could flow around the body and exit from somewhere else. Women whose menses were stagnated often tried home remedies to promote them: 'A servant girl "on the advice of her family" took a strong dose of crushed bay leaves "to promote the menses" […] a woman cooked some juniper juice for herself to achieve the same effect' (Duden 1991, p. 75). Bloodletting, too, was still being used as a remedy for an insufficient menstrual flow. A maidservant '[was having] nearly half a pint of blood drawn from her arm because of an in sufficient flow of the *mensium* [menses]' (Quoted in Duden 1991, p. 74).

The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Even into the nineteenth century, the idea that menstruation was necessary for the general health of women, and that should menstruation not occur, then the retained blood would cause problems, was still widely accepted. It is recorded in Bernutz' and Goupil's *Clinical Memoirs on the Diseases of Women* (1866) that menstruation could be hindered by states of high emotion, for example a 'violent fit of anger, which caused the flow to immediately cease' (Bernutz and Goupil 1866, vol. 1, p. 56), or else the 'menstrual period suddenly stopped through fright', which caused the patient 'severe abdominal pains for several days' (Bernutz and Goupil, p. 60). Immersion in cold water was thought to arrest the menstrual flow, as was experienced by:

> A woman, aged 26, [who] was admitted into the St. Antoine Hospital [Paris], 24th October, 1844 […] A fortnight previously she washed the

> vulva with cold water during menstruation, which was thereupon checked. After this she complained of some abdominal pain, especially in the right iliac fossa, which was not relieved by either baths or poultices. (Bernutz and Goupil, p. 58)

The avoidance of bathing, hair washing, and paddling during menstruation was a widely held belief. Bernutz and Goupil quote the eminent gynaecologist Frédéric Duparque (1788–1879), who 'remarks upon this case':

> When the skin is chilled in females, it excites by a sort of sympathetic influence a spasmodic contraction of the os uteri. The same thing takes place under the influence of mental impressions; in the rigors of intermittent fever & 1986. When these causes are in operation at the beginning of menstruation, or at the approach of the menstrual molimen, they prevent the preliminary stage of congestion, and thus amenorrhœa occurs without there being any uterine affection. (Bernutz and Goupil, p. 60)

If menstruation ceased, there were procedures either to rid the woman of her menstrual blood, or else bring about its onset. For this latter purpose, leeches were often applied, either to the inner thigh and genitals, or else to the cervix. Bernutz and Goupil record:

> Ordered four leeches to the cervix, and a hot bath afterwards, rest in bed and poultices to the abdomen […] Menstruation came on after the leeching, and was abundant for three days. (p. 48)

However, precautions must be taken with this procedure, and Bernutz writes:

> One precaution I would recommend […] it is, the placing of a plug of lint into the uterine orifice, to guard against the entrance of the leeches into the uterus for when a leech attaches itself to the cervical cavity it causes great suffering to the patient. Forgetfulness of this precaution may result very disagreeably, while all the benefit of the bleeding will be lost. (Bernutz and Goupil, p. 141)

In the late nineteenth century medical beliefs about menstruation took on more political overtones:

> During the eighteenth century and before, menstruation was one of many types of excrement needing to be purged and expunged to maintain good health. Though menstruation carried the burden of being a curse that God leveled upon women for the disobedience in the Garden of Eden, it did not necessarily signify pathology. This once healthy expulsion took on decidedly medical and political overtones by the mid- to late nineteenth century […] It became symbolic of women themselves, fraught with interpretations that rendered them weak, sickly, and therefore politically disadvantaged by virtue of their sex and their bodies. (Vostral 2008, p. 21)

The subject of menstruation entered the struggle for women's emancipation, and studies took on political associations. For example, Henry Maudsley insisted in 1883 that young women were not suitable for higher education because of their menstrual cycles, during which their body and mind 'for one quarter of each month, during the best years of life, is more or less sick and unfit for hard work' (quoted by Houppert 1999, p. 144).

Despite Maudley's opinion, women capably took over men's jobs during the war years of 1914–1918. Emily Martin (1989) in her survey of early twentieth-century menstrual studies points out that the results of such studies (which demonstrate the effects that menstruation has on women's physical and mental capabilities) were manipulated in order to reflect the social and economic situations of the era, once women were no longer needed to fill these roles. For example, Robert T. Frank was, in 1931, the first person to name and describe premenstrual syndrome:[3]

> [Frank] carried forward the idea, which flourished in the nineteenth century, that women were swayed by the tides of their ovaries. A woman's ovaries were known to produce female sex hormones, and these were the culprit behind premenstrual tension. (Martin 1989, p. 117)

[3] Martin, 1989:117: 'It is generally acknowledged that the first person to name and describe the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome was Robert T. Frank in 1931' (see Frank, 1931).

For the most severe cases, Frank advocated X-ray treatment directed at the ovaries. Frank also considered the effect of premenstrual tension on women's ability to perform at work, advocating that 'in mild cases employers have to make provision for an employee's temporary care and in severe ones to allow her to rest in bed for one or two days' (Martin, p. 118). Martin considers this study on a woman's ability to work in terms of the 1930s, when it was conducted:

> It strikes me as exceedingly significant that Frank was writing immediately after the Depression, at a time when the gains women had made in the paid labour market because of World War I were slipping away. Pressure was placed on women from many sides to give up waged work and allow men to take the jobs. (Martin, p. 118)

She further comments that:

> Given this pattern of research finding women debilitated by menstruation when they pose an obstacle to full employment for men, it is hardly surprising that after the start of World War II a rash of studies found that menstruation was not a liability after all. (Martin, p. 120)

Twentieth Century Anthropological Studies

Menstruation and its associated cultural rites and rituals also attracted much attention from anthropologists during the twentieth century (Frazer 1947; Douglas 1966; Delaney et al. 1988; Knight 1991; Meyer 2005). Sir James Frazer's pioneering (armchair) anthropological study of magic and religion, *The Golden Bough*, explores menstrual taboos in the vein of the early ethnographic tradition that describes menstruation as a negative and polluting force:

> The general effect of these rules is to keep [menstruating women] suspended, so to say, between heaven and earth. Whether enveloped in her hammock and slung up to the roof, as in South America, or raised above ground in a dark and narrow cage, as in New Ireland, she may be considered to be both out of the way of doing mischief, since, being shut off from

> both the earth and from the sun, she can poison neither of these great sources of life by her deadly contagion. (Frazer 1947, p. 606)

In early ethnographic studies, carried out by well-heeled gentlemen, the voices and experiences of women are silent. As the discipline of anthropology developed, theories about 'pollution', together with the idea that menstruation was used as an opportunity to suppress women, became an accepted theory and was for many years seldom challenged.

Mary Douglas was key in influencing ideas about pollution. In *Purity and Danger* (1966) she argued that concepts and ideas about pollution are culturally defined:

> We can recognise in our own notions of dirt that we are using a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems. It is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining room table […] our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (1966, pp. 35–6)

There is no dirt or pollution *per se*, it is only when certain substances or practices transgress cultural boundaries that they become problematic. Of pollution she writes: 'If we can abstract pathogenicity and hygiene from our notion of dirt, we are left with the old definition of dirt as matter out of place' (1966, p. 35). If we apply this to menstruation; blood (from a male viewpoint) is a substance which should be kept within the bounds of the body and only released through injury, or when blood is drawn. However, menstrual blood is different; each month it flows freely, transgressing the boundaries of the body. It is often seen as 'bad' blood, carrying with it toxins and poisons, which need to be expelled by the body. In some societies this expulsion has grown into a notion that blood loss is necessary for purification, and there are instances where men have echoed the idea by cutting their penis in the ritual of male-genital bloodletting reported by Margaret Mead (1940) for the Mountain Arapesh of northwest New Guinea, and Ian Hogbin in his first account (1934) of the neighbouring Wogeo people. On the subject of 'men's menstruation', Mary Douglas remarks:

> The sexual power is manifested in blood: the female nourishes the young in her womb with good blood, her menstrual blood is dangerous; the male has equivalent blood in the penis, which is good, life-giving and which he draws to feed his child, once born, in exact parallel to the feeding of the foetus in the womb. Female menstruation strengthens the woman, because it is a means of discharging from her body the dangerous fluids of the opposite sex received in intercourse. This natural purifying discharge men achieve artificially by letting blood from the penis. (1999, p. 176)

In their book *The Curse,* Delaney, Lupton and Toth discuss the menstrual taboo and argue that 'taboos exist to protect human beings from danger' (1988, p. 7). They quote Franz Steiner who wrote that taboo deals with 'the sociology of danger itself' (Steiner 1956, p. 21; quoted by Delaney et al. 1988, p. 7). Delaney et al. continue to argue that '[taboo] is concerned with both the protection of dangerous individuals from themselves and the protection of society from them' (1988, p. 7). Together with Shuttle and Redgrove, in *The Wise Wound* (2005), they suggested that the term 'taboo' contains a kind of dualism. It can refer to danger, but refer also to being sacred.[4] Frazer, for example, notes 'as the garments which have been touched by a sacred chief kill those who handle them, so do the things which have been touched by a menstruous woman' (1947, p. 207). Amongst the Polynesians, and the Sioux tribe of north America, the word which means 'menstruating' also means both 'taboo' and 'sacred' (Shuttle and Redgrove 2005, p. 63). Similarly, Thomson (1949, p. 205) argues that:

> From one aspect the woman who may not be approached is inviolable, holy; from another aspect she is polluted, unclean. She is what the Romans called *sacra,* sacred and accursed. (Quoted in Delaney et al. 1988, p. 8)

[4] Briffault (1927, 2, p. 359): 'The notion of tabu […] has given rise to two seemingly quite different, and even radically opposite, forms of sentiment […] a thing may be tabu because it is too holy, too sacred, too "good" and "pure" to be touched; because it would be "sacrilege" to do so. Or, on the other hand, it may be tabu because it has the exactly opposite character, because it is "unclean", "impure", and a breach of the tabu attaching to it would pollute, defile the offender and render him also unclean. The tabu on an object or person may thus be an expression of extreme reverence or of extreme horror, of worship and love, or of aversion and disgust; the tabu thing may be supremely good or supremely evil.'

Pollution taboos provide a platform for menstrual research. Once a taboo has been reported and interpreted, it provides a precedent for the study and understanding of menstrual taboos as a whole. The notion that menstrual taboos are in place to suppress women is so often reiterated that it has become accepted as fact, rather than challenged as theory. This results in a very fixed set of ideas about menstrual taboos. During analysis, more often than not, a patriarchal framework is the default presumption, and it is argued that the taboos are in place because of the perceived dangers to men of being polluted by women's menstrual 'powers'. Evelyn Reed reports that among the Bacas and other South African tribes:

> should a man touch a woman during her periods, his bones become soft, and in future he cannot take part in warfare or any other manly exercise. (1975, p. 96)

She reports also that in New Guinea, if a man so much as saw a menstruating woman, 'his body would swell up and he would surely die', while 'the natives of Motwat and Daudai [were] convinced that slow death would follow any relations with a menstruating woman' (1975, p. 96).

Marilyn Strathern's study of New Guinea (1995; originally published 1972) also deals with pollution taboos. It documents the belief that menstruating women are highly dangerous to men. If men come into contact with menstrual blood then they become poisoned and die. In discussing how menstruating women were feared, she writes: 'A woman is always responsible for the effects of her powers, and is consequently roundly blamed for any carelessness which endangers her men folk. Although she cannot help her powers, she controls the extent to which they are actually dangerous, by observing or not observing the rules' (1995, p. 171). Women pose a double danger to men. First there is a fear that men can absorb menstrual blood through their penis, so that sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is forbidden, and then there is a fear that women can poison men simply by giving them food that they have prepared while they are menstruating. Strathern comments: 'Blood ingested over a period of time would gradually rise up in the victim's ribcage in two columns which meet at his neck: this is the danger point; some sudden

exertion easily snaps the columns and he dies. A nose bleed at death is symptomatic of pollution' (1995, p. 167). A woman's movements are also controlled, and she must be careful as to where she treads. It is, for example, a serious insult for women to step over the legs of men: 'The particular unpleasantness of a woman doing so is related to the fact that, men say, women do not wash themselves and there may always be spots of menstrual blood on them. […] Fear of sexual intercourse is partly based on the supposition that women's private parts will be dirty with old blood and semen' (Strathern 1995, p. 166).

Alternative Frameworks

More recent anthropological studies of gender and sexuality have criticized previous approaches to the study of sexual difference. Not all cultures place the same emphasis on notions of 'maleness' and 'femaleness'. As Ortner and Whitehead argue:

> What gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them—all of these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological 'givens', but are largely products of social and cultural processes. (1994, p. 1)

Lila Abu-Lughod (1991, p. 140) argues that anthropology is built on the historically constructed divide between the West and the non-West, and continues to be primarily the study of the non-Western 'other' by the Western 'self'. Since the West is historically patriarchal, Western anthropologists and ethnographers who study cultures very different to their own are in danger of viewing those cultures through Western eyes and of working through a patriarchal framework in order to construct the society under study as 'other'. As MacCormack and Strathern note, 'we are now brought to a relativistic point of view where men think one thing, women know another, but are not allowed a hearing because European investigators turn to men as the authoritative spokesperson' (MacCormack and Strathern 1990, p. 19).

Margaret Mead (1901–1978), working in the 1920s, who regarded 'primitive' cultures as having very different approaches to sexuality as compared to the West, was the first scholar to question the wholly negative associations attached to menstruation. Her fieldwork in Samoa studied heredity and environment in relation to adolescence. Since the menstruating girl in Samoa experienced very little pain, except slight back or abdominal pain, and no dizziness or fainting, and there was apparently no sense of shame or need for concealment of menstruation, Mead concluded that menstruation was less stressful for Samoan girls than for American girls. Her explanation for an apparently easier passage through puberty was that Samoan society was more casual than Western society: conflicts were avoided, and if disagreements arose they were soon settled because of the fluidity of the family situation. (Mead 1966, pp. 119–20; 157–62)

Mead's work, once acknowledged as one of the most influential anthropological studies, has been harshly criticized for not being objective enough (Freeman 1999). For example, the style, in which *Coming of Age in Samoa* is written, depends on subjective literary language, using many evaluative and judgemental adjectives, putting a particular slant on descriptions. However, despite the criticism, Mead was the first anthropologist to speak to women and ask them about their experiences, and she created her own framework for understanding the society, instead of surrendering to a patriarchal viewpoint. Mead's study influenced a later, feminist anthropological tradition, to which women's voices and experiences were central.

Luisa Elvira Belaunde's ethnographic study of the Airo-Pai of Amazonian Peru (2001) provides an example of how the practice of monthly menstrual seclusion can alter the rhythm of daily life and affect the gender roles of a community. When a woman is menstruating, she is not permitted to cook or carry out the household chores, and so the responsibility for these tasks falls to her husband. Belaunde noted that for the Airo-Pai, menstruation was a very important aspect of life, which came to her attention when she had her own period and was told, 'You must not walk around like that […] the men will fall ill' (2001, p. 129).

Belaunde notes that during their menstrual period, Airo-Pai women went into seclusion. They must sit in a corner of their home surrounded by banana leaves. The husband is not allowed to hand his wife's food

directly to her, but must place it on a banana leaf and let a child give the food to her. At the end of their seclusion, women go to the river to bathe, but they are forbidden from walking on the paths used by men. Men get headaches and fall ill, if they come into contact with her.

> During her menstrual seclusions, a woman is encouraged to remain sitting still inside the house so as to protect herself from all bad influences. Physical tranquillity is conceived as the best prophylactic against any possible harm, both physical and moral. (Belaunde 2001, p. 132)

Belaunde also notes that menstruation is not a shameful thing, and the state of a menstruating woman is of public concern. Other women and children come and talk to her and make sure she is not feeling too sad and lonely. Therefore Belaunde proposes that:

> It could be argued that the general idea emerging […] is that these practices restrict and render women dependent upon men. I agree, but this is only part of the picture. The reverse side of women's culturally constructed vulnerability is men's responsibility for, and active participation in, women's fertility processes. (2001, p. 137)

She concludes:

> these cultural practices are equally constraining on both genders and their aim is not to maintain women's subordination but to foster the couple's love and the well-being of their children. (2001, p. 138)

When studying the Beng people of the Ivory Coast, Alma Gottlieb (1988, pp. 55–74) relates how she initially tried to impose standard pollution taboos on her society of study, only to realize that they did not necessarily fit in with Beng culture. She reports (1988, p. 57) that the Beng have four main menstrual taboos:

(1) Menstruating women must not go into the forest other than to defecate. They are not to work in the fields nor chop wood or fetch water.
(2) They must not touch a corpse.

(3) Men may not eat the food cooked by a menstruating woman if he has ever eaten sacrificed meat.
(4) Menstruating women may not touch logs or live coals on the fire of non-menstruating woman, nor may logs or coals from her fire be taken into the forest by another farmer to cook food on.

At first sight, these appear to be standard pollution taboos, but when Gottlieb spoke to a senior tribe member, he explained:

> Menstrual blood is special because it carries in it a living being. It works like a tree. Before bearing fruit, a tree must first bear flowers. Menstrual blood is like the flower: it must emerge before the fruit—the baby—can be born. Childbirth is like the tree finally bearing its fruit, which the woman then gathers. (1988, p. 58)

Thus she had to rethink her ideas in terms of reproduction and productivity. She observed that women are not isolated from the 'flux of social life' during menstruation (1988, p. 58). It was a time for socializing with other women and cooking food together. Furthermore, the food cooked by menstruating women was not out of bounds and seen as dangerous, but was highly prized and seen as the best food, because the women had longer to spend in preparing it (1988, pp. 72–3).

Gottlieb argues that menstruating women are not seen as polluting, but are instead at risk of being polluted themselves. She notes that menstruating women are forbidden to touch a corpse. However, it is the corpse that might pollute the woman, and not other way round (1988, p. 67). In Beng society, she reports, menstruating women are not seen as polluting, and are not forbidden from touching implements used by men (1988, p. 67), nor are men forbidden contact with a woman's menstrual cloth (1988, p. 59). Menstruation is seen as a fertility symbol, it represents life, not death, and the taboos are centred around the protection of women's creative power.

Denise L. Lawrence (1988) studied taboos concerning menstruation and food preparation. Her focus was primarily on the effect that menstruation had on the annual slaughter of pigs and preparation of pork in rural Portugal, where there is a taboo on menstruating women at the time

of pig slaughtering, because their presence will cause the pork to spoil (pigs are a valuable family asset, and nothing must spoil this). The processing of the pork (for sausage making) also is adversely affected by menstruating women. It is believed that because the anatomy of humans is very similar to that of pigs, women's 'illness' (menstruation) will transfer to the pig and cause the meat to spoil (Lawrence 1988, p. 124). Because of these powers, menstrual women spoil pork and must have no involvement in the sausage-making process (Lawrence 1988, p. 122). Furthermore, menstruating women must not watch the castration of male pigs (1988, p. 124). Women coming to the door of a house during the pig slaughtering days, are asked by the mistress of the house whether they are 'able to see'. If the visitor is not menstruating, she will answer 'I can see'. This way the pork will not spoil if she is allowed into the house (1988, p. 129). This custom gives the woman control over who can enter into her home.

Lawrence's study offers an example of how pollution taboos may be manipulated and reclaimed by women to their advantage. She writes: 'by consciously maintaining the beliefs, they are able to manipulate social relations, both within and beyond the household' (1988, p. 136). Some older villagers still believe in the 'Evil Eye', even though the younger generations do not. The Evil Eye refers to a situation in which it is thought that a person can cause bad luck by staring in malevolent envy at someone or something (1988, p. 130). Thus in the society, envy is feared. This manifests itself in two ways. First, if a small favour is asked, it is usually given. Second, the families are careful to avoid public displays of wealth (1988, p. 131). It is felt that menstruating women are particularly prone to casting the Evil Eye, perhaps even unintentionally because they are thought to be in an uncertain state of control:

> The feature characterizing both the evil eye and the menstrual taboo is belief in the powerful influence of the fixed gaze: Whatever harm is thought to be communicated is transmitted through the eyes. (1988, pp. 130–31)

This caution around menstruating women gives them a certain level of power. Lawrence concludes that women use menstrual taboo to their own advantage:

> women's control of recruitment and access to their homes is not insignificant. Although women's participation in these activities may be taken as a necessary extension of their domestic responsibilities, the important role played by the menstrual taboo underwrites and reinforces women's claims to that pivotal position. (1988, pp. 135–6)

So, despite the fact that menstruation is a universal physiological process, perceptions, beliefs, taboos, meanings, symbolism and practices are not universal. Douglas (1966, pp. 141–2) notes that menstruation is unmarked by taboo by the Walbiri of Central Australia. In this culture there was complete dominance of the males over the females. Walbiri women were beaten or speared for the least complaint or neglect of duty. The Walbiri men had no beliefs that menstrual blood should be avoided or symbolized danger. Douglas concludes that they did not need a menstrual taboo to assert their dominance.

I suggest that the diversity of these studies points to the notion that there can be no fixed framework for the analysis of the treatment of menstruation from a cultural point of view. It is impossible to impose a predefined framework on menstrual taboos (or their absence). Furthermore, traditions and perceptions evolve and change over time. There can be no finite conclusion applicable to all societies. In order to understand the meanings and practices of menstruation in a particular society, it is necessary to identify the cultural framing of menstruation, how it is perceived, what symbolism is attributed to menstrual blood, how it is culturally defined, what the gender roles are, and so forth. We should not assume that menstrual taboos solely represent the oppression of women. Each culture should be studied *in situ* and on its own terms.

Ortner and Whitehead (1994, p. 1) argue that there is a need to recognize 'the bias which often underlies studies of both sex roles and male dominance'. We often assume that we know what 'men' and 'women' are, and this gives rise to 'an assumption that male and female are predominantly natural subjects rather than predominantly cultural constructions' (1994, p. 1). Thus there is a risk of analytically imposing patriarchy on a society where it may not be as marked as one might think. Menstruation is a fundamental female experience; it is a process that is cursed, endured and celebrated, and has shaped social roles and relations between the sexes. Lester L. Grabbe states:

> Anthropological studies show that regulations about menstruation often mirror the relationship between the sexes and the place of each sex within the society. Societies in which women have considerable freedom of choice and independence from men will usually reflect this in various customs about ritual purity, including menstruation. Those societies in which women are restricted to a particular place and function and are discouraged from entering the province of men will usually have restrictive regulations. (1993, p. 60)

This suggests that there is a need for an open approach to the study of female culture and customs. It cannot be denied that patriarchy has an influential role to play in the construction of menstrual taboos. However, we would be presenting a biased viewpoint if we did not consider the possibility that not all menstrual taboos are concerned with the patriarchal control of female power. As was argued by Denise Lawrence in her study of rural Portugal (1988), women can manipulate and reclaim taboos to their own advantage. Furthermore, perhaps we should be open to the possibility that where women undergo separation at their time of menstruation, it is not necessarily a restrictive, suppressive practice, but rather a welcome retreat into a female-only sphere and away from the tasks and chores of daily life. Menstrual taboos must therefore be studied from a more open viewpoint, one that challenges and tests the patriarchal framework that has become standard in the analysis of menstrual taboos, before we surrender to its application.

In their introduction to *Blood Magic* (1988), Buckley and Gottlieb argue that the recurring themes of pollution and taboo in the anthropology of menstruation should not be taken at face value, but should be re-examined. Eugenia Herbert argues similarly:

> Words such as *pollution* and *taboo* are loaded with ethnocentric baggage, much of which has undoubtedly now affected 'traditional' understandings of the terms […] conscious or unconscious pejoratives attached to the notion of pollution have obscured our understanding of what is actually at issue, and this is particularly true in the assumptions about menstrual blood. (1993, p. 86)

In this chapter I have considered historical and cultural interpretations of menstruation. Although I have only been able to present a scant few

of the writings of others, I have endeavoured to examine ideas about menstruation and women's powers, moral and spatial restrictions, and the development of early medical theories. Menstruation beliefs, whether supernatural, restrictive, religious, or medical, all suggest that menstruation is a social construct, as well as a physiological condition. As is evident from early medical writings and anthropological studies, menstruation is never framed as just a monthly bleed, it is always located within larger societal frameworks regarding the position of women in that society. Thus menstruation is a process which, when interpreted socially, becomes a matter of gender relations. In Chap. 3, I shall discuss studies of menstruation carried out in western society from the 1960s to the present day, which help suggest how menstruation is constructed and positioned in contemporary western society. These deal mainly with social aspects of menstruation, the menarche and Pre-Menstrual Syndrome (PMS), as well as the medicalization and management of menstruation in recent years. I shall offer some insight into the social construction of menstruation in societies such as present-day Britain, and also situate the present study within the existing literature about menstruation.

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3

Positioning Periods in Context: Contemporary Discourses and Dilemmas

This chapter examines the interplay between menstruation as a biological fact and as a social construct. The subjective experience of menstruation, and menstruation, as reflected in popular belief, has been little studied. There have, by contrast, been many discussions focusing on the menarche and the physical, emotional, and social changes young women experience at puberty, on the prevalence and treatment of Pre-Menstrual Syndrome, and on the problems caused by the medicalization of menstruation.

Gender, Sex and Menstruation

'Female' and 'feminine' are not inextricably linked. Discussions in the 1970s and 1980s positioned 'gender' as the culturally and historically specific roles associated with being a woman or a man, which were learnt and used to identify people as masculine or feminine. 'Sex', by contrast, was used to describe the biological differences of the male and female bodies. 'Sex' was a biological fact and 'gender' was a socio-cultural construct. As Ann Oakley put it:

V.L. Newton, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-48775-9_3

> 'Sex' is a biological term: 'gender' a psychological and cultural one. Common sense suggests that they are merely two ways of looking at the same division and that someone who belongs to, say, the female sex will automatically belong to the corresponding (feminine) gender. In reality this is not so. To be a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, is as much a function of dress, gesture, occupation, social network and personality as it is of possessing a particular set of genitals. (Ann Oakley 1985, p. 158)

However, this distinction between 'sex' as the biological body and 'gender' as the cultural body has not gone unchallenged. In particular, during the 1990s, the usefulness of the sex/gender binary was questioned; was the concept of 'sex' not also a social construction, rather than a biological given, as previously assumed? These arguments centred around the incidence of intersex people who have a 'sex' imposed on them. These individuals are labelled as either 'male' or 'female' depending upon their dominant sex traits, but in reality might have biological traits of both sexes, depending upon their chromosomal makeup. In this way, these bodies are shaped to fit pre-existing categories of 'either/or', with no allowance for ambiguous bodies. In this line of thought, 'sex' is seen also to be socially constructed to fit in with our concepts about men and women, and female and male bodies. Diane Richardson writes:

> In this model, sex is not something that one 'has' or a description of what someone is. Without the concept of gender we could not read bodies as differently sexed. It is gender that provides the categories of meaning for us to interpret how a body appears to us as 'sexed'. In other words, gender creates sex. (2008, pp. 6–7)

This notion that 'gender creates sex' is disrupted when menstruation is taken into account, and arguments from third wave feminism, influenced by Queer Theory, further complicate the issue. Highlighting that not all 'women' bleed, and not all 'menstruators' are women, the concept is unpicked further. Using *menstruators* to describe people whose bodies bleed periodically detaches physiological sex from gender. Judith Lorber argues that by using this category ambiguous bodies are accounted for, to include intersex and 'transmen', who may bleed, but do not identify

themselves as women, and femaleness and womanhood are split off from menstruation; thus the standard sex/ gender binaries are challenged as 'perpetuating gender inequalities and limiting human expression' (Lorber, in Bobel 2010, p. xi).

The 'sex as a cultural construct' argument is valuable since it recognizes that not all menstruators identify as 'female'. Thus in these later arguments, menstruation as indicative of 'womanhood' becomes fractured. Although the case for employing the term *menstruator* is persuasive, menstruation does still have a symbolic function in reproduction, as an indicator or reassurance of non-pregnancy (Newton and Hoggart 2015). What's more, Bobel (2010, p. 13) raises questions about how we can talk about body-based discrimination without talking about women as women, while at the same time questioning fundamental categories such as gender. Menstruation is both a biological process and a social construction. The way menstruators/women care for their bodies during bleeding (menstrual etiquette) is cultural. However, at the core of this is a biological function. Thus, in terms of menstruation, the physical body cannot, and should not, be absent, and what needs to be developed is a means by which the physical body can be successfully included in discussions about the cultural body. Kath Woodward summarizes this argument as follows:

> A key question in gender and women's studies concerns finding ways of talking about the body without fixing it as a naturally determined object which exists outside politics, culture or social change, […] whilst also holding on to the materiality of living bodies. Bodies are always in the world and those bodies and the world are also changing. (2008, pp. 76–77)

Bearing the above debates in mind, for the purposes of this book I have decided to retain the terms 'women' and 'girls', as well as 'female' and 'male', since the use of *menstruator* in this context would feel too abstract, and, indeed, not all the participants in my survey were menstruating—some school students had not yet started; some of the women had passed the menopause, and others used contraceptives to control their bleeding. Employing these terms refers to everyday assumptions about female bodies, and reflects how the participants themselves understood and spoke about menstruation and their own menstrual identities.

Puberty, Education, Menstruation

The production of the menstruating body starts with puberty, even before a girl has experienced her first menstrual period: 'Stereotypical beliefs about menstruation and menarche are part of socialization into traditional female roles' (Havens and Swenson 1988, p. 89).

How girls learn about menstruation and their early experiences of it have an effect on how they perceive both their bodies and future menstruation. It has been argued that early negative experiences of menstruation result in negative associations with menstruation throughout life:

> Attitudes toward menses come from personal experience and cultural conditioning, and affect how a female thinks about herself overall and what she thinks about her body. (McGrory 1990, p. 265)

Information about menstruation for adolescent girls comes from a number of different sources (Havens and Swenson 1989; Prendergast 1995; Koff and Rierdan 1995). Teachers, school nurses, parents, older siblings, peers, literature, and the media all have a part to play in the construction of a relationship between the adolescent girl and her maturing body.

Beverley Havens and Ingrid Swenson (1989) carried out a content analysis of educational media dealing with menstruation. Although the educational films they studied were accurate in their description of the physiology of reproductive development and the menstrual cycle, instead of photographic imagery there were 'animated images [which] distorted the sizes and colours of the reproductive organs' (1989, p. 903), making the process remote from the actual human body. In addition, the advice centred around how to cope with menstruation socially, rather than any concerns about the physical process itself:

> fear and embarrassment of the menstrual process were acknowledged, with the two reactions almost always occurring together. The fear was of embarrassing situations (odours, staining and soiling of clothing, and boyfriends' knowing that the girl was menstruating). In no instance was the girl portrayed as being fearful that menstruation was painful, abnormal, or otherwise traumatic. The fears were also portrayed as being easily allayed

> once the girl knew how to correctly use the various sanitary products; (Havens and Swenson 1989, p. 903)

Thus it was not the actual process of menstruation itself that was the cause for concern, but the consequences that it might bring. It was the etiquette of dealing with menstruation that was presented as potentially problematic for the adolescent, the concern being that people might know a girl was menstruating if she did not exercise sufficient care in keeping it under control. Many of the educational films were developed by commercial sanitary-product manufacturers, and, unsurprisingly, had the hidden agenda of promoting the manufacturer's own products. They reinforced feelings of secrecy, and hence also of shame, 'making menarche a hygienic rather than a developmental milestone' (Havens and Swenson 1988, p. 90).

Elissa Koff and Jill Rierdan (1995) examined how best to prepare a girl for the onset of menstruation. For this, post-menarcheal young women were asked how they thought best to prepare pre-menarcheal girls for the menarche. They reported that:

> The girls emphasised the need for emotional support and assurance that menstruation was normal and healthy—not bad, frightening, or embarrassing. They stressed the pragmatics of menstrual hygiene and the subjective experience of menstruation (how it would actually feel), while down-playing the biological aspects and the link between menstruation and self-definition as a woman. (1995, p. 795)

The participants in this study highlighted a need for more information about the actualities of bodily experience in preparation for menstruation.

Shirley Prendergast (1995) studied girls' experience of menstruation in school and observed that during a biology lesson on reproduction, the boys joked, while the girls, when watching a film about birth, expressed bodily shame and disgust. Prendergast observed that the girls' posture-positions were very closed, twisted, and tense, reflecting their bodily anxiety, and when conducting her interviews she noted that the observed body-positions of girls were:

> Clearly defensive body postures, watchfulness, secrecy, anxiety, stress, all the things that girls describe in school, are not natural correlates of menstrual

> experience, but might come to shape, quite literally our sense of self. (1995, p. 359)

Prendergast tells us that the 'sex education lessons were dominated by boys' behaviour and responses' (1995, p. 355), and because the lessons focused on reproduction rather than sexuality, it was women's bodies that were on open view. It was this that caused the girls' discomfort, because 'women must *produce* their bodies, via makeup, hair and clothes, for the judgement of men' but the female body had also to be '*repressed,* guarded and contained, so that its secrets could not be known' (1995, p. 357).

In Prendergast's study, the girls expressed a fear of their menstruation 'breaching bodily boundaries' and causing an incident which might 'with extreme watchfulness, monitoring and advance planning be avoided' (1995, p. 353). However, the toilet facilities at the school were ill equipped for their needs, and often the girls had to change sanitary protection while they blocked the lavatory door by closing it with one foot. This added to their sense of shame. The lack of facilities suggested to them that their menstruation was not a natural process, but an inconvenience. She identified three dominant themes which emerged from the girls' experiences of menstruation at school. These were: the adolescent body as responding to the scrutiny of the (predominantly) male gaze; the sense girls had of their body becoming disorganized and out of control; and the need to learn to regulate the self as a model for future gender roles. (Prendergast 1995, p. 356)

Carol Beausang and Anita Razor (2000) report that in Western society:

> mixed messages are given to prepubertal girls about menstruation. Available information is often contradictory, in that it congratulates girls on their entry to womanhood while at the same time suggests that 'it' be kept secret. (p. 518)

In a comprehensive literature review of studies done from 1975 to 1996 on the attitudes of young women to their menarche and menstruation, Beausang and Razor concluded that 'young women perceived experiences related to menarche and menstruation as negative' (2000, p. 521). Their own study, which was conducted in 1998, backs up these findings.

Although they were not specifically collecting data about menstruation, they examined 85 stories collected as part of a larger study on sexual development, since these contained information about menstrual experiences. In only half of the stories could the researchers discern a positive or negative attitude, and of these, only a quarter regarded their experiences as positive, while three-quarters identified their experiences as negative. Examples of words used to describe negative experiences were 'panic', 'embarrassed' and 'scared' (2000, p. 523). The stories identified problems with menstrual-related education, which were described as:

> perceptions of unwillingness by teachers to discuss menstruation, time limits for education, unclear instruction leading to misconceptions, and the presence of peers in group learning situations that lead to embarrassment. (2000, p. 517)

In the last 15 years there have been relatively few studies which focus specifically on menstrual education in the West, but a study by Laura Fingerson (2006, p. 49) suggests that in the early years of the twenty-first century, very little had changed in terms of the anxieties young women faced when trying to manage their bleeding bodies in the institutional environment of a school, where breaks between lessons are short, and students are not allowed out of class to use the toilet.

Medicalization of Menstruation

The female reproductive body is medicalized in Western culture, which sees the care for women's bodies and reproduction put in the hands of 'expert' doctors and health professionals in a way which women's own subjective understandings of their body are not duly acknowledged. In-depth understanding of the physiological processes behind menstruation is a relatively recent discovery, occurring only in the mid-twentieth century:

> It is only since 1930 that the uncertainties about whether womb-lining was shed and when in the cycle the egg was released were more or less resolved. The changes that occur in the womb-lining were not fully described until 1950. (Shuttle and Redgrove 2005, p. 26)

Menstruation is often described as when the womb lining 'deteriorates' and is 'discharged' or 'expelled' (Martin 1989, pp. 47–48), while Katharina Dalton states that menstruation represents a 'failed pregnancy' (2000, p. 69).

What does and does not constitute menstruation is, however, open to interpretation. Gwyneth Sampson (in Brush and Goudsmit 1988) acknowledges that defining 'menstruation' can be difficult, especially when accounting for different types of uterine bleeding:

> menstruation itself is an event marked by the 'shedding of blood' and is therefore observable not only to the woman in whom it occurs but can be demonstrated to others if needed. Even so, there is often uncertainty as to whether bleeding is 'menstrual flow', 'flooding', or 'spotting' and any definition such as 'menstruation is a time when women require to use sanitary protection' is an arbitrary one. (1988, p. 37)

Experiences of menstruation vary a great deal from woman to woman, and are shaped by genetic, environmental, or biological factors. It is difficult to assess an 'average experience' of menstruation. There are variations in what is termed as a 'normal' flow: average blood loss is said to lie between 30 and 40 ml, but a loss of anything from 10 to 80 ml can occur, and blood loss is greater close to the menopause (Wilson and Rennie 1976, p. 28). In the majority of women, the cycle length is between 25 and 30 days. However, the 'normal' length has come to be seen as 28 days.

The medicalization of menstruation tends to define what is 'normal', and what is not, in terms of 'symptoms' which diverge from the standard 28 day cycle. This 'normal' cycle is not experienced by all women, and there are many perceived problems associated with menstruation. These include PMS (premenstrual syndrome), amenorrhoea (absence of menstruation), menorrhagia (excessive menstrual blood loss), and dysmenorrhoea (painful periods). By constructing a 'normal', 'average' cycle, menstrual problems become defined as deviations from this norm. Brush and Goudsmit write:

> A large number of undesirable events are known to be related to the menstrual cycle and may range from the mildly annoying and inconvenient to

> extremely serious situations, where the physical and mental pressures lead to extremes of tension with total disruption of lifestyle and the family unit. (1988, p. ix)

Depicting the menstrual cycle in these terms implies that the cycle is hugely problematic, not only to women, but to society as a whole. There have been a number of studies dealing with the 'symptoms' of menstruation. The Moos Menstrual Distress Questionnaire (1968) was one of the earliest studies conducted to assess the psychological changes associated with the menstrual cycle. It is often referred to and quoted in subsequent literature. The Moos study consisted of asking 839 women whether any of a set of 47 symptoms had been experienced during their most recent menstrual cycle, and also during their worst menstrual cycle. The symptoms included pain, behavioural changes, water retention, and inability to concentrate, and were assessed using a six-point scale at three phases in the cycle—menstrual, premenstrual and inter-menstrual. The Moos Questionnaire reported that women who complain of premenstrual and menstrual symptoms also complain of similar symptoms in the inter-menstrual phases.

In subsequent studies, the Moos Menstrual Distress Questionnaire research was criticized on methodological grounds, since it used the spouses of university graduates as the sample group, and these were not representative of the wider population. There were also many variables. Some participants had children, whereas others had not, and some participants were taking the contraceptive pill.

In 1974, Mary Brown Parlee trialled the Moos Questionnaire on 25 female and 34 male undergraduate students; no screening was done to eliminate the females who were taking oral contraceptives. The results agreed with the Moos study, in that females and males gave similar descriptions of the kinds of 'symptom changes' occurring before and during menstruation. However, during the premenstrual and menstrual phases of the cycle, males did attribute a greater symptom severity to women than the women did to themselves. This indicates that men attribute a greater negativity to the menstrual cycle than the women actually experiencing menstruation. Parlee concluded that the menstrual distress described by females appeared to be communicated to males either directly or indirectly. The stereotypical

beliefs about the menstrual cycle circulating in popular discourse are likely therefore to influence the description of symptoms.

Ann Clarke and Diane Ruble, in their study *Young Adolescents' Beliefs concerning Menstruation* (1978), took three groups of adolescents and administered the Moos Questionnaire to them in order to assess the attitudes of the adolescents towards menstruation in terms of symptoms, effects on mood and activities, and sources of information. The groups used in this survey were pre-menarcheal girls (average age 12 years 5 months), post-menarcheal girls (average age 12 years 11 months), and boys (average age 12 years 10 months). All three groups completed the Moos Menstrual Distress Questionnaire according to what they thought 'girls in general' experienced. Only the girls were able to complete the Moos Questionnaire on a personal level, in accordance with their own experiences or what they expected to experience. All of the adolescents were asked to rate on a four-point scale how much they had learnt about menstruation from 14 possible sources. The results supported the work done with adults by Moos (1968) and Parlee (1974), which concluded that knowledge about the cyclic variations and symptoms of menstruation, such as mood changes, are not solely informed by personal experience, but are also influenced by a wider societal discourse.

Premenstrual Syndrome: Medicalization and Problematization

A large proportion of the medical literature on menstruation is dedicated to the definition and treatment of premenstrual syndrome (PMS). This, like menstruation, faces difficulties of definition and also criticism for over-medicalization.

Diagnosis of PMS is made by the self-reporting of the occurrence and the severity of certain symptoms. A consistent symptom-free week between menstrual periods is considered essential in distinguishing PMS from other gynaecological or psychological disorders:

> Premenstrual syndrome (PMS) may be defined as the cyclical recurrence, in the luteal phase of the menstrual cycle of any combination of distressing

> physical, psychological, and/or behavioural changes of sufficient severity to result in deterioration of interpersonal relationships and/or interference with normal activities (Reid and Yen 1981; quoted by O'Brien 1987, p. 6).

PMS is listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1952ff). The medical explanations for PMS may invoke an imbalance in the levels of progesterone and oestrogen or, more particularly, a progesterone deficiency. A vitamin B6 deficiency may also, apparently, contribute to PMS. Most women report only mild symptoms, while 30–40 % report troublesome symptoms, and 5 per cent report symptoms that disrupt their daily lives (Ferin et al. 1993, p. 198). Dalton, who is considered to be the pioneering expert on premenstrual syndrome,[1] begins her book, *The PMS Bible*, with the ominous words:

> Once a month, with monotonous regularity, chaos is inflicted on homes throughout the world as premenstrual tension and other premenstrual problems recur time and time again. (2000, p. 1)

In this single sentence, PMS is framed as a worldwide pervasive problem that is centred on women's reproductive capacities and their unwieldy 'power' to inflict misery on others by an inability to control their emotions during menstruation.

In reaction to this, feminists have been concerned that the problematization of PMS is far wider reaching than just being a condition affecting some women. The medicalization of PMS 'implied that the majority of women were "ill" each month and required possible medical care in order to control and cope with their disease' (Rittenhouse 1991, p. 417).

Rittenhouse's study 'The Emergence of Premenstrual Syndrome as a Social Problem' examines why premenstrual syndrome only began to

[1] Katharina Dalton (1916–2004), a British doctor, first carried out work on the menstrual cycle in the 1940s. She identified the seriousness of a set of symptoms known as PMS 'Pre-Menstrual Syndrome' (Houppert 1999, p. 138). Dalton stated that PMS was 'the world's commonest disease' (1978, p. 206), and her research was very much concerned with the effect this disease had on women's ability to concentrate and function normally at work and at school. She wrote that 'during the paramenstruum there is a deterioration of arm and hand steadiness, which is an adverse factor among those whose work demands manual dexterity' (1978, p. 114). In 1969, Dalton published *The Menstrual Cycle: An essential guide for women and men* (Penguin UK; Pantheon NY), which in 1978 this was reworked and republished as *Once a Month* by Fontana paperbacks.

emerge into social awareness as a problem in the early 1980s, even though it had been first identified in the early 1930s. She notes that in the early 1980s, PMS was used as a defence in two murder trials. After this cultural shift, it became an issue in the popular press. During the subsequent discussion, the definition and meaning of the term 'PMS' was forged, as a syndrome of symptoms occurring before the onset of a menstrual period. Rittenhouse argues that the boom in interest in PMS came as a result of the social-cultural environment of the early 1980s. She adds that:

> Discussions of PMS were published at a time when women were not only participating in increasing numbers in the paid labour force but were also proving themselves to be quite capable within this context. PMS brought back old stereotypic views […] of women being adversely influenced by their biology. (1991, p. 419)

The classification of PMS as a disorder has, thus, been viewed as a double-edged sword. Susan Markens (1996) notes that defining PMS as a legitimate disorder is a positive thing, because it allows women suffering from PMS to be taken seriously and therefore to gain treatment. However, on the other hand, it is also negative, because (as also noted by Rittenhouse 1991) it could lead to the stigmatization of all women, and result in gender discrimination. Markens writes that 'sceptics of PMS do not deny women's experience of premenstrual symptoms; rather, they question whether these symptoms constitute a *syndrome* for most, if not all women' (1996, p. 43). Citing Iris Young (1984), Markens argues that there is a male bias in the medical conception of what constitutes a healthy body, and this leads to the assumption that a normal body is unchanging and characterized by stability and equilibrium (1996, p. 44). This is not the case for the female body, which undergoes cyclic changes on a monthly basis. Furthermore, some of the common negative symptoms constituting PMS (such as anger and violent outbursts) are not traditionally 'feminine' traits. Markens continues that the negative symptoms 'implicitly and explicitly define how a woman should feel/behave' (Markens, p. 47). Ideas such as these have been reinforced in the written media, where much attention has been paid to PMS in popular magazines aimed at women, and PMS is discussed with a 'predominantly negative

tone' (Markens, p. 46). Women are being told repeatedly that they are less mentally capable just before their period, and this is bound to have a negative impact on their relationship to their bodies and to their cycle. As Arlene McGrory notes, '[in our society] myth, belief, and stereotype have not been separated from factual information' (1990, p. 265).

Emily Martin (1989) explored the different perceptions of women's reproductive processes, and examines, in particular, the ways in which medical science construes women's bodies, and the terms in which they are described, in contrast to the ways they are viewed by ordinary women. Examining the language used in medical textbooks to describe the menstrual cycle, Martin sees it described in negative terms, as a degeneration of the womb lining due to failed conception, whilst ovulation and the male reproductive function are described in positive terms. She also argues that women's identity and function in these texts is constructed solely around reproduction. To her, the language of the textbooks is gendered and biased towards the male. She writes that 'women are not only fragmented into body parts by the practices of scientific medicine, as men are; they are also profoundly alienated from science itself. They are less involved in the production of science as a form of cultural activity' (1989, p. 21). She argues that science is based on a belief system that equates objectivity with masculinity. She quotes:

> We find that the attributes of science are the attributes of males; the objectivity said to be a characteristic of the production of scientific knowledge is specifically identified as a male way of relating to the world. Science is cold, hard, impersonal, 'objective'. Women by contrast are warm, soft, emotional 'subjective'. (Berliner 1982, quoted by Martin 1989, p. 21)

Martin found that PMS was described in terms of physiological, emotional and behavioural 'symptoms' that women 'suffer'. Thus PMS is put forward as the result of hormonal malfunction, and, by extension, as the malfunctioning of women's bodies. In the medical texts, women's bodies were portrayed as being almost out of control. The female reproductive system was seen as delicate and susceptible to malfunctioning, and female bodies were therefore viewed as needing management, with the result that women were expected to endure regular examination throughout

their lives. This means, of course, that women's own responsibility for their reproductive systems is taken away from them and placed in the hands of the doctors. Martin notes that:

> from the late teens until old age, women in society are expected to submit their genitalia and internal reproductive organs to scrutiny by a doctor. (1989, p. 71)

In *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation* (1999), Karen Houppert further argues that although menstruation is conveyed as a normal bodily process, the hormonal flux gone through each month by women is seen as a problem or disease (p. 229). Thus it might be seen that women are encouraged to seek treatment for PMS because, as Martin argues, while society allows men the right to express their anger, this right is denied to women, whose premenstrual anger is therefore seen as their fault (Martin 1989, p. 130).

What may be the over-enthusiastic classification of PMS as a syndrome suffered by the majority of women has repercussions for all women. A systematic review published in 2012 failed to provide clear evidence in support of a specific negative mood syndrome associated with menstruation in the general population (Romans, Clarkson, Einstein et al. 2012). The authors conclude that the widespread belief perpetuates a negative link between female reproduction and negative emotionality.

Lay Knowledge vs. 'Expert' Knowledge

Much of the language we use to discuss menstruation originates with the medical profession. Women who are unsure about the biological processes of their body, and who are unable to articulate menstruation in appropriate medical terms, are disempowered, and this is reflected in late-twentieth-century research. In 1977 Snow and Johnson (reported in Scambler and Scambler 1993, p. 27) conducted a study involving 40 women attending a clinic in a multi-ethnic, low-income area of Michigan, USA. The women had little knowledge of the medical aspects of the menstrual cycle, and 55 % were unclear about the origin of the flow. In 1982, they conducted a

follow-up study of 200 mainly low-income, poorly educated black women attending an antenatal clinic, and again found a 'lack of understanding' of the menstrual cycle, with 55.5 % not knowing the reason for menstruation, and 33.5 % not knowing the source of the blood. This study ignored the women's own ways of articulating what their cycle meant to them, and since this did not fall in line with medical understanding of the menstrual cycle, the women were dismissed as being ignorant of their biological functions. Reviewing this research, Scambler and Scambler suggest that:

> the medical perspective on menstruation and menstrual disorders is not only limited but also limiting […] It is limiting in that the manner in which menstruation and menstrual disorders have been addressed in the biomedical sciences and clinical practice reflects the predominance of men amongst scientists and practitioners. (1993, p. 25)

In the twenty-first century, lay perceptions and understandings of the body are beginning to be considered in medical discourses, and recent research has called for clinicians to consider the effect on their practice of lay understandings of the body and bodily metaphors (Walker 2012; Walker 2013). For example, as reported in studies with clinicians, contraceptive choice is greatly influenced by the experiences, both positive and negative, that friends and family communicate (Hoggart, Newton and Dickson 2013). These informal discourses are important, and can be highly influential in a woman's decision to use, or not use, a certain type of contraception (Harper et al. 2004; Newton and Hoggart 2015). They can also be significant in shaping women's understanding of how their bodies work, which can have implications for matters concerning reproductive healthcare.

Hormonal Contraception

It is impossible to discuss the menstruation and the reproductive body without acknowledging the impact that hormonal contraception has had on women's reproductive control, and, by extension, their experiences of the menstrual cycle. From the 1960s onwards, the development of

the contraceptive pill gave women greater freedom from the risk of unintended pregnancy, and also provided them with a method to regulate their monthly cycle. The pill was developed to mimic the normal ovulatory cycle:

> COCs [combined oral contraceptives] have been manufactured and licensed in a regimen of 21 days of active treatment followed by a seven-day hormone-free interval, when the withdrawal bleed usually occurs. A number of reasons for the original choice of this dosing regimen have been advanced, including: a desire to mimic the normal ovulatory cycle to facilitate general community acceptance; to bring the pill regimen into line with the Catholic Church's approach in approving the use of the 'safe' period for birth control; and concerns that not having a bleed on a monthly basis may be harmful. (Read 2010, p. S33)

Recent developments in hormonal contraception have, however, given women additional options for control over, and regulation of, their monthly bleed:

> Modern women have at their disposal a variety of contraceptive methods, many of which perturb monthly vaginal bleeding. OCs [oral contraceptives] are still widely used to regulate monthly menses but, in addition, women now have the option of extended pill regimens to decrease the number of vaginal bleeding episodes, or to use progestogen-only methods of contraception and potentially eliminate bleeding altogether. (d'Arcangues et al. 2011, p. 10)

However, the 'medicalization' of menstruation has been much discussed. Feminist researchers often critique the 'medicalization of the body', in particular the female reproductive body, since these medical discourses are seen to fortify a patriarchal frame within which women's bodies are scrutinized, and constructed as problematic and in need of medical surveillance (Scambler and Scambler 1993; Martin 1989). The female body has thus increasingly become a site for technological interventions.

In Foucauldian terms, biomedical technologies, such as those for contraception, are 'technologies of bodily governance'. They are thus 'technologies of power'—ways in which the individual's body can be controlled, and, by extension, ways in which a community can be controlled:

> For Foucault, biopower literally means having power over other bodies: 'an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations.' (Lock and Nguyen 2010, p. 24)

However, other feminist perspectives focus less on the social control of mass populations, and more on women's rights to control their own bodies, seeing biomedical contraceptive technologies developed to control fertility as a powerful tool in a progressive society for providing women with freedom from the threat of unintended and unwanted pregnancies, thus giving them the chance to have control over their own life paths.

Whether women choose to use hormonal contraception, and how they evaluate its impact on their bleeding patterns, is highly subjective and differs from woman to woman. It is influenced, among other factors, by their understanding of, and their relationship to, their reproductive bodies; a division exists between groups of women who like to experience a regular bleed, and others who prefer a less frequent bleed. To investigate this, Edwards et al. (2000) conducted focus groups and structured questionnaires with 45 women from different socio-economic backgrounds and life-stages in Oxford (UK) in order to determine women's knowledge of the effectiveness, risks and acceptability of the side effects of different contraceptive methods. Their study found that amenorrhoea (absence of menstruation) was considered the most acceptable form of bleeding irregularity (Edwards, p. 76). However, they also found evidence that some women worried that they were pregnant if they did not have a regular period. Frequent bleeding and spotting were 'seen as a nuisance or inconvenience rather than a major concern to most women' (Edwards, p. 76). Finally, prolonged bleeding was seen to be unacceptable by 95 % of women in the study sample (Edwards, p. 77). Similarly, Fuchs et al. (1996, p. 275) found that when women were asked about their preferred frequency of menstrual bleeding there was a polarization between the 44 % of women in their sample who preferred a monthly bleed and the 34% who favoured a 'no-bleed' regimen (Fuchs, p. 282).

In the first study of its kind, the World Health Organization called for greater understanding of how concepts interact with regard to amount, duration, regularity, frequency and associated bodily changes of the menstrual bleed: 'the relative importance of each is […] essential

if attempts to introduce contraceptive technology that is known to affect one or more of them are to be successful' (WHO 1983, pp. 14–15).

This supports the argument that 'the process of menstruation carries deep cultural and personal significance for women. This significance persists even in the face of a modern understanding of menstruation, and the ability to manipulate menses with medication' (d'Arcangues et al. 2011, p. 16).

It is, therefore, important to be sensitive to cultural factors and to recognize that these may vary between women, depending on factors such as class, generation, religion and ethnicity. In a study of contraceptive implant users from five countries—Chile, China, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia and Tunisia—81 % of women preferred a monthly bleed, although this figure did vary from location to location: 'younger women, women not married or cohabiting with a partner, Christian women, and women experienced with hormonal contraceptives were more amenable to deviating from the monthly menses' (d'Arcangues et al. 2011, p. 11).

Although menstruation was perceived, and still is perceived medically, as the result of a woman's failure to conceive, women now have the technologies available to help them successfully control their fertility and to choose not to conceive. For these women, menstrual blood does not symbolize 'the weeping of a disappointed uterus' (Jeffcoate 1975; quoted in Laws 1990, p. 93). Although hormonal contraception has given women the opportunity to control their cycle and their fertility, it has also led to the further medicalization of reproduction, since the supply of such technologies is controlled and regulated by the medical profession.

In the face of the ability to do away with uterine bleeding altogether, bleeding is still symbolic for some women, and concepts of 'reproductive control' and 'bodily control' can become dislocated from one another, when bleeding patterns are disrupted by these technologies. For example, young women who experienced irregular bleeding while using the contraceptive implant, interpreted such unpredictable bleeding as a threat to their bodily control, and framed the removal and discontinuation of the implant in terms of reasserting their bodily control (Hoggart and Newton 2013). Bleeding, as experienced while using contraception, is also often understood by women in terms of their 'period', despite medical

definitions that it is a 'withdrawal bleed' or else 'breakthrough bleeding' (Newton and Hoggart 2015). This is because it is subject to the same social conventions and bodily care as the menstrual period, and so its experience for women is understood in the same way.

Thus it appears that menstruation (and bleeding) symbolizes many things for women: it can be welcomed as a sign that a woman is not pregnant, or it can be dreaded because it brings with it pain and discomfort. Most of the texts I have discussed in this chapter are concerned with what menstruation means, to women and to society as a whole. They discuss the values attributed to menstruation in a patriarchal society, examining the construction of ideas about menstruation, and the terms in which menstruation is described and identified. In the studies discussed, there is an overriding assumption that menstruation is a problem for women, both physically and socially: either the biological process itself is fraught with difficulties, such as the occurrence of PMS, or menstruation, and the perceived silence around it is restrictive for women, or the education adolescents receive about menstruation is flawed, or, finally, the information about advertising only reinforces the shame of concealment.

I do not dispute the value of these different perspectives on menstruation, but I do think that there is a bias in research towards *problematizing* menstruation. There is a shortage of studies which examine and document contemporary, everyday ideas and knowledge about menstruation without a predisposed notion to view it as problematic. This, therefore, is the standpoint of the present book: to research and document vernacular discourses, contemporary popular beliefs and folklore about menstruation, and by looking at these 'unofficial' discourses, to draw some conclusions about the everyday articulation and understanding of this fact of life, using the words and terms of ordinary people. This study aims to further knowledge about menstruation by looking outwards, towards everyday discourses, including media and educational influences, as well as examining lay knowledge, belief and experience concerning menstruation. My aim and research agenda has been to examine the role of everyday knowledge and discourse in the construction of experience, looking specifically at 'unofficial' lay knowledge and belief about menstruation; how menstruation is articulated through language, specifically euphemism, slang and joking; and how menstruation is managed at menarche as well as a

once-a-month occurrence. Lay knowledge and everyday experience, and what it can tell us about understanding the social and cultural construction of menstruation, is extremely valuable to the human experience.

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4

On the Blob: Young Adulthood and Menstrual Lore

This chapter will use data from the study to examine the different ways in which young people learn about menstruation. It will focus on menstruation as discussed in the vernacular language of adolescents.

Knowledge about menstruation derives to a very large extent from observation, informal communication, and the societal pressures and stereotypes expressed in formal education and the mass media. These, together with a fear that their menstruation will be exposed, shape the ways adolescent girls behave towards their periods. In particular, it is when school students first learn about periods that they become abruptly aware of the majority of menstrual etiquette and the sensitivities that accompany it. Through this early socialization, both female and male school students attempt to make sense of their changing bodies and their position in the world. They construct their own discourses, sharing rumours and stories that shock, as well as providing defining guidelines for how menstruation ought to be dealt with in school.

V.L. Newton, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*,
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Menstrual Education: 'A Messy Subject'

During my research, the secondary school where I was conducting my interviews held a 'Puberty Day' (Newton 2012). These 'days' focus on explaining the changes that take place during puberty. I was asked to join in for the talk concerning periods. In a scenario which appeared to have changed very little since my own experiences with puberty education, almost 15 years earlier, all the Year 7 girls (11–12 year olds) were gathered together in a classroom and told to sit on the floor. The talk itself was given by a school nurse.

As the talk was on a 'messy, sensitive subject', the girls were told that they would not be called upon to share personal stories or to discuss the experiences of friends. Thus from the very start the topic was outlined as one that should be kept secret. However, even though the girls were discouraged from talking about themselves, they were invited to raise any queries they might have. A gendered information divide also became clear when, at one point, a male school student came into the room in order to pass on a message, and the girls were told not to ask any of their questions while he was there, because the subject of the talk was 'a little sensitive', and intended for the girls alone. The boys were to be told nothing of it. It was to remain shrouded in secrecy.

The nurse then focused on growing up and warned that 'when you start growing into women, you have to start planning and being prepared.' The girls would have to 'think ahead!' and 'become a responsible adult'. If their periods started at a time when they were not prepared, they should go to the sick-room or medical room and get a sanitary towel. As I saw it, this automatically categorized menstruation as an ailment rather than a natural physiological process.

Reactions to the talk were predictable, and there was some giggling and loud laughter at the naming of body parts such as 'nipple'. Very striking, though, was the girls' discomfort and disgust at details of the female body. The words 'uterus', 'periods' and 'pubic hair' all gave rise to 'Ugh!', a response of revulsion. However, in strong contrast to this, when the nurse was talking about the male aspects of reproduction, and the fact that all the sperm die, which do not fertilize the egg, the responses were more compassionate ('Aw!', 'That's sad!'). This prompted a query from one girl: 'Are we all the fastest sperm?'

When the nurse spoke more specifically about periods, the girls were quieter. There was some emphasis on the connection between periods, fertility, and having a baby, but this was glossed over. The nurse told the girls that 'babies come much later in life', which I interpreted as a way for her to avoid any link to sexuality. However, the link between periods and pregnancy was one that the girls were keen to know more about. They asked many questions about 'babies' and 'the egg', but their questions on menstruation and pregnancy showed very little understanding of how the two related to each other. They asked, for example, 'When you are pregnant, do you have to use pads rather than tampons?'

The information given about menstruation and the experience of it focused chiefly on behaviour. The girls were warned about possible mood-swings brought on by hormonal changes and the nurse told them: '[Mood change is] simply not an excuse—you must control it'. With regard to possible discomfort, the nurse—misleadingly—advised the girls that having a period did not hurt ('it isn't like cutting yourself'), but it sometimes did cause cramps. She continued that cramps were 'not something that you want to share with everyone—keep them to yourselves.' This accordingly indicated that periods were something that had to be kept hidden, even if a girl was really struggling with discomfort. The nurse added that the cramps will 'not be really bad cramps, they are manageable'. This was incorrect; even from my own subjective experience I knew that some women do suffer really badly with menstrual cramps.

The nurse did, however, provide some guidance for dealing with these cramps ('a warm bath', 'holding a heated bag on the lower stomach', and 'exercising and taking pain-killers'). When asked about the practicalities of having a period she answered students' questions in the following manner:

Q. Swimming—what if it [the period] comes out [begins] then?
A. 'You get warning about periods, they don't come on suddenly, you'll know.'
Q. Would the string ever come out of a tampon?
A. 'It's highly unlikely, but theoretically it could happen.'

This question-and-answer session drew more on the nurse's experience as a woman than on any specific teaching points or professional knowledge.

Finally, the students were shown different types of sanitary protection and told how to use these. The nurse began by telling a story about her own experiences when she first started her periods. The sharing of personal discourses was effective in encouraging the students to feel that they could talk to their friends about periods and how they experienced them.

The description of the sanitary products was very commercial; 'Always' and 'Tampax' were the only products used in the demonstration, and there was no mention of reusable products such as 'Mooncups', or washable cloth pads. Pant-liners were described as a backup for tampons, which were also to be used between periods in order to absorb discharge and to help you keep fresh every day. 'Freshness' was an issue that was emphasized strongly. As for sanitary towels, the nurse told the girls to change them very frequently: every four hours, even if there 'was not much blood on them'. She added, 'This is important, and those of you who aren't listening will go round smelly'. On the matter of tampons, the girls reacted with 'Ugh!' when inserting them was mentioned. The idea of bodily penetration caused concern, and there were questions like 'Does it hurt?' The students were discouraged from using tampons directly at menarche, and warned of the danger of Toxic Shock Syndrome [TSS].

When I spoke with the head of PDE about the student interviews (she had been present during these, as agreed with the school), she pointed out that sex education was a topic the students looked forward to, and wanted to learn about. However, some teachers found it difficult to teach this subject, and, as a result, the students were left feeling disappointed that they had not received the level of instruction they were expecting. As she told me:

> F1C: Sex education is funny, actually, because it is surprisingly popular. You would think that…erm…kids are more nervous about, you know, discussing this kind of stuff with an adult, but actually they get quite narked, because not everybody…because of the way we deliver PD[E], we have a problem with Key Stage 3 [13–14 year olds], because it's delivered by form tutors, and of course that could be anyone. It could be a teacher that really in their normal teaching career would have nothing to do with discussion, particularly, or certainly some of the, you know, kind-of more sensitive

> areas, and so some of them duck it, I think. Some of them…erm…some of them are very open about it, and come to me and say: 'I don't want to do it', and so I'll deliver the sex education for that group instead, but I think some are less open about it, they don't want to be seen to be ducking it, but they do in one way or another, and so the kids get a bit annoyed about that, because they do enjoy it. (F1C)

In addition to attending the Puberty Day, Year 7 pupils also learnt about puberty and menstruation in Science lessons, in a unit on reproduction', and in PDE, in the unit about puberty. I was provided with the lesson plans for both units. The lessons were mixed sex, with girls and boys receiving the same information.

In the Year 7 Science unit about reproduction, the third lesson covers the menstrual cycle. This is discussed in terms of the human reproductive cycle, with emphasis on the egg and the egg's journey. The students learn about where and how often human egg cells are produced. They watch a video, draw diagrams and make notes using worksheets, and are told by the teacher that the menstrual cycle 'is designed to produce a single offspring with a good chance of survival'. Thus, the Science lesson deals with biological fact rather than exploring a more subjective view of female experience.

The PDE lessons discuss the physical, mental, and social changes that puberty brings. The topic, entitled 'Changes', is split into three lessons, the objectives being to review the physical changes that happen to boys and girls during puberty; to examine the emotional changes that may happen at puberty; to allow students to discuss how they might cope effectively with these changes; and to develop an increased awareness of the need for personal hygiene. These lessons present puberty as a crisis, when the body has the potential to become out of control, and a matter of hygiene, inasmuch as the body suddenly becomes dirty and there is a social price to pay for not observing good cleanliness. As Mary Douglas (1966, p. 73) notes, 'with us pollution is a matter of aesthetics, hygiene or etiquette, which only becomes grave insofar as it may create social embarrassment. The sanctions are social sanctions, contempt, ostracism, gossip.' The lessons are non-gendered and generic in content, and do not focus specifically on menstruation.

Despite this, the guidelines that the girls received from the nurse about managing their menstruation effectively, coupled with PDE lessons that treat the changes of puberty as associated with uncleanliness, might possibly give rise to some concern. They send a clear message that although all bodies become 'unclean' at puberty, menstruation is an additional hygiene problem, one so unclean that it requires special instruction dedicated to 'sanitary' wear, the management of which has to be taught by a health specialist. The implication that young women are more unclean at puberty than young men is inescapable.

These shortcomings of menstrual education in schools are reflected in the interviews. In the 'Puberty Day' lesson I attended, the girls were separated from the boys for their talk, and, as a result, the latter missed out on an opportunity to acquire knowledge about menstruation. The only formal education that the boys had about it was during Science lessons and the very general PDE lessons. It could be argued that menstruation is not something that boys need to know about, but the lack of male instruction on the matter was something that male interviewees recognized:

> I do remember sex education in primary school…I do remember that they separated the boys and girls, and I do remember thinking it was really unfair, because they were learning loads of stuff that we didn't know about, and I'm guessing it was all about that. (M3B)

> Erm…in secondary school when we were about Year 7, and they took all of the girls out of the class for some kind of talk, which none of the boys were invited along for, and we were all, like: 'What are they talking about? What are they talking about?'(M5B)

Despite this, it was clear from the interviews that some of the male students were articulate about menstruation and had a relatively mature attitude towards it. Here are three Year 8 boys talking:

> VLN: So what is your attitude towards periods? What do you think about them?
>
> M3A: Erm…I think that it's perfectly normal and fine to, like, have a period, really.
>
> M5A: Yeah, I don't think people should be embarrassed about it…

M3A: I don't think there is anything wrong.
M5A: …and should be able to talk openly about it.
M4A: Yeah, they should be able to, but if they don't want to, they don't have to.
M3A: No. It's pretty much, like, the girl's choice, really, 'cause it's, like, them that's on the period.
M5A: Yeah. It's up to them whether they want to discuss it or not.

There is, however, some advantage to be gained from having a more widely open discourse about menstruation in school. The students obviously want to learn about growing up and having periods. It is a transitional and sometimes difficult time in the course of their life. One of my adult interviewees, who was a retired school nurse, reflected, as follows, on her time teaching school-students about growing up:

> Yes, I always ask them, you know…when you go in, I say: 'We're going to talk about periods and growing up today for girls, and boys as well', and… erm…'What do you know? Tell me some of the things you know about growing up for girls', and the boys would all say: 'Oh, having periods'. They might…they would probably have done a little bit of preparatory work with the teachers beforehand…just a bit, not too much…but a lot of them say, 'Oh, my mum's told me'…even the boys have said, 'My mum's told me', and a lot of the girls would say, 'Oh, yeah: mum's told me about it, and she's sat down and explained to me about it', and they seem to be quite calm about it, because they know, and I think that is a really good…a good thing. (F3E)

School plays a key role in providing informed opinion about menstruation. Yet female interviewees who had left school at the time of the interview remembered the menstrual education they had in school as mostly scant and non-specific:

> F8C: […] we are talking about the early 80s, so it's probably very different to how they have it today in schools…but they didn't really talk about the women's side … We did talk about the biology side of it, reproduction kind-of-thing…and then I do remember watching this video on a woman giving birth, and it being the most horrific thing I'd seen…and that was

about it really…We didn't really have sex education in how I envisage it is more today in schools.

F11B: I think it was all at school, to be honest. I don't really remember my mum talking to me about it, or anything, and I remember being told that you lose about six table-spoons of blood, and it seemed like loads and loads, and I imagined it all sort-of gushing out, and everything…and then, when it happens, it's not like that at all…so it's built up like this big scary thing, and then when it happens, and you have your first period, it just kind-of…you get on with it, and it's nothing big at all.

Even after they had, in different ways, been taught about menstruation, as described earlier, some female school students I interviewed were worried about starting their periods, perhaps indicating a need for schools to offer emotional support and preparation for the menarche as well:

F4A: I'm just scared of *starting* really […]'cause, like, I go to town loads with my friends, and I'm, like, 'Oh, I don't want to start while I'm there'. I'd rather start when I'm at home, and alone. You know, like, well, not alone, but that I have no friends round or anything. […] I wouldn't like to have started, if I was somewhere where I wasn't with my mum, because when you first start, I think I'd find it quite hard to talk about it to anyone else, like a nurse at school.

In this instance the girl wanted only the support of her mother. However, during the interview below, it was her friend who offered her some reassurance and honest advice:

F5A: Sometimes it's really really painful [turns to F4A]…sorry, but you were just saying things like, 'People keep telling me it's horrible'. It's not always, but it is a bit sometimes.

This kind of female bonding and peer support is most common in schools at times when all the students are going through similar experiences together. Young women discuss menstruation as a means of learning about how to deal with their bodies and how to solve the many practical problems that cause concern. This is particularly the case during a girl's

school years, when she might be sensitive to the knowing looks of her peers who, through having had similar experiences, may guess her secret but can also offer support.

Menstrual Talk in the School Environment

School can be a difficult environment for dealing with a period, especially in cases where leaving the classroom to change a tampon or pad is not easy, without the girl revealing her situation by making a special request to go to the toilet. Even then, there are the practical issues of how to carry necessary items around and at the same time keep them out of sight. It is here that teenage girls first learn to manage their bleeding bodies, which can expose them and let them down.[1] In the school environment this managing of the bleeding body can also extend to the way in which girls talk about their periods.

VLN: Why do you think people use these different names and ways of saying 'having a period'?
F4A: Erm, I think, like, I dunno. Some people might think it's personal if you say, like, [lowers voice] 'period', or something.
F5A: Yeah. It makes it not so much of a problem, trying to…[cover it up]
F4A: Yeah. They may not want everyone to know what they mean by it, or something.

This use of alternative terminology was not limited to girls; the boys too were aware of different ways of referring to menstruation.

VLN: I want you to list for me as many different names or ways of saying 'having a period' that you can.
M3A: Alright.
VLN: Any names at all […]
M3A: Erm…'on the rag'.

[1] In my own secondary school days (the mid-1990s), girls would hide tampons up their sleeves. One day, my friend dropped a tampon in class. The tampon slid out of her sleeve, and the female teacher asked, in front our small group, whether my friend 'had lost something'. Too embarrassed to bend down and pick it up, my friend denied all knowledge of the tampon on the floor.

M4A: Yeah.
M5A: 'On the blob'.

'Blob' and 'rag' were terms most popular in the 18–30 age group and the school students' awareness of them is evidence of how broader popular discourses about the naming of menstruation are learnt. Overall terms which referred to 'rag' were the third most frequently cited term for menstruation given by 19 % of questionnaire respondents. 'Blob' was also very popular with 18.1 % of respondents giving phrases such as 'on the blob' in their questionnaire responses. Further discussion about the different names for menstruation can be found in Chap. 8, and also the Appendix A in this book). Among the school students, 'rainbow' and 'rainbow kissing' were also concepts in common parlance.[2] As the girls told me:

F4A: All boys say, 'Oh are you on your "Rainbow"?', or summat like that.
VLN: What is that, 'Rainbow'?
F4A: I don't know. Everyone just says, 'Are you on your "Rainbow"?', and we're all, like, 'What?'

However, the boys' terms were not as innocuous as they first appeared. I was told later that 'rainbow kissing' was the act of cunnilingus performed on a menstruating woman. The term was not restricted to the school in which I carried out my research, but occurred in other schools as well in the research area. One of my female participants (aged over 60), who had worked as a school nurse, commented:

VLN: I was looking at your questionnaire, and I got back on a lot of questionnaires [from school students] about 'rainbow kissing' […]
F3E: Yes, I did…you see, because I mentioned that…because it was something that the Year 6 students…you know, the top juniors, if they wanted to try to shock you … you know, if you were standing…and

[2] Common also was a phrase which came up throughout the research in school: 'get your brolly [umbrella] out' or 'get your brolly out, don't slip'. Both boys and girls were aware of this phrase, and some equated it to a gush of blood (like rain):
M3A: I don't know, I just think they think it's like a gush of blood.
VLN: Yeah.
M5A: That's just gonna [going to] go 'whoosh' [laughter].

I mean, I'm really unshockable, 'cause I think I must have heard everything before, that people tell you…and they used to say: 'Hey, Miss, do you know what "rainbow kissing" is, then?', and I'd say: 'No, I don't know, but you do, don't you? Are you going to tell me?', and the teachers would be getting a little bit…erm…uncomfortable, you know, but what they used to… Do you know about 'rainbow kissing'?

VLN: No.

F3E: No? Right. Apparently it's…erm…when the girl has a period, and then they fondle and they kiss the genital area. Now that is something that I couldn't quite understand, where they got the pleasure from, you know, to me…but it's something that seems to be on the up, and I did say to them that…you know, depending on the age that they were…that of course you can pass-over sexually transmitted infections by bodily fluids, and you have to be careful what you are doing…I tried to get it through that way…you know, that about the health aspect of it. But, yes: it seems to be that they just like to kiss and fondle, and…when somebody has a period…kiss the genital area.

These discourses appeared to be used by the school students in a brazen attempt to shock, since they themselves clearly saw 'rainbow kissing' as a sexual practice that was both alarming and unacceptable. Sometimes the school students put the narratives forward as though they were true and had taken place within the recent past, in the manner of what folklorists have designated 'cautionary tales' or 'contemporary legends': narratives dealing with the problems and risks of modern-day society that are presented and told as if they had happened to a friend, or even a non-specific 'friend of a friend'.[3]

However, the concept of 'rainbow kissing' appears to have also merged with another contemporary legend, that of the 'soggy biscuit', where boys in a group are reported to masturbate over a biscuit, and the last one to finish has to eat the biscuit, complete with semen.[4] This had become the

[3] The alleged time between the purported event and the telling and transmission of the legend is short, and often the location of the event is local. Contemporary legends are never traceable to an exact source, they have always happened to a 'friend of a friend', and not directly to the narrator (Bennett 2005, p. xi).

[4] Soggy Biscuit: 'A male masturbating game. Contestants all jack off onto a digestive biscuit. Whoever shoots his load first onto the biscuit is deemed the winner! The loser…. eats the biscuit' [sic] www.urbandictionary.com. Accessed 19 January 2009.

legend of the 'rainbow biscuit', and male school students spoke as follows concerning this:

> M2A: Well, there's a game, I can't remember how you play it though, but it's quite a …I can't remember. [To M1A] Do you know what it is? It's a game…'Rainbow Biscuit', or something.
> M1A: Yeah, it's supposed to be a game, but it's…it sounds really sick. It's when the boys have to drink it or something.
> M2A: Oh yeah.
> M1A: It's horrible.
> M2A: It's horrible, or something, on a biscuit, or something.
> VLN: Right…
> M1A: Yeah, I don't know about it really.
> M2A: Or something like that.[5]

The purpose of these stories is to disgust or 'gross out' their listeners. The narrator thinks of the most controversial things possible and then explores these further by taking them beyond the bounds of what is socially acceptable. As Elissa Henken puts it:

> When a gross-out movie such as 'American Pie' shows one character masturbate with an apple pie and another drink a beer glass of ejaculate, how much further must legends go to get a response? In order to catch the attention of a quickly bored and blasé audience, the narrative must be heightened. (Henken 2002, p. 272)

If we compare the narrative about 'rainbow biscuit', given by the school-students M1A and M2A, with the one below given by an older male participant, it is possible that narratives about menstrual sex have evolved from 'grossed out' to become more shocking in the present day, when young people have wide access to the Internet and pornography:

> M1D: There was also…was there something with 'Hell's Angels'?… I remember that they used to have badges, and one of them was you had to

[5] I was also provided with a similar narrative (M3E, adult, 60 plus) in a jocular aside, about the bacon sandwiches prepared by one particular menstruating woman which were greatly valued for their positively enhanced flavour [M3E].

have sex with a menstruating woman was one […] you had 'Red Wings' after that. So there has always been that sort of association, I suppose, with it being mysterious or an unpleasantness perhaps…say, it's quite a macho thing to do that, to put yourself in that position.

Contemporary legends are also often concerned with bodily functions, such as sex and excretion, the transgressing of bodily boundaries and the contamination of food. In addition, there are narratives that focus on exposure and being shamed in public, a theme which also occurred in some stories I collected from school students. Here, for example, are two Year 8 boys:

M5A: Erm…well, I was at [the swimming baths]…I didn't even know this girl, but she was swimming, and…erm…this…her tampon fell out into the bottom of the pool, and it weren't very pleasant.

M2A: Hmmm…I've heard one about going swimming and [it] getting [in] the entire pool and stuff, and it all going everywhere […] like…it all, everything comes out and it's all around.

It may be that the young men who I interviewed were 'acting up' for me, a female researcher in her twenties. However, similar stories were also recalled by the female students and were given as reasons why a girl cannot, or should not, carry out a specific activity when she is on her period:

F4A: Can you still go swimming if you're 'on it'? 'cause some people say you can't and some…'cause all the boys, when we were doing PD[E], they said…'you can't go swimming 'cause everywhere you swim, you'll just have a pool of red following you around.'

The 'pool of red' would indicate a fear in the girl that if she is menstruating it will become known to others in the pool. Other stories were gorier:

VLN: I've read on one of the questionnaires that a girl 'can't swim with sharks', because she'd get attacked. Have you heard that before?

M5A: Oh yeah; that's a joke!

M3A: Sharks aren't attracted to blood, anyway, are they?

M4A: Yeah.
M5A: Yeah, they are.
M3A: Is it the smell?
M5A: No, it's just, like, what people say, because sharks are, like, attracted to blood, aren't they?[6]

In this way, the male school students were providing their own reasons as to why a girl is unable to carry out a particular activity, in this case swimming. Since they had no real practical knowledge of sanitary protection, and had been excluded from the teaching on menstruation, because of their gender, the ideas they arrived at were often far-fetched, yet provided a means of articulating and understanding a physical process that was alien to their own bodies.

The gulf separating the schoolboys in this study from the realities of female life can also be seen in their lack of full awareness of the physiology of the female reproductive system. One of their narratives was based on the putatively vast and unimaginable size of the vagina. This motif, known elsewhere as 'vagina infinita',[7] also featured in their jokes and euphemisms. The fear of tampons getting lost, or stuck in the body, is linked to ideas about the size and capacity of the vagina. Misunderstanding of the physiology of the female reproductive organs was, however, also evident in girls' narratives. In the following passage, knowledge about Toxic Shock Syndrome is followed by concerns about tampons 'getting lost' in the body:

[6] M3B recalled a further legend of menstrual contemporary legend, which had come up in the film 'Anchorman' [2004]: 'It was one of Brick's lines, you know the dumb guy. He just goes: "Bears can smell their periods!" […] But then you think about it for two seconds and cities would just be, like, overwhelmed with bears … they'd be everywhere'. In the movie, Brick was objecting to the presence of women in TV station newsrooms. His actual lines were: 'I read somewhere their periods attract bears. Bears can smell the menstruation.'

[7] *Vagina infinita*, Latin for 'infinite vagina', is a term used by Whatley and Henken (2000, pp. 118–21): 'The view of the vagina as huge and engulfing appears in jokes and stories about the "vagina infinita". For example, a bawdy folksong, referring to a woman of "large dimension", tells how the entire soccer team went in last night and "none has yet come out of it". Folklore depicts the vagina as capable of being of enormous size, in which anything might become lost or stored'. The term echoes the older *Vagina dentata*: (OED) 'the motif or theme of a vagina equipped with teeth which occurs in myth, folklore, and fantasy, and is said to symbolize fear of castration, the dangers of sexual intercourse, of birth or rebirth, etc.' The motif is logged in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* as F547.1.1 'Vagina dentata' (Thompson 1958, vol. 3, p. 164).

F6A: If you leave them [tampons] in too long, you can get, like…I can't remember what it's called, but like a virus or something.

VLN: Yeah.

F6A: And they can, like, disappear.

VLN: Disappear?

F6A: If you, like, swim too far, they wander off.

F7A: I read in a magazine that…erm…a girl fainted, 'cause she had it in too long.

VLN: Yeah.

F6A: I got told that if you shove a tampon in too far, then it can, like… might disappear into your body.

VLN: Just get lost somewhere?

F6A: Yeah, I watched it on 'Casualty' [a United Kingdom television hospital drama] that she had something in her stomach and it turned out to be a tampon.

Adult respondents also supplied some contemporary legends, although often these were known to be untrue:

M3B: I mean, there has definitely got to be horror stories, I'm pretty sure I remember one…it's never a kid at your school; it's always a girl at someone else's school, who your cousin knows, or something like that…and I'm sure there was a story about a girl's tampon falling out in Assembly, or something…something bollocks, but it was one of those things, you know…urban myths that spread around the whole school. But, like I say, I don't remember specific examples, but you can guarantee that there are, because it's kind-of an easy shot, isn't it?

F4C: I do remember them always having a funny story, and we lived near a train line—the main line down to London—and I always remember them talking about—and all of them—it seemed to have happened to all of them—so it was obviously just folklore, you know—it obviously hadn't happened to anybody at all, but I remember them saying it—that somebody had thrown a sanitary towel off the train, and it hit one of them in the face!…you know…but every group of lads knew this story.

These cautionary tales, or contemporary legends, provide guidance to acceptable behaviour. They serve as a means of control, articulating the

consequences of what might happen if a woman does not manage her menstruation properly, or dispose of her tampon responsibly, and are arguably a routine part of the status passage of adolescence. They also provide an insight into the interplay of ideas on blood, sex and women's bodies in the jokes and practical joking that formed a major element in the repertoire of menstrual lore available to the young people in my study.

Practical joking concerning menstruation begins early in secondary school, when adolescents are first learning about, and anticipating, the changes of puberty. When I interviewed the school students, many made reference to the fact that male students rummage through the school bags of their female counterparts in order to see what they can find, a practice also noted by Laura Fingerson (2006, p. 129) in her research about menstruation. If they find menstrual products, then these are sometimes taken out and thrown around the classroom, or discussed in loud voices, as in the following example:

VLN: Okay. And also on the questionnaire, it said that some boys joke around with pads and tampons that they find in a girl's bag. Does that happen?
M1A: Yeah, that's true; I've seen that before.
M2A: Yeah, I've heard people do it.
VLN: Yeah? What do they do with them?
M1A: They, like, put them on people, and stuff.
M2A: But not, not…
M1A: Like, just on their shoulder, or in their bag, and stuff.
M2A: On their shoulders, or on their back, without them knowing…or something like that.
F6A: Well, they'll stick tampons up their nose.
VLN: Will they?
F6A: Or they'll, like, kick the pads across the floor, as a football.

In another instance a male in the 18–30 years old category recalled:

M1B: […] me and my brothers used to go through my mum's bag when we were kids. We used to sort-of pretend that they [tampons] were cigars and cigarettes, and things, because we were young lads, and I'd probably… I would probably say that if I was at home now with my two brothers, and we went through my mum's bag and found one, one of us three would pretend that we were smoking it. I would genuinely stand by that today, we

would do it…one of us would, 'cause we are just daft, and it does just ring of that daftness about…about blokes.

Fingerson (2006, p. 129) argues that this type of practical joking places the boys in a more powerful position, as they are violating the girls' personal space. However, these interactions are complex and cannot simply be read as the boys using their limited knowledge of menstruation as a means to subordinate the girls. As I shall explore later, in Chap. 9, there is also a certain degree of 'power play', in which the out-of-place mentioning of a 'sensitive' subject can bring about a shift in the dynamics of a social situation.

Bearing this in mind, some of the young people I interviewed reported that this type of practical joking was carried out in school by girls as well as boys:

M5A: Someone in our form, like, a girl… in fact, it was a girl, like, messing around with them, sticking them on boys' backs, and, like…not used ones, obviously…but …

VLN: But…that was a girl doing it?

M5A: Yeah, and all the other girls were laughing.

VLN: Yeah. Why do you think they did that?

M5A: They weren't being mean, or anything. They were just joking around, but they were…it was…I was surprised to see it, actually.

M4A: Yeah, I was.

The behaviour of these girls, which the boys found 'surprising', represents a disruption of their gendered teasing. Rather than the boys exercising sole power through gross denigratory talk and joking, some girls mimicked them in order to disrupt their play. Similar behaviour is reported by Fingerson (2006, pp. 130–1), who reports that the girls used their menstruation as a 'power resource' in mixed-gendered interactions. 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. In the same way that, as sociologists of deviance have long since taught us (Becker 1963), social control inexorably produces deviance, concealment equally necessarily produces discovery, and that which was hidden is revealed.

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5

Managing Menstruation: The Menarche and Status Passage

The anticipation of 'starting' and the focus of interest that it becomes for many young people underline just how important the menarche is as a life-cycle event. As such, it can be understood in terms of the sociological concept of a 'status passage' (Glaser and Strauss 1971; see also Newton 2012).

A 'status passage' is a symbolic change, which may, or may not, be accompanied by a physical change, and which marks a transition point with respect to the way a person is perceived by others. Often, but not always, the transition is linked to age and symbolizes a milestone passed during the course of an individual's journey through life. Depending on the transition involved, which may be childhood to adulthood, from single to married, from pregnant woman to new mother, the individual can move up or down the social status hierarchy, and in so doing, gain or lose influence over others.

Religious rites of transition, such as those of the Catholic Church, existed for many centuries before early twentieth-century anthropologists began to pay attention to social transitions, such as birth, puberty, adulthood and death, and how they were marked by ceremonial rituals. Arnold Van Gennep developed the idea of 'rites of passage', which he saw as

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marking out three phases of 'passing' from one social identity to another, the 'preliminal' (leaving one state), 'liminal' (approaching another state) and 'postliminal' (being incorporated into the new state). Van Gennep adduced many examples of 'rites of passage', or status change, from all parts of the world, and published them in *Les rites de passage* (1909). The work did not, however, achieve any great acclaim in the Anglophone world until 1960, when it was published in English translation and strongly promoted by the University of Manchester Department of Social Anthropology.[1]

For women, the menarche signals the beginning of their reproductive life-cycle. In the school environment it is marked by initiation and entry into a new group. Puberty is a stage during which adolescents have to cope with their changing bodies as well as learn about and explore the social world and their position in it.

Using Van Gennep's three-fold model, we may think of the 'preliminal stage' as when girls are being prepared for menstruation by their mothers and by their school. The 'liminal stage' (transition) is marked by the menarche, when the girl is on the threshold of her adult life, but neither yet inside it nor outside it, until she passes into the 'postliminal stage', when she is incorporated and accepted as a member of the new group. Here the girl joins her peers who have already started to menstruate, leaving her less mature peers behind.

Contemporary UK society does not mark the menarche with any distinct 'ceremony'. However, the onset of menstruation signals a social transition for the girl. She is no longer a child and she has moved into what Van Gennep (1960, p. 65) calls 'physiological puberty', signalled by the menarche, which might happen at different ages for children, even though they are peers. The girl then moves into 'social puberty', which is reached when, in the eyes of the society, she is deemed to have completed the transition from child to adult. Van Gennep used the age at which an individual can marry as an indicator of social puberty, but in our society this would probably need to be reconceptualized as the age of sexual consent (16 in the UK in 2015). Social puberty often does not coincide with physiological puberty, and often lags behind, but within

[1] Cf. N. Journet (2001) 'Les rites de passage', *Sciences Humaines*, N°112 (Janvier).

the school environment the obvious signs of maturity, such as being taller, or having developed breasts, do give the individual more social status and respect, described as 'a bit of an elitist thing' by some study participants (Newton 2012).

A number of my interviewees commented on how the menarche marked a change in status for a girl, not only physically, but also socially. There might be a division between friendship groups, and a girl who is physically more mature than her peers might relate to them differently, or be seen by her peers to be different. Many of the female school students mentioned that girls were eager to start their periods, recognizing that to be 'grown up' and 'mature' enhances their status in the social environment of the school:

> F6A: When they start, they are, like, to all their friends. They think they are better, 'cause they've started, and, like, say, other people haven't.
> VLN: Yeah.
> F6A: It's, like: 'Oh, I'm growing up, and you're not'.

Adult women in my survey reflected on their time at school and the feeling of competition between female friends, no one wishing to be the last one to start:

> F6B (18–30): Yeah, it was strange. There was me and three other girls who were good friends at school, and I don't think I was the first one to start, but I definitely felt there was a sort of competition. I didn't want to be the last one out of the four of us to start. I don't know why. Yeah, it's peculiar isn't it, when you look back.

Thus we see a separation between the more physically mature girls and the ones who have yet to start their periods. A late menarche can prove problematic for teenage girls, and the school students pointed out the concern of being physically immature in relation to their peers:

> VLN: So, it's a desirable thing to have started, rather than being a late starter?
> F7A: Yeah, 'cause, like, they say that the girls who haven't started haven't got big tits, and stuff.

VLN: Do you think it's difficult, then, for girls who don't start, who start later?

F7A: Yeah.

F6A: Yeah, 'cause, say, like, other people that have started might call other people immature…the way they act.

This concept of being physically mature and having 'big tits' demonstrates a recognition that the girls have acquired sexual agency. Maturation has brought heterosexualization. The girls have been transformed into sexual beings.

In the school where I did part of my research, the students highlighted the menarche as a status changer with respect to the social standing and behaviour of girls 'who had started', as against those who 'had not'. There was a perception that this apparent sexual maturity would mean that the girls 'act differently':

F8A: I think, yeah. In our class, you can kind-o' tell who has and who hasn't. You kind-of get, like, more mature.

F9A: Yeah.

VLN: Do they act differently? Or dress differently?

F8A: Not dress differently, but act differently.

'Maturity', in its connections with sexuality and being a more physically adult young woman, was not always welcomed, however. This perhaps reflects the tensions that surround the menarche as a 'status passage' and the ways in which society views the young sexual body. This did not always sit comfortably with the girls, and some school students commented that when a girl was on her period she would tend to dress down and play down her new-found status by avoiding makeup and tight clothes:

VLN: Would you say she changes the way she conducts herself? Does she dress differently, or…?

F7A: No. Probably with, like, makeup…like, have none on.

F6A: Or just, like, wear baggy trousers and baggy tops, and stuff.

Ideas about sexual unavailability at the time of menstruation may also influence these types of attitudes. The school students did express an

awareness of conventions about the avoidance of sex during menstruation, although it was unclear where these had been learnt.

VLN: Are there certain things that a girl shouldn't do when she's on her period?
F6A: Yeah, like not have sex, or anything
VLN: Yeah, why is that?
F6A: I dunno…it's just…You just, like, don't do anything.
M4A: And not many girls, like, want to have sex.
M5A: No, because it might be discomfortable and a bit messy again. [Laughter].
M3A: A bit ugly!

Menstrual sex as 'messy' and a 'bit ugly' was referred to in the wider data. Many of the interviewees commented on the need to avoid sex during menstruation, which was seen as a time of sexual unavailability and/or undesirability. A menstruating woman, visibly fertile, as indicated by her menstrual flow, was seen as out-of-bounds. Additionally, at the onset of their period, many women feel that they are sexually undesirable, and less 'clean'. This ceases at the end of the period, when her usual state of being 'off' resumes.

Thus, menstruation can be seen as a status passage in two respects: Firstly, the menarche marks the physical transition from being an immature girl to a new status as a potentially child-bearing woman. Second, that woman must then face monthly stigmatization if she fails to manage her bodily functions while she is 'on'. Thus every menstruation is a *rite de passage* of sorts.

Menstruation as a Monthly Status-Passage

From the menarche to the menopause, menstruation is a monthly status-passage. This process involves women hiding their bleeding bodies to 'pass' as though they are not menstruating (even though they are); as Vostral notes: 'the phenomenon of passing […] is traditionally associated with a person moving from one identity to another' (2008, p. 3).

In this case, passing involves the use of menstrual hygiene technologies to trap the menstrual flow, as well as the use of painkillers to address any discomfort, and the curtailing of behaviour which might suggest that they are bleeding (for example, hiding sanitary products in bags, pockets and up sleeves instead of carrying them in the open on the way to a public shared toilet, such as might be in the workplace). Time and effort are put into managing this monthly ritual of taking care to avoid exposure and shame. These management concerns are impressed on girls in their school years: young women must learn to 'care' for their bodies and adopt the necessary habits and coping mechanisms as they negotiate their way through their monthly cycles.

Implicit and explicit messages come from all sides to impress upon the girls that menstruation is something to be kept within bounds. There should be no leakage, and all facts should remain hidden and pursued in silence. Any outsider knowledge of them would result in stigma:

> Although most modern cultures do not relegate women to huts when they are menstruating, menstruating women are clearly stigmatized. Few people believe that menstruation should be openly discussed, even within the family household. (Kowalski and Chapple 2000, p. 75)[2]

Thus menstrual etiquette is an established discourse, into which adolescent girls enter and to which they conform to in order to hide their 'stigma' and limit, or avoid, the potential shame of being seen to be menstruating. Because having a period is not an everyday situation, occurring only five days out of every 28 or so, the woman's menstruating self does not align with preconceived perceptions about the 'normal' state of women. She is under pressure to present herself in a standardized manner, in the way people are expected to appear. Erving Goffman (1986, p. 2) points to the judgements that others make about us, based on our appearance:

> When a stranger comes into our presence, then, first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes, his 'social identity' […]. We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands.

[2] See also Newton 2012.

Issues concerning pollution-beliefs and blood 'out of place', concepts about sexuality and sexual availability, the 'occasional' occurrence of menstruation, and the discomfort and perceived problems associated with it, place menstruation in an inferior, undesirable category. Kowalski and Chapple carried out experimental research which examined the social stigma attached to menstruation:

> 28 menstruating and 30 non-menstruating women were interviewed by a male confederate who either was or was not aware of their menstrual condition. […] menstruating women who believed that the interviewer knew they were menstruating perceived that the interviewer liked them less, yet were less motivated to make an impression on him. Non-menstruating women reported more self-presentational motivation and perceived that the interviewer viewed them more positively than he did the menstruating women. (2000, p. 74)

Menstruation is a social stigma, and, from the menarche onwards, girls learn how to manage their menstruation in a public setting in order to ensure that others remain unaware of their condition. There are many aspects of menstrual management; the most pressing of these for my informants was how to hide the fact that they were menstruating:

> F8C: But I think there is still this kind of taboo about it. It's just really stupid, like, if you have to go to the toilet…erm…you know, like, people will pick up their whole handbag and take it with them, or hide them in a packet to go to the toilet—why? Why didn't you just take it out of your bag, and walk to the toilet?

Goffman states that a discreditable person's concern is 'managing information about [their] failing' (1986, p. 42). Thus the potential causes of a menstruating woman's stigma, such as tampons and sanitary protection, must be carefully concealed. If these tell-tale indicators of her menstruation become apparent, the woman becomes open to stigmatization and humiliation. Girls are taught to undertake 'backstage' preparation in order to control 'front-stage' appearance (how others see them). It is not so much menstruation in itself that is the problem, but all the practical concerns it brings with it and the fact that it is 'matter out of place' in public.

A woman must consider how to solve all the practicalities, in addition to 'denying' it by not speaking about it and keeping it invisible by screening her own practices of concealment off from view.

Thus if we view stigma as a 'special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype' (Goffman 1986, p. 4), between individual actualities and conventional expectations, the stereotype of 'female' and 'feminine' can be divided into front-stage *appearances* and backstage *practices*. In the public sphere, women are expected to appear well presented and sexually appealing, and there is no room for the leaking, smelly bodies of the backstage area. Backstage preparations, such as toilet habits and managing menstruation, as well as other activities, such as sex, are kept away from public view. There is thus a gap between how women present themselves and the processes that go towards that management. Menstrual blood out of place signals 'dirty' and is a blemish on both physical appearance and character. Thus it is generally understood that women should show no outward sign of their changing cyclic state. As suggested earlier, this can be viewed as 'passing', in which a woman 'can convincingly cover her identity as someone who possesses a fluctuating, leaky body and present a controlled, orderly, and contained "normal" female body' (Vostral 2008, p. 18).

In school, a student might, for example, plan the times she uses the toilet, alter what she wears in case she 'leaks', and find ways of concealing towels, or tampons, about her person, if she is not allowed to carry her bag out of the classroom. Such subterfuges are often necessary when a heavy social price is exacted if a woman fails to contain her menstruation.

Indeed, in popular literature the revelation of menstruation is a powerful image, no more so than in Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), a novel which dramatizes the humiliation that a lack of menstrual knowledge can cause. The narrative opens in the Baker Street Grammar School in Chamberlain, USA, where Carrie White and other girls are in the locker room, showering after gym class. Carrie had been told nothing of menstruation. She turned off the shower, stepped out, which is when all the other girls 'saw the blood running down her leg' and began to shout '*Per*-iod!' in a series of catcalls. Carrie's fellow classmates then unite in humiliating her by throwing tampons and towels at the bewildered girl, shouting at her to control her flow. The book was turned into a film in

1967 directed by Brian De Palma and starring Sissy Spacek and opens with this scene in the communal school showers. In the later 2013 film version, directed by Kimberly Peirce, Carrie's humiliation is captured on video by her peers, and, in a contemporary twist, she is publically shamed on the Internet.

Carrie's lack of knowledge about menstruation—because of her fundamentalist mother—prevented her from performing the necessary tasks required to control her flow of blood, and she was unable to act on her peers' orders to clean herself up. The scene presents an extreme dramatization of the pressures that can be placed on a girl at menarche: the expectation that once a girl starts her periods she should take care of her body with as little public commotion, and visibility, as possible, is present right at the onset.

With regard to maintaining menstrual etiquette, there can also be a level of self-policing among women. The quote below from my data is an example of this, and features a young woman in the 18–30 years age category, talking of the time that her mother-in-law hid her tampons:

> F12B: I think I put in the questionnaire about my mother-in-law […] I was so pissed off…I was really pissed off, because I put them in the bathroom, cause we were staying at their house, me and my husband and my son, who is…he was under two at the time, and I didn't want to wake him up in the night by searching for tampons, so I put them in the bathroom, and I got up in the morning, and I was desperate for one, and they weren't there. And I was, like: '[calls husband], where have they gone? Where are they?', and he said: 'Oh, I think my mum must have hidden them', and later she said to me: 'Oh, yes; I put them in my bedroom, because I didn't think you'd want them in the bathroom.' And I just thought: 'Oh! I need them!' […] It's only my father-in-law that would have seen them and been bothered!

Most women will recognize how they 'should' behave during menstruation. The standards are already set out for them and observed by the vast majority of women in society. Goffman makes a similar point, allowing for the gendered language of the time:

> The standards [an individual] has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably

> causing him […] to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be. Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess. (1986, p. 7)

My interviewees also discussed instances in which they wanted to control personal information about their menstruating status, only talking about, and sharing it, when they wished to. Accidental exposure was seen as embarrassing:

> F2C: I must admit: do you know? I pulled something out of my bag, and a 'Lil-Lets' shot across the room, and there was a lad in there, and I just sort-of looked at it, and I was embarrassed, but he didn't say anything… but I was, like: 'Oh my God! One's escaped!' [Laughter]. And it was so … it's silly, but I was quite put out by it, but nothing was said, and, I don't know, I presume he saw it, but I was, like: 'Oh dear!'

A further aspect of menstrual management and 'passing' which young women learn is how to manage period-pain and other symptoms. In addition to being told about pain-killers by my respondents, I was also told of remedies which could be classified as 'folk remedies'. These included 'peppermint in hot water', 'evening primrose', 'I take Omega 3' [fatty acid], and 'my mum always used to have Yeast-Vite' [thiamine hydrochloride]. One interviewee reported the following 'remedy':

> F6C: […] I remember one of the excuses in Sixth Form[3] to try and get out of games: 'Oh, I feel a bit poorly—I've got my period'. The teacher had this book, and she was a very strict lady, and she'd say: 'Right what you have to do is you have to go lean against this wall, and put your legs out at an angle', and apparently it tilts your pelvis, and so the contractions don't hurt as much. So instead of people going: 'Oh, good! I can go and have a fag now', she'd use to say: 'Right! Go and lean against the wall' [laughs].

Some women may choose to use hormonal contraception to control or limit their bleeding in addition to using it for pregnancy avoidance. Some

[3] Also known as Year 12 and 13 in the British schooling system. Students are aged 16–18 years old.

methods of contraception, however, such as the Long Acting Reversible Contraceptives (e.g. intrauterine contraception [IUD and IUS], a subdermal contraceptive implant, or contraceptive injections) can change bleeding patterns, which can in itself be problematic, in that it is essentially experienced as, and subject to, the same restrictions and issues as a menstrual period. As one informant told me:

> F10B: For me, it's a pain in the arse, and I hate it because I had the pleasure of not having periods for years, and now the hormones in my implant have just sent me wappy, and I hate it, and so all the sort-of stories about people having accidents and things are all happening to me now, and it's horrible, and I hate it!

Irregular bleeding can be prolonged, which will affect many aspects of the lives of women who experience it.[4] In the most mundane way, sanitary products are costly, even for women with a normal monthly bleeding pattern. If protection is needed on a daily basis over quite some time, some young women find this expense difficult to sustain. In these instances 'passing' as not bleeding also becomes ever more problematic. In addition, some contraception makes bleeding difficult to deal with, because of the unpredictability of when it will begin and end. This often determines the clothes that women who are affected choose to wear, and may generally undermine their front-stage self-confidence.

Menstrual management and 'body watching' starts before the menarche, at a time when adolescents are anticipating the arrival of menstruation. The management of menstruation then continues on a monthly basis, perhaps with some breaks in the child-bearing years, until post-menopause. Thus at every stage in their life-cycle, from menarche to menopause, women's bodies are acted upon and subject to restrictions about how they should look, feel, behave. Young women face stigmatization if they have a late menarche and are seen to be physically immature in relation to their peers. Menstruation, and showing signs of bleeding, are stigmatized in themselves. The data reveal some generational differences in this respect. As I shall discuss in

[4] The data in the present study did not focus on the use of contraceptives in bleeding. For discussion of this aspect, see Hoggart and Newton 2013; Hoggart et al. 2013; Newton and Hoggart 2015.

Chap. 6, the adolescents I interviewed were probably better informed and prepared than perhaps women in the over-60 group had been, when they were young and experiencing the menarche. However, today's girls are still worried about when and where they will start, and whether it will cause distress, pain, or embarrassment. Growing up on the receiving end of the same messages from the media, school and elsewhere, they share the same fears of stigmatization and embarrassment.

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6

Talking About My Menstruation: A Generational Comparison

Starting her periods is a salient life event for a woman, and even though attitudes towards menstruation and the management of the menstruating body may have changed over the generations, it remains a felt and memorable part of adolescence. Here a woman from the 46–60 years old category of respondents recalls starting her periods:

> F3D: I was a month after my 10th birthday, and I was—obviously I felt a bit damp, and I went to the toilet—and in those days we wore navy-blue knickers—'bloomers'—and I had a job fathoming out what it was at first. I felt it, and blood came away on my hands, and I just about screamed the house down, because I thought I was dying.

Although not all experiences I found in my fieldwork were as extreme as those that she describes, many accounts of the menarche were characterized by a degree of shock. 'Starting' appears to be a life-changing event that most women do not forget. In this chapter I shall discuss how attitudes towards menstruation are revealed by female respondents in accounts of their experiences of menarche, and other significant menstrual events in their life, and whether they have changed, or remained constant, over the years.

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'Starting': Similarities in Experience

A woman's feelings about menstruation are shaped by how she came to know about it and how she experienced her own menarche. It is, therefore, important to understand her sources of information, her reaction to that information, and her narratives of personal experience of the menarche. My interviewees shared their own stories with me, and some of them also told me about the experiences of their friends.

In the following account, a woman who was over 60 at the time of the interview recalled struggling with her first period because it was painful:

> F5E: I was just 13, when I started. I think it would probably be the day after my 13th birthday, and we'd been on holiday the week before to the Isle of Wight, and I'd had the most awful stomach pain, and we were going round the Isle of Wight in a bus, sight-seeing, and I was just lying on the seat groaning, and my mother kept saying: 'Sit up. Look at the view. Sit up! Look at the view! Stop lying down!'. And, anyway, she didn't seem to be able to link the pain I'd had with anything particularly…or it didn't seem to me…she never said to me: 'Oh, it might be that you're going to start your periods'—never said anything like that. So, the week later, of course I woke up in bed at my grandmother's absolutely flooded, and…erm…I was too embarrassed to say anything, so I padded my knickers out with toilet paper, or something… […] I don't know what I used. It could have been hankies, or something, and I went to school, highly embarrassed, scared to move all day. Anyway, when I came home, my grandmother had obviously seen the state of the bed, and she gave me half-a-crown, which was 2/6 in old money, and said: 'You'd better go to the chemist and buy what you need', and I didn't really know what I needed [laughs]. And that was as much as was ever said to me about it, and that was it: I was given half-a-crown every month to go and buy what I needed.

This participant's account of 'starting' was poignantly remembered. In this instance she felt unprepared and embarrassed. This was not resolved when she was given the money to buy proper supplies without any explanation. Because she felt that no one had prepared her for starting her periods, this interviewee later recalled trying very hard to prepare her own daughter.

Starting unexpectedly was a common theme, as was the fear of exposure. Some narratives about the menarche revealed what the interviewees considered to have been a betrayal of trust. While they had not wanted anyone else besides their mother to know that they had 'started', their mother had nevertheless passed this information around, to their embarrassment:

> F11B: I remember being quite upset, because it was a shock…and feeling…I remember feeling like…'cause you put pads on, and everything, and you tell your mum, and you know, you say: 'Don't tell anybody else, 'cause I'm really embarrassed'…and walking downstairs…and I heard [step-dad] saying: 'I hear you've turned into a young lady'.

> F2C: I remember sitting on the stairs at home, talking to my mum, and I'd got a dress on, and she just went: 'Oh! […] You've started your periods', and I hadn't realized, and there was blood on my pants, and she made such a fuss about it, and my mum and dad were split up, and I remember her ringing my dad that night, and I could hear her on the phone, and she'd rung him specially to tell him that my periods had started, and I was…I felt physically sick, and yet two months before that we'd been to Wales on holiday, and I can remember thinking there was something wrong with me, because I'd been having bits of blood there, but didn't tell me mum—I didn't find it easy. Me mum would have talked to me about it, but me mum always had a way of embarrassing me.

The menarche is an experience shared by girls, which marks one of the transitions from childhood to bodily adulthood; however, the transition is not always easy. A number of respondents reported that it had been stressful, and they had not all felt prepared emotionally for the change. In some cases this even occurred if there had been open discussion in the home about menstruation. The following passage is taken from an interview with three generations of the same family, although the exchange here is between daughter and mother. Despite previous honest and free discourse, the daughter still found it difficult to articulate what her periods meant to her, and at first had felt a need to conceal them:

> Daughter (F5B): I can't remember not knowing about it, to be honest, so I think maybe it was just part of knowing about growing up and being a girl, I think. I don't ever remember finding out about it, so it must have just

always been part of conversation about being a girl. Erm…mum had got me books, and things like that, for me a few years before, because I can remember being devastated at the thought of 'that', because it meant you were growing up then, and you had to then be grown up, and I didn't want to be, so I kind-of hid the book in my room for ages and didn't want to acknowledge it, really, and, actually, when I did start, I didn't tell [mum] for months. […] I remember I was doing gymnastics in the garden with [a friend], and I ran upstairs and found out that I had started my period, and instead of telling her or anyone, I just ran home, and hid it from [mum], and changed, and threw my knickers away, and then—just for quite a few months—just dealt with it on my own, and just shoved toilet paper in there, and didn't use anything.

Mother (F4D): I know; I was really hurt, because we were very close, and I was quite hurt that she didn't feel…but when I did talk to her about it, you burst into tears, and you said: 'It's because it means I'm not a little girl any more', didn't you?

In this instance, the difficulties of talking about and dealing with menstruation remained, despite a conscious effort by the mother to make menstruation a more open subject. The girl, who felt shamed by her changing body, did not want to acknowledge that she had 'grown up'.

The forces acting on an adolescent girl are, of course, wider than her immediate family environment, so her experience of the menarche is as much influenced by her broader social context as by her close network of family and peers. She is responsive to, and learns from, already existing discourses about menstrual etiquette. Three examples below show us how daughters remembered their mother's reaction to the news of the menarche. Although the interviewees are from different age groups, all three of them reported similar experiences. Most salient in their memory was either their mother's lack of urgency in coming to provide immediate help, or her failure to provide direct information about what to do.

F12B: I was quite scared. I remember waking up and finding the blood there, and going and saying to my mum: 'Mum, there's blood—I think I've started my period' […] and I remember it was a Sunday, because there was nothing in, we didn't have any tampons or pads or anything in the house, and…erm…it was before the shops were really open on a Sunday, and my

> sister is 11 years older than me, and she'd moved out, and I remember my mum saying: 'Oh, I'll go and see if [my sister] has got any', and…erm… yeah, she brought me these pads, and said: 'Right! You've just got to use these now', and I thought it was forever. […] And I just thought that it was for the rest…that you never knew when it was going to come on, and that you'd just have to wear pads for the rest of your life. So really, I knew nothing, I was very sheltered, I guess.

In this interview (age group 18–30), the mother was poorly prepared for the daughter's menarche, and did not provide her with sufficient information on the use of sanitary pads. The respondent recalled having little knowledge about the physiology of the menstrual cycle, and the practicalities of how it could be managed. The following interviewee (age group 31–45) wanted to tell her mother that she had started her periods, but felt unable to let her father have the same news. Her mother instructed her to go to the bathroom and 'sort herself out', until she was free to come upstairs and help her. This illustrates a theme that regularly crops up in these narratives; menstruation was viewed as something which should be kept between daughters, mothers and sisters:

> F8C: […] my dad used to run his own newsagent's sweet-shop, and we lived in a flat above, and I can always remember the moment…it must have been afternoon time …and I can remember phoning down on the intercom to speak to my mum…erm … to say: 'What do I do?', kind-of-thing, and my dad answering, and saying: 'She's really busy…can't you tell me?'…'No, I can't tell you: I have to talk to my mum—I need to talk to my mum', and I can remember that, and eventually mum coming in, and she's going: 'What? What?'…and I was: 'I'm bleeding', and kind-of-thingy, and so it was kind-of a shock, but not…I didn't cry, or anything too bad: it was more of an 'Okay, what do I do?' kind-of-thing, and mum saying: 'It's okay. I'll be up in a minute. Go to the bathroom—you know, where I showed you those kinds of things', and then, that was it really.

These narratives are about girls who wanted to know more, or receive more support. The menarche appears as a consistently bewildering experience throughout the accounts of the different age groups. In the final interview quotation, below, about 'starting' and sharing the news, the

participant (age group 46–60) also lacked instruction about what to do when she started her periods. She made a point of noting that she regressed in her language, and this suggests that the menarche was both stressful for her, and that she wanted her mother's attention. Her mother's calm response confused the participant in her panic:

> F4D: […] when I did start them, it was Mum who—you were checking the washing, and you found a few blood…little spots of blood in my knickers…
>
> And [Mum] said: 'Darling, have you started your period?', and I said: 'I don't know, I don't think so, I don't know', 'cause I hadn't had pains, or anything, and I went upstairs, and I regressed in my language—because by then I was calling Mum 'Mum'—and I shouted down: 'Mummy! I have'. So Mum said: 'Just get a towel, darling, and I'll be up and show you, and see to you in a minute'. So I got a hand towel, 'cause I didn't know that in the cupboard there were tampons and sanitary towels kept: so when you said 'towel', I thought it was an ordinary towel, so that's how I first started.

When it came to children being educated by their parents about menstruation, my older respondents recalled being told very little. Some younger interviewees told me that their mother had given them a book to read, rather than sitting them down face-to-face to talk about periods. This was particularly common in the 18–30 age group. One explanation for this could be that after the women's health movement began in the 1970s, discourses about menstruation were becoming more open and a greater number of books were being written about the process, aimed at the education of young women. On the other hand, it can also be argued, as suggested by the first quotation below, and by the mother-daughter discussion earlier, that this approach of side-stepping the topic and relying on reading a book for information gives further weight to the idea that menstruation is something difficult to talk about, even within close relationships. Just because there is a book doesn't mean that a young woman will read it:

> F12B: No. They didn't talk about anything—periods, sex, or anything like that. It was very sort-of…it's very bizarre, because my parents are very sort-of liberal, yet they never mentioned anything about it. I think they once said to me: 'Oh, there's a book. Go and read that book', and because

of the way they were, I felt quite embarrassed to even go and look at it. Because it was sort-of quite, you know…it felt a bit… I dunno there was a bit of a…not a stigma, but.

The use of books to educate was also seen as a method of parents dealing with their own embarrassment about the topic. For example, F9B told me: 'I don't know if she [mother] was embarrassed by it, or anything, but she just gave me some, like, books – they were only, like, very little thin books—"Yes, read those, and that'll be it"'.

In addition to not being told about menstruation by their parents, some of the older interviewees told me that they had found out for themselves about periods, only later to be told that they were 'too young' to know about such things. The following excerpts demonstrate 'who' is allowed know about menstruation and 'when'. The menarche signals the beginning of a girl's reproductive life cycle and as such is a 'status passage' (Glaser and Strauss 1971), in the sense of a social and symbolic change marking a transition point in how others perceive her (Newton 2012). One of the key considerations here is 'how others perceive her': being privy to knowledge about menstruation was, for the women quoted below, linked to being of the 'correct age', and being *seen* to be of the 'correct age'. That age is socially constructed as a transitional moment marked by the anticipation of starting to bleed and becoming 'a woman'. These excerpts give evidence of a perceived need for girls not to get to know 'too early':

F4D […] I remember being quite young and going swimming with some—it was with Brownies, and there were some Guides there, and they were talking, 'blah blah, blood, blah blah blood', you know, and when we asked what they were talking about they said: 'You're a nipper, you don't know: you're not old enough to know this.'

F3C: Right—first time I learnt about them was when I was in Girl Guides, which was a bit strange, but my parents never told me anything, and we had a lady come and … no…it was two ladies actually … they came and they brought all these leaflets and books, and everything, and explained 'This is what was going to be happening', and I was, like: 'Oh, my God', 'cause it was quite frightening, really. Erm…I went home, and my mum says: 'Oh, you're too young to learn about that sort of thing' …I was 11…

> but then, two weeks later, I started my periods…so if it wasn't for learning the stuff they told me at Guides, I wouldn't have known what was happening …and when it did happen, I was so scared I didn't really realize what was going off […] I wasn't expecting it, you know, 'cause my mum said I was too young to learn about things like that, so when I went to the loo, and there was all this blood and, you know, staining, I thought: 'Oh, my God! I'm dying!'You don't understand what…well, I didn't understand what was going off, and then I went downstairs and told my mum, and she just threw a sanitary towel at me, and said: 'Use this', but she didn't tell me what I was supposed to do with it. I mean, a lot of my friends, they didn't start until they were a bit older, so I was the first one among my group, and it was a bit, you know…nobody to talk to about it, as well, and it was a bit hard.

Although this material suggests that there are similarities in the experiences of menarche of respondents of different age groups, a generational difference is evident when it comes to preparation for menstruation, particular with respect to the freedom to talk about it. This suggests that society has become more open about menstruation. We may, for example, contrast the personal experience narratives of one woman over 60 and another aged between 31 and 45. In the following quotes, the older participant recalls that knowledge of menstruation was seen as highly personal, so that even those in close relationships might be unaware that it was happening to each other:

> F4E: I don't think my mother told me very much to prepare me for my periods. The whole process was kept very quiet. I do remember her telling me that she did not tell my dad when she was on her period, and I certainly didn't mention it to my dad when I was on mine. She used to keep the towels in the airing cupboard right at the back, and the used ones used to be tied up with the loops, and put on the fire. She held it in place with a poker, until they caught alight.

In contrast, a slightly younger woman recalled feeling very supported by her mother:

> F5C [31–45]: I think my mum was very supportive in that way, you know, and I think she'd buy packs of pads, and all that sort of thing, a long time before, and sort-of said, 'You know, these are for you' […]'cause friends

had already as well, so in a way you sort-of want to—want to be able to join the club, really, don't you? So, I think my best friend…er… […], who I was best friends with from the age of seven right the way through school—she started before me, so, you know, she discussed it a lot with me as well, so I picked up things from her.

There are also indications in the interview data as to how and why these changes were taking place. Some women who were mothers themselves with teenage daughters wanted to make the transition easier for their daughters than it had been for them:

VLN: Would you say your daughters had an easier transition then than you did?

F3C: That's the one thing I wanted…erm…I didn't want them to be scared of what was going to happen, so we've always talked about it, and… erm… it's been quite a …quite good for them, I think, because they've been able to talk to me about it and talk to their dad, which a lot of…I can't… I could never talk to my dad about anything, you know, and they'll say: 'Dad, can we have some money for some sanitary towels', or whatever, if they need some… or: 'Can you fetch us some from the shop?', and he'll go and buy them for them. I can't ever imagine my dad going to the supermarket [laughs]. So it's, hopefully, they understand, you know, and if they've got any questions that I can't answer, I go and have a look on the Internet for them, and say: 'Well, there's this site I've put down'…you know, they quite enjoy that as well, so they're getting more involved with it.

How We Used to Manage

Respondents also discussed how women's resources for managing their menstrual flow had changed over the years. Some women exhibited a historical awareness of the fact that in the past women had used washable menstrual cloths to manage their flow. These could be 'torn-up bed sheets, fastened to knickers with safety-pins' (Sutton 1992, p. 17). However, this practice was not one which was recalled from first-hand experience:

VLN: And you were talking about your grandmother, and about using washable menstrual rags.

F6B: Yeah, oh yeah. I think it was—I couldn't remember the name of the material, but she said it was that she just used to put material in her underwear, and then they'd have to wash it out by hand. Which I think isn't—it's quite degrading really to have to do that. Yeah, and then my mum said, 'I think it was only in the '70s they used to have sanitary towels that had some kind of straps to it'.

In the 1970s sanitary protection became less cumbersome and sticky-back pads became available and began to replace the looped pads and menstrual belt. This was seen as a positive advancement:

F4C: my sister had a belt, and she was two-and-a-half years ahead of me… so it would have been 1975 when she probably started, and mine was about 1977, and she had to have a belt with these loops on for the sanitary towel, and somehow in that short period of time they'd developed quickly, and you just had a strip where, you know, you peel the thing off…and they weren't very decent at all, but you just felt that they were…you know, that they were better than having to have a belt—and I remember thinking: 'Oh, thank God for that!', you know—some progress had been made.

The use of tampons offered women freedom to carry on life as normal during their period, including playing sports, swimming, and more mundane activities, such as hair washing and bathing. However, older women often recalled being discouraged from using internal protection when they were teenagers, and it was often their mothers who disapproved of the use of tampons:

FC2: Well, me mum wouldn't let me use tampons, 'cause she said they were for older women, and that you lost your virginity if you used them.

However, once the young women had left school and had greater independence from their families, they had more freedom over their choices of sanitary protection:

VLN: Were you allowed to use tampons?
F2D: No, no, because they would be 'bad' for me.
VLN: Any other explanation?

> F2D: No, I don't think she [mother] went into any other detail, but just that they weren't the right thing to use. Erm…I don't remember using tampons until probably when I left school. When I was about 17, 16…17. Once I'd left school…erm…and I was working, she didn't have as much influence over what I did or what I used, 'cause I would buy my own. Erm…I don't remember using anything other than pads while I was at school.

Nowadays, commonplace usage of disposable items means they are disposed of in sanitary bins, thrown away, and end up in landfill. However, in previous generations, when people commonly had open fires, these products were burnt either on the home fire, or in a communal incinerator. One participant recalled:

> F4D: I can smell the smell of burning sanitary wear, and I can hear Miss [name], she was called, the senior mistress at [school]…and they joked, and we laughed about it afterwards, because she used to be very embarrassed about everything…and we had a girl's assembly, and she said: 'Now, girls, we're having problems with girls putting [whispers 'sanitary towels'] down the toilet, and this is not something that we want. If any girls are putting [whispers 'sanitary towels'] down the toilet, then could they please cease immediately, and use the incinerators designed for the purpose?' She was mortified as she was saying it to us, and we laughed about it for ages afterwards, and we were saying things like: 'Well, have you got your [whispers 'sanitary towel'] on today?' [Laughs]

Some participants also reported knowledge of 'myths' and popular beliefs about menstruation that had been current within living memory (a more in-depth discussion of these is provided in Chap. 7). The most popular of these seems to have been the avoidance of hair washing and bathing during menstruation, which was reported by respondents from older generations, but not by younger ones. These ideas were also reported by Maureen Sutton (1992, p. 26) in her oral history of sexuality and superstition in women's lives in Lincolnshire during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. The decline in the avoidance of hair washing and bathing during menstruation recorded in my later data suggests that established beliefs and vernacular knowledge erode only slowly, but that it is

possible to locate, approximately, when these beliefs began to decline. For example, a woman in the 31–35 age group thought that popular teenage magazines, such as *Jackie*, a UK magazine for girls published between 1964 and 1993, had debunked the belief about hair washing and bathing:

> F5C: Yeah…but that's still around. It's funny…you just mentioned that about the hair washing thing: my mother-in-law said it, 'cause that's something that, as a magazine reader again—I used to read 'Jackie' magazine and all those—and that was always mentioned in there saying it's not true. So it's something I never came across, anyone saying it was true, but I came across it in all these magazines as it's not true. Sometimes, in a way, you start to believe things don't you? Even though, you know…you think: 'Why is everyone saying it's not true all the time?'

In these personal-experience narratives, respondents remembered their experiences of the menarche, and menstruation, highlighting it as a defining moment in their transitions from childhood to adulthood. They remembered what happened to them and their experiences: the menarche was and is an important and anticipated life-cycle event. Stories were also shared inter-generationally between women, with a direct transition of knowledge. This emphasizes the perceived life-style improvements in terms of sanitary protection from one generation to the next. However, despite some similarities of experience at the initial shock of the menarche, there is perhaps now less secrecy and shame surrounding it within family relationships.

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7

The Curse: Popular Histories and Cultural Knowledge

This chapter explores the contemporary vernacular knowledge about menstruation—what might otherwise be called 'folklore'—that was reported by my respondents. At the same time, I shall place it in deeper historical context. The topics to be covered include beliefs concerning menstruating women and the preparation of food, 'taboos' surrounding sex during menstruation, understandings of the lunar cycle and menstruation, and tales about menstrual synchrony. I shall conclude by considering the role of menstrual lore and vernacular knowledge in shaping contemporary attitudes towards the menstruating body and menstruating women.

Superstitions

'Superstitions' concerning menstruation have stood the test of time and persisted in popular knowledge well into the age of medical science. The renewed interest in recording 'antiquities' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw these beliefs documented in medical journals, and elsewhere. The importance of such popular beliefs, and scepticism about the absurdity of claims about the supposed corruptive powers of

V.L. Newton, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*,
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menstruating women, gave rise to 'expert' scientific debate. In 1878, for example, the *British Medical Journal* carried a series of letters claiming that a menstruating woman could cause bacon to putrefy (Whelan 1975, p. 106). By 1916, however, Sir Raymond Crawfurd, in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, could confidently treat the idea as superstition:

> Superstitions concerning the menses loom so large in the customs of primitive peoples and are so far from extinct among the lower orders of civilised nations as to be worthy of serious consideration. Many a farmer's wife in this country will still assure you that milk handled by a menstruous woman cannot be churned to butter or that hams will not take salt at her hands. (Crawfurd 1916, p. 49)

Opie and Tatem in their *Dictionary of Superstitions* (2005, p. 247) record other similar beliefs, such as a servant girl in 1934 who refused to cut up some beef-steak for a pudding, and explained that if she cut the steak it would undoubtedly go bad and be unfit to eat; or in 1941 menstruating women not being permitted to have anything to do with killing a pig; or in 1956 to go near to hams while they were drying, in case they went 'off'; or, as late as 1982, to milk cows or make butter.

These ideas were reported by some participants in my study as existing within living memory. I collected the following story, from a woman in the 31–45 age group, involving the belief that when a woman is 'unwell' (i.e., menstruating) she should not be allowed to prepare food:

> F5C: [My husband's grandparents] started telling us about how they used to get a pig from, I think it was, a local farmer, and they'd have a pig slaughtered and, like, delivered to the house as a whole pig, and they were saying how they'd, like, have it butchered, and whatever, and they'd use all the different parts of the pig, and some they'd eat as fresh meat, and some they'd salt and whatever they did with it to preserve it, when they were first married. And then, I think it was my husband's grandfather says…he says: 'If a woman is unwell, she shouldn't be doing anything with that meat', and I looked at him straightaway, and I thought I knew what he meant as well. I'd never heard that term before either, 'If a woman is unwell', but I was, like, 'Oh, really? That's a really strange thing to say', you know, and he

> said—well, me and my husband were kind of laughing—and then his grandmother said: 'Oh, it's true you know, it is true. If a woman is unwell she mustn't have anything to do with preserving meat, or the meat will go off'…and then they were going through it, saying it also applies to if you were pickling something in vinegar…erm… that would go off, if a woman does it when she is unwell, you know—that's just how they put it. And then the other thing was—and I remember my husband's grandfather saying this—he says, 'If you go…', if you went to the local pub, and the barmaid was unwell, he says, 'it affects the taste of the beer, and the beer can go off, and, yeah, she shouldn't really be working at that time, because it affects the beer.' So it was basically this theory, that things go off, I think, if they are prepared by a woman at that time of the month, but I did think it was really interesting. I did get the impression that they did believe it, as well, you know, they didn't sort of…they said it in a light-hearted sort of way, but I got the impression that they believed it, or had believed it at some point in their lives, you know.

One of my male interviewees, in the over-60 category, noted a similar belief on his questionnaire:

> M3E: They used to grow mushrooms in the Paris mushroom-cellars, and they wouldn't let women in.[1]

Menotoxins

Whether or not any actual poison radiated from women at their time of menstruation was a question that claimed the attention of the Austro-Hungarian medical researcher Dr Béla Schick, who taught Paediatrics at the University of Vienna between 1902 and 1923. A report by Schick appeared on 6 May 1920 in the *Wiener klinische Wochenschrift*, the first two paragraphs of which translate into English as follows:

[1] (French original: Hugo 1972, p. 441; English translation (M. Turton) in Stoczkowski 2002, p. 119): 'A part of the catacombs in Paris is devoted to growing button mushrooms. No woman is allowed to enter it. It is claimed that the mere presence of a woman at a certain time of the month is enough to make a whole planting of mushrooms fail and rot. This periodic indisposition has strange and mysterious effects. It is certain for instance that it makes powder and rouge fall off the cheeks of actresses.'

> Around noon on 14 August 1919 I received a largish quantity, about ten, of long-stemmed, very fresh-looking dark-red roses, scarcely out of the bud. To keep them fresh, I passed them on to a maidservant to place in water. I was not a little surprised, when on the following morning I noticed that all the roses were withered and dried up, a large portion of the petals lying fallen off on the table. I suspected that some mischief was behind this deterioration, and asked the maidservant what had happened to the roses. She answered that she had known even on the previous day that the flowers were going to die; she ought not to have touched them, since she was just in her time of menstruation. Any flowers she took into her hands during this time died.
>
> It was absolutely clear to me that if what she said was true, it established a very interesting fact. However, the statement sounded so incredible that I really needed first of all to check up on the issue experimentally, before devoting myself to it. After all, it may have been nonsense or superstition.[2]

Schick accordingly conducted experiments to confirm the truth, or otherwise, of this observation, and over a period of 48 hours tested the reaction of anemones, chrysanthemums, and helianthus held, for a short time, in the hand of a menstruating woman, against the reaction of a similar bunch held in the hands of a woman who was not menstruating. The flowers, which had been held by the menstruating woman quickly died, while those held by the woman who was not menstruating remained perfectly fresh. Repetition of these experiments between September 1919 and April 1920 gave similar results.

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[2] German original: 'Ich erhielt am 14. August 1919 mittags eine größere Anzahl, zirka zehn Stück, langstielige, sehr frisch aussehende dunkelrote, kaum aufgeblühte Rosen. Um sie frisch zu erhalten, übergab ich sie einer Hausgehilfin zum Einwässern. Ich war nicht wenig überrascht, als ich am nächsten Morgen konstatierte, daß alle Rosen welk, verdorrt waren, ein großer Teil der Blätter der Blüte lag abgefallen auf dem Tische. Ich vermutete, daß dieses Zugrundegehen nicht mit rechten Dingen zugegangen sei und erkundigte mich bei der Hausgehilfin, was mit den Blumen geschehen sei. Sie antwortete, daß sie schon gestern gewußt habe, daß die Blumen zugrunde gehen werden, sie hätte sie nicht berühren sollen, da sie gerade in der Zeit der Menstruation stehe. Alle Blumen, die sie während dieser Zeit in die Hand nehme, gehen zugrunde. Ich war mir vollkommen darüber klar, daß bei Richtigkeit dieser Aussage eine sehr interessante Tatsache festgestellt war. Die Angabe klang aber so unglaublich, daß ich doch zuerst die Frage experimentell prüfen wollte, bevor ich mich derselben widmen wollte. Es konnte ja Schwindel oder Aberglauben sein.' (English translation kindly provided by Prof. G. Newton, Germanic Studies, University of Sheffield).

The results prompted Schick to look for parallels in folklore. He found accounts which reported that menstruating women were said to affect the fruit on trees, the wine and beer in barrels, bread in the baking, mushrooms growing in cellars, and many other items of plant life and fungi. He found, too, that factories where fruit jams were made, or flowers dealt with in bulk, even had rosters of when their female workers would be menstruating, so that they could do work other than that concerning fruit or flowers at that particular time (Schick 1920, p. 396). All this seemed to confirm reports Schick had found in Hovorka and Kronfeld (1909, p. 622), that folk ideas concerning menstruation needed to be tested experimentally, which he accordingly did, eventually concluding that menstrual poisons, or *menotoxins*,[3] were present in the skin and sweat secretions of women at the time of their menstruation, and that these were indeed injurious to plants and fungi. In what seemed to be an amazing confirmation of beliefs long current in popular knowledge,[4] Schick further suggested that the toxin was generated in the red blood cells of the coagulum (Schick 1920, p. 379).

Menotoxin was believed to be important, and to have implications for lactation, so other German-speaking researchers quickly followed Schick's lead (Hans Sänger, Munich 1921; Max Frank, Prague 1921), and in 1924 the research topic reached the United States as 'A Phyto-Pharmacological Study of Menstrual Toxin' by David Macht and Dorothy Lubin. Macht continued his work in this field, and in 1934, together with Mary Davis, published 'Experimental Studies, Old and New, On Menstrual Toxin', which examined the effect that the secretions of menstruating women had on plants and white rats. Their summary of results serves as a prime example of how expert knowledge systems have historically attempted to discredit menstruating women:

[3] The first use of the term *Menotoxin* occurs in Schick 1920, p. 397, who relates 'diese Bezeichnung des Menstruationsgift hat mir v. Groër vorgeschlagen' [this designation of menstrual poison was suggested to me by von Groër]. Franciszek (von) Groër (1887–1965) was Professor of Paediatrics, 1914–1919, at the University of Vienna; thereafter at Lemberg, now Lviv, (Ukraine).

[4] Cf. *HddA*, 7, 780: 'Menstruierende dürfen eine Monatsrose nicht berühren, da diese sonst welken muß' [menstruating women must not touch a Damask rose, since the rose else must wither].

> There is a popular belief among all peoples and all races, ancient, medieval and modern, that a woman at the time of her menstruation is 'unclean', using the word not merely in its literal sense as referring to the catamenial flow but in the transitive sense as defiling or contaminating. Such a person is popularly believed to spread poison or contaminate persons and objects with which she comes into contact. Thus, for instance it is a matter of common knowledge that when a menstruating woman touches fresh flowers they wither. (1934, p. 113)

Macht and Davis then drew on popular beliefs concerning the mood-swings of menstruating women to validate their research, concluding (1934, pp. 117–18) that injections of menotoxins 'exert a decidedly depressant effect on the behaviour of albino rats, [and] are of considerable interest when examined in connection with the pathological manifestations of menstruation in human beings. It is a matter of common knowledge that at catamenia many women feel out of sorts and are frequently depressed mentally'.

Scientific investigations into the perceived occurrence and potency of poisons in menstrual fluid continued into the 1950s. If we place these studies of 'menotoxins' in the context of Emily Martin's survey of research into women's ability to work during menstruation and the effects of pre-menstrual syndrome, which she located within the social and economic conditions of the era (Martin 1989, pp. 113–38), they appear to be 'scientific' attempts to prove that women are biologically flawed and to position women and their bodies as polluting. As for menotoxins themselves, no firm proof has been found for their existence, although *disproof* of the theory has been attributed to 'dem Arzt Burger' (Dr Burger, the [noted] physician), whom Sabine Hering and Gudrun Maierhof report as having succeeded in 1958 in showing scientifically that menotoxins did not exist (Hering and Maierhof 1991, p. 78).[5] Despite this, the stories nonetheless continued to exist; as late as 1974 the British medical journal *The Lancet*

[5] 'Erst dem Arzt Burger gelingt 1958 der wissenschaftliche Nachweis, daß es kein Menstruationsgift gibt' [Not until Dr Burger, the (noted) physician, in 1958, did (anyone) succeed in proving scientifically that menstrual poison does not exist]. Hering and Maierhof give no further detail on Burger, but the 'physician' in question is most probably Dr Karl Johann Burger (1893–1962), Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in the University of Würzburg (1947–1962), author of *Geburtshilfliche Operationslehre* and personal obstetrician to the royal family of Archduke Otto of Austria.

published a letter,[6] stating that there appeared to be 'sound pharmacological basis for the ancient beliefs in the toxicity of catamenial loss' (Laws 1990, p. 53). Thus some medical legends appear to be as tenacious, and as resistant to the absence of evidence, as their popular equivalents.

Not at 'that Time of the Month': Activities to be Avoided

Some things were described by respondents as activities which it was believed that women should avoid during their period, since they might be 'harmful'. As I discussed in Chap. 6, water contact, such as hair washing, provided one theme of my research. Although it might seem obvious to associate beliefs about the avoidance of bathing and hair washing with the avoidance of swimming during menstruation, I found the only real link between these beliefs to be 'water', since the beliefs themselves deal with very different concerns. Bathing or hair-washing were seen to be physically damaging. The woman is viewed as physically vulnerable during menstruation and liable, for example, to catch cold. By contrast, avoiding swimming was related to the shame of exposure, since a woman has to undress and wear a tight-fitting swimming costume, which might give away the fact that she is menstruating. In this section I shall deal only with the avoidance of bathing and hair washing; the avoidance of swimming will be discussed later.

Table 7.1 documents changes in attitudes towards menstruation and immersion in water. The answers given by female participants on the

Table 7.1 Avoidance of bathing/getting hair wet (females)

Age	No. in group	Taking a bath/shower	Washing your hair	Perming hair	Putting feet in cold water
12–14	162 (100 %)	(1) 0.6 %			
18–30	98 (100 %)	(8) 8.2 %	(4) 4.1 %		
31–45	45 (100 %)	(5) 11.1 %	(3) 6.7 %		
46–60	39 (100 %)	(14) 35.9 %	(21) 53.8 %	(1) 2.6 %	
Over 60	22 (100 %)	(8) 36.4 %	(15) 68.2 %	(1) 4.5 %	(2) 9.1 %

[6] V.L. Ernster (1974) 'Menstrual Toxin', *The Lancet*, 303, 7870, 1347 (29 June 1974).

questionnaire demonstrate the age-distribution of knowledge of ideas about not having a bath or shower, or getting one's hair wet, when menstruating.

The older the female respondent was, the more likely it was that she would report advice such as 'don't have a bath', 'don't wash your hair', and 'don't put your feet in cold water'. As this table shows, the belief that one should not have a bath, or wash one's hair during menstruation is declining, if not vanishing altogether; awareness of it was largely restricted to the two groups aged over 46. What is more, beliefs about avoiding water with regard to bathing and hair washing were reported by female participants only.

Ideas about not having a bath, or not washing hair, may have relaxed in recent times, because of changes in attitudes towards personal hygiene. With central heating in almost all modern houses, people bathe and shower much more often than they did in the past. Ideas about the avoidance of hair washing and bathing were current within living memory; phrases such as 'my mother was told' or 'my grandmother said' frequently came up. One of my interviews (F3E) recalled as follows:

> I remember one of the ladies, and she came from one of the poorer areas of the village, and probably a little bit more…the families are closer, and they don't mix with people outside quite as so much, and they'd all perpetuated this thing that you didn't wash very much when you had periods, because it made you…it made you poorly…*and this is only a matter of 15 years ago*, probably…and then another mum said, oh, yes: she knew about these myths, and she says: 'Oh, our So-and-so used to stink!', ′cause they never used to wash, you know…and wash their hair…because that was felt that you were going to be…erm…give you a cold …for a want of a reason.

The belief seemed to be that a woman would be taken ill in some way if she were to get wet while menstruating. She might, for example, catch a cold or lose too much blood; her menstruation might even stop altogether:

> VLN: […] you wrote down about your friend, she didn't used to wash her hair.
>
> F4C: Yeah! I worked with her, and it was terrible. There was snow on the windows one night, that thick [indicates about 10 cm with her hand], and

> I was saying: 'Oh, I'm so hot—I'm just going to have to have the window open'. It was like a little room we sat in when we worked nights, you know, and it was just awful, because she used to smell terrible. She didn't have to tell you, but, I mean, you knew, you know—her hair was always greasy. I don't know what she thought—she thought she was going to get pneumonia, I think. How odd is that? She felt very vulnerable at that time of the month, I think, so she thought. It must have been something her mum had said to her, you know. […] She shouldn't have a bath…a bath!…and it's when you want one, isn't it?… that's what's so strange. […] she thought she was going to bleed to death in the bath.

This interviewee's comments about cleanliness were also evident with respect to other aspects of body management. Sex was often described as an activity to be avoided. Although it might be assumed that ideas about the avoidance of menstrual sex are linked to ideas about religious patriarchy and cleanliness, stemming from Leviticus, this is not obvious from my data. Rather, the primary concerns were about women's sexual appeal and sexual desire at the time of menstruation. In response to the question in the open-ended questionnaire about 'activities to be avoided', 17.5 % of participants mentioned sex. In the interviews, too, there was discussion of abstinence from sex during a period, because women should not, or should not wish to, have sex during their period. Some men in the study commented that the main dealings that they had had with menstruation were in relation to sexual relationships. This man was over 60 at the time of the interview:

> M2E: I suppose the only time I actually got to really know fully about this process in ladies, or event in ladies, females, was when, as in most males, you think to yourself: 'Is this lady ready for sex, and…erm…if this lady is ready for sex, and she's…er…acceptable for you to have sex with her, then that's okay—fair enough.' But when she says…erm…and she'll say it normally…she'll say something…it's not…like…:'I'm having a period' […]—she'll say: 'Well, no, I'm afraid at these few days in the month I can't have sex with you', or other things.

Although there is an obvious connection between menstruation and female fertility, it was rarely alluded to. Only one woman, in the 18–30

age category, openly told me that she had sex during menstruation, and that it was a 'safe time' to have sex, because it was unlikely that she would get pregnant:

> F1B: I'm very regular, and that's quite handy as well, because I can work out fertile times of the month, and when to abstain, or when to, you know, be good, or whatever—it's not really a…you know, I'm fine with it …[…] I can't ever go on the pill and stuff, and during my period sort-of day 2, day 3 is the only time I can have unprotected sex and, you know, so I do, and it doesn't really bother me, and it doesn't bother him, and it's just like…I'm quite, they're not majorly heavy. If I had really heavy periods, it would be awful, but, you know, I don't feel, like, in any way…like I think girls in the past used to feel, unclean or dirty, or it was wrong, or whatever, but to me it's the time of the month when I can actually just be spontaneous. [Laughs]

This participant, despite telling me that she had sex during her period, appears to need to justify her actions as she recognises that it goes against usual conventions. I did not come across any specific 'folk theory' as to why sex was avoided, other than the suggestion that blood and sexual appeal are not two things that go together, as describe by the following two men:

> M3B: I think…I think it's…a lot of men find it really gross. I'm not entirely sure why. Obviously, it's like sex and bleeding are not good kind-of partners…they are not two words you should put together, I think, unless you are into certain kinds of things, but I get the feeling that that's mainly it…I don't think they actually think… or you'd have to be a dumb-arse if you thought that you were going to catch anything from it, or anything like that…but I imagine it…yeah, just grosses them out […] I can't see any other reason, unless, like I say, you are a dumb-arse. I'm sure there are some people who think that if they get menstrual blood on them, then that's it: they're going to die of AIDs, or something.

This association of sex, blood and violence was also repeated by another interviewee:

> M5B: It is a taboo. Erm…but I don't know why. Possibly because it's… because it's associated with blood, and, like, the sex and murder aspect, and

you end up finished covered in blood, and…I dunno…people do have a lot of associations with blood and danger, and blood and harm.

The lay explanations given above help us to understand the etiquette surrounding menstruation. Participants gave reasons in their own words for why things are the way they are, and why certain beliefs and practices are upheld in a process which could be likened to 'folk reasoning' or 'folk etymology'.

The everyday discourse among the school students about whether a girl could go swimming, or not, during her period is another good example of this 'folk' or 'vernacular' knowledge. In the following quotation problems are identified—such as fear of exposure by means of 'a pool of red'—but they are accompanied by an acknowledgement of the inequality experienced in this respect by adolescent girls:

VLN: Are there any certain things which a girl shouldn't do when she's on her period?

F4A: That was, like, in the questionnaire, but I didn't write anything, because all the boys were writing stuff like swimming, 'cause that…but when one of the boys shouted out, 'You can't go swimming because you'll have a pool full of…a red blob…following you everywhere you go.'

F5A: You can go swimming, but some people don't like to go.

VLN: …and any other things that she shouldn't do…?

F4A: I think that she should be able to do *everything* she wants, and act normal.

F5A: Yeah, 'cause otherwise it's not fair on her, because it doesn't happen to other people.

Here the school students are rejecting a perceived restriction and protesting that women should be just as capable on their period as off it, in terms of 'fairness'.

Although the students were aware that a girl might face problems with swimming, rather than considering the practical challenges of learning to use a tampon, they tended to generate their own reasons, reflecting the conventional wisdom of their (male and female) peer group:

F3A: I didn't think that you could go swimming […]

VLN: Why is that? […]

F3A: Because it would all come out in the water.

Older participants pointed out that swimming was a very difficult activity for girls in the days before tampons came into common use, and that tampons were often thought unsuitable for adolescent girls. Perhaps, because a tampon is worn internally, the issue was that the tampon might cross a boundary; one participant commented that when she was growing up it was thought that using a tampon would take away a girl's virginity:

> F3D: Yeah—and another thing in my generation, when I was young, was that if you wore a tampon, it'd take away your virginity. You know, it's…and it's not that long ago we're talking about…we're talking…well, 50 years… no…yeah…I was 10 when I started my periods. So it's 50 years ago.

Menstrual Cycles

Many interviewees had heard of a connection between the moon and the menstrual cycle, but for many the connection between the lunar and menstrual cycles was vague, it was something they were aware of, but not in any concrete way:

> F6B: they say it's something to do with the cycle of the moon, or something? That's sort-of a myth. I didn't know if it was a myth, or if that was true.
>
> F2C: I'd just heard it from me mum when I was younger, that it was to do with the moon and full moon, and stuff like that.
>
> F2D: No. I've heard about it, but I don't know anything about it. I have heard about it that, you know, sort-of phases of the moon that can affect it, and…but I don't really know anything about it. I've sort-of just heard it.
>
> F3D: Yes. I've only heard that sometimes it's lunar cycles can affect your period, but I'm not really sure how it works.

Other participants pointed out the link between the length of the lunar cycle and the length of the average menstrual cycle. These cycles were also seen to influence emotion, and some participants pointed out a connection between the lunar cycle and mood-changes. One participant in the 18–30 age category pointed out the positive mood-changes of the menstrual cycle:

F5B: Yeah, that's the sort-of folklore around periods, I guess, that women are more intuitive when they've got their periods, or with the full moon, and how that's when menstruation […] Yeah, it is something to do with the moon, isn't it…the cycles anyway… and the cycles of a woman and the moon, 'cause they're … the moon is related to the female, isn't it?, so…and I don't really know a lot about it, but I know about that, and I think your emotions are really attached to your cycle—definitely.

In a way that was similar to their knowledge of the cycles of the moon, some participants reported a vague awareness of the concept of 'menstrual synchrony'.

F5E: Yes, because we're all controlled by the moon apparently, and… erm… I don't know, I suppose it's just women living in close proximities that start working to the same cycle somehow.

More concretely, many respondents claimed to have first-hand knowledge of instances where it had happened:

F4D: That's reminded me of when I shared a flat with three other girls, and we did synchronize, and we did share the same pattern.

F6D: Yes. 'A group of women living together'—definitely, 'cause when I was at college we'd sort of start the college term, where we'd all be on at different times, but towards the end of the term, we'd all…we wouldn't be on at the same time, but we all seemed to get nearer. And we found that very strange, and we did notice that, and we didn't know whether it was same living conditions, or whether it was that we were all eating the same food…we didn't know what it was, but it did happen, and periods either came late or early, and we all adjusted to be nearer to each other…not exactly spot-on, but certainly nearer.

In this last quote, the participant put her experiences down to social and environmental factors. For others it was hormonal, but it always centred on shared female spaces and life experiences in common:

F6C: Erm…yes, because I worked…I used to work for the Post Office in a team of ladies…team of gentlemen and ladies and…but we were all sat in the same area at a desk, and we generally all sort-of…not bang on synchronized,

> but it would be happening within a week and a half…all of us would—which is weird, but you don't know…like, I don't know if it is true, or not. I don't know if it is a myth, but I've read things that say it's hormonal, and people react to other hormones that are around them—so it could be. And it could be to do with light…it could be to do with the amount of movement we were all doing, because we were all doing the same sort of things…and amount of stress…so it could be lots of things, but alternatively it could be a really, really bad myth…but I don't know.

Men also reported this belief and sometimes speculated that menstrual synchrony happens to women who have close interaction with one another:

> M3B: […] but then, the menstrual cycle, you know…people coming into sync. I'm …I don't know if it is true or not, but I'm inclined to believe that that happens, because you see people when they get together, you know…people start to become like each other, so I don't sort-of see why that can't happen in a way, and I've seen people…I've seen people have a period, and then two weeks later have another, so I don't see why it can't change as well.

Menstrual synchrony is said to occur when the menstrual cycles of a group of women living or working in close quarters gradually over time move to occur roughly synchronically. As shown above, some of my respondents claimed to have experienced this phenomenon, or else knew about it, but were unsure as to whether it existed or not. Since Martha McClintock's pioneering paper 'Menstrual Synchrony and Suppression' (1971), a significant number of studies have been carried out in this field (Weller and Weller, 1993,[7] 1995,[8] 1997; Weller, Weller,

[7] 'Menstrual synchrony was examined in three groups of women: (1) mothers and their daughters; (2) women sharing a room in a private residence; and (3) women sharing a room in a dormitory. […] Mothers and daughters living in the same domicile displayed a significant degree of synchrony. Roommates in private residences were also synchronous, although not significantly more than roommates residing in dormitories'. (1993, p. 943)

[8] 'The sample consisted of 72 women soldiers in two army bases, and a civilian sample of 36 office workers. None of the samples showed significant synchrony. However, social interaction variables were found to be important factors contributing to the relative degree of synchrony. Friendship, mutual activity, and length of time working together were significantly related to the degree of synchrony'. (1995, p. 21)

Koresh-Kamin and Ben-Shoshan 1999[9]). The empirical studies carried out by Leonard and Aron Weller (1993, 1995, 1999) used closed-ended questionnaires to gather data and examine whether different living arrangements and relationships affect synchrony. These studies all recognize menstrual synchrony as a genuine phenomenon.

However, not all studies have found this. In Yang and Schank's study of 26 groups of women living for more than a year in dormitories at a Chinese university (2006), participants were asked to record the dates of menstrual onset, and the data was then mathematically analysed. The authors concluded that:

> Synchrony did not occur when women lived together for a year or more, and that menstrual cycle onset clustering were neither stable nor occurred more than expected by chance. This is because rhythms with cycles of variable length cannot synchronise unless rhythms converge on the same frequency (i.e. cycles must converge on the same cycle length) […] We also showed that cycle variability leads to repeated cycle convergences and subsequent divergences, which may explain the perception of synchrony. (2006, p. 442)

Thus no uniform agreement has emerged as to whether menstrual synchronization happens, and what might cause it. It is particularly difficult to compare with accuracy the cycle lengths of women, and researchers have, as a result, remained undecided about the best method of analysis:

> While the timing of menstrual cycles must be modifiable in order for the phenomenon of menstrual synchrony to occur, cycle variability and the occurrence of irregularly long or short cycles complicate the measurement of the process of synchronization over time and of determining whether synchrony exists for women who have lived together for a long period of time. (Weller and Weller 1997, p. 115)

[9] 'The […] study examined menstrual synchrony in 51 pairs of women working together under conditions optimally conducive to synchrony. They had been together for at least 1 year, shared a relatively small office, worked there all day full time and contact with other people during the day was minimal […] Menstrual onsets of close friends tended to occur on the average within 3.5–4.5 days of each other while onsets of co-workers who were not close friends were significantly more broadly ranged (7.7–9.0 days of each other). (Weller et al. 1999, p. 449)

Science aside, the synchronization of menstrual cycles that apparently occurs when a group of women live together was a definite, and widely-held, part of the 'popular knowledge' of my informants, not least, apparently, because of what was believed to be female experience.

For male respondents, menstrual synchrony was sometimes linked to the idea of women being emotional together at the same time, reflecting other popular ideas about 'moods' and providing fodder for joking, as is evident in the following two examples:

> VLN: Have you heard about women who live together synchronizing?
>
> M1D: I'm banking on it. I've got three women in the house. If not, that means that out of every four weeks, if they don't synchronize, three of them are going to be murder, because one of them is going to be on at a different week, so I'm hoping they'll all synchronize, then one week out of four I'm going to live in the shed…I've already planned it out where I'm going to be. But, yes: I don't know if it's true, but I've heard that it does happen.
>
> M2B: It was, like, when a group of women live together for a long time, then their periods synchronize—which is horrible, and which is probably why my mum and my sister are always angry at the same time.

David Hufford's hypotheses about the 'cultural source' and the 'experiential source' of beliefs (Hufford 1982, pp. 12–16) might offer a useful approach to understanding the roots of the menstrual-synchrony experience. Although Hufford was focusing on supernatural beliefs and experiences—specifically visitations by 'the terror that comes in the night'—these ideas may also be relevant to other 'unproven' phenomena.

The 'cultural source' hypothesis defines accounts of supernatural experience as products of culture and tradition, and anomalous experiences as misinterpretations of ordinary events; so that in the case of menstrual synchrony, the apparent coming together of cycles is merely coincidence. The perception of menstrual synchrony would, therefore, be a consequence of cultural conditioning. Popular knowledge and discourses about menstrual synchrony influence the perception of events. Thus, cultural discourses nurture beliefs in menstrual synchrony, which lead to perceptions of experience. Experiences of menstrual synchrony become fixed in

popular knowledge, and popular knowledge about menstrual synchrony leads to experience and belief. Existing knowledge provides the guideline, so if a person has an experience that they cannot explain, they will turn to preexisting discourses in order to provide a satisfactory explanation for that experience. Sometimes this information is drawn from 'expert' knowledge systems, other times from lay belief.

By contrast, the 'experiential source' theory holds that experiences can occur, which are independent of culture. Menstrual synchrony, as an actual physiological occurrence, and no less actual experiences of it, would therefore be the root of popular knowledge. In this case, people from all countries throughout history have had similar experiences, though these are interpreted differently in different cultures and at different times. Here, experiences precede belief in menstrual synchrony. They lead to it, and are not caused by the cultural environment.

In both examples that I have discussed in this chapter—studies of 'menotoxins' and menstrual synchrony—it is apparent that there are complex interactions between expert and lay knowledge, where both kinds of knowledge influence popular beliefs about menstruation. Expert knowledge, such as that from medicine and religion, inform our popular concepts about menstruation, and, in turn, lay beliefs about menstruation can also inform expert knowledge. The studies investigating 'menotoxins' and menstrual synchrony were initially informed by lay knowledge and later explored by experts who attempted to prove or disprove the theory. These studies demonstrate that a fascination with menstruation has persisted in both scientific and popular debates around the perceived power of women's reproductive bodies. In addition to scientific frameworks and theories, popular knowledge gives rise to a 'folk etymology' in which lay people draw on their everyday resources and understandings of their cultural environment, and their bodies, in order to provide explanations for such beliefs. There was very little awareness of Leviticus among my respondents, as the source of strictures that menstrual sex is to be avoided. Instead, explanations drew on popular culture and ideas about blood, sex, and violence. People scavenge around in popular culture for their own meanings. This is very evident in menstrual euphemisms and jokes, which will be the focus of the next two chapters.

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8

'Auntie's Come to Tea': Menstrual Euphemism

This chapter deals with how people find ways to talk about a subject, which is still deemed 'sensitive' in mainstream society. Although such talk may be difficult for many people, vernacular language, which is the focus of this chapter, is one means of articulating this 'sensitive' subject. I shall focus on this language in order to explore how menstrual euphemisms and slang not only provide a conversational way around a difficult topic, but also help to shape, and are shaped by, societal views of menstruation.

This chapter will also discuss the social consequences of direct and indirect references to menstruation, arguing that an out-of-place mentioning of a 'sensitive' subject can bring about a shift in the dynamics of a social situation. The chapter closes with a discussion of verbal exchanges concerning 'sensitive' subjects, and their usefulness as a means of exploring and gaining knowledge about topics, such as sexuality and the gendered group dynamics of social interactions.

V.L. Newton, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*,
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Naming Menstruation: 'The Painters are In'

It is a fairly common assumption that menstruation, as 'something unmentionable', is difficult to talk about freely and openly in our everyday lives. However, in practice we can, and do, talk about menstruation; it has attracted scores of euphemisms and slang terms, all of which allow for 'indirect' articulation and implicit reference.

Although euphemisms[1] and slang expressions for menstruation exist in abundance, the first extensive study of these was published in the USA in 1948 by Natalie F. Joffe, who examined not only menstrual terminology from the USA, but also from the homelands of European immigrants. The terms collected were obtained through interviews and supplemented by consulting printed sources.[2] She classified her findings using the categories 'time', 'colour', 'visitors', 'persons' (male and female) and 'disability' (Joffe 1948, p. 184). In addition, she noted whether the terms were American, French, German, Italian, Yiddish, Polish, or Irish, and drew some conclusions about the acceptance or taboo surrounding menstruation in the specific cultures and how this was reflected in the terms used to describe it. In Germany, for example, she argued that a menstruating woman was regarded as unclean; menstruation was referred to as *Schweinerei* and *Sauerei*, associating it with what were regarded as filthy animals, the pig 'Schwein' and the sow 'Sau'.[3] (Joffe 1948, p. 181). She also found that that in cultures where menstruation carries a great taboo, there are fewer terms and names for it: 'Among the Irish where all sexual behaviour and allusion is muted, and menstruation is a strongly taboo subject, the vocabulary is limited' (Joffe 1948, p. 182).

Many of Joffe's terms, in one guise or another, were also present in my own Derbyshire data, perhaps suggesting either universality or diffusion from other cultures. For example, Joffe lists 'leakage' and 'flow' as transferred from Polish; 'blood' and 'the red road' from Italian; 'to have

[1] Euphemisms are convolutions of speech that convey meaning without being too precise, '[a] substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for a harsh or blunt or direct one' (Enright, 1985, p. 13).

[2] Joffe stressed that 'no systematic sampling was made for terminology, as the word lists were a natural outgrowth of the balance of the work' (Joffe, 1948, p. 181).

[3] German: *Schweinerei* 'filth, mucky mess', *Sauerei* 'uncleanliness, filthiness'.

the painters' and 'a female/male acquaintance is visiting' from French, while from American she gives 'unwell', 'period', 'the rag', 'the hammock is swinging', 'Grandma is here', 'Aunt Jane', 'the flag is up' and 'the machine is kaput'.

A comprehensive overview of the different types of vernacular expressions for menstruation that I found in north Derbyshire can be found in Appendix A to this book. I have classified them in overarching categories for content and analysis of the meanings and attitudes they convey. Table 8.1 features the most frequently given terms:

The terms given more often by females refer either to the time and frequency of menstruation (period; time of the month; monthly), or are euphemistic (on; on the rag; on the blob; painters and decorators; the Curse; ladies'/ women's/ girls' [thing]).

Apart from 'period', most of the terms given by males make direct reference to the processes of menstruation. 'Blob', and compounds of the word 'bleed' and 'blood', describe the menstrual flow. Although there is now increasing popularity for cloth reusable pads, the term 'rag' describes an historic mode of sanitary protection, but one which also has associations with uncleanliness. Terms focusing on 'crimson wave/tide' are inspired by

Table 8.1 The ten most frequent terms given in my study

	Most frequent terms overall	Most frequent, females	Most frequent, males
1	Period (48.8 %)	Period (54.1 %)	Period (34.8 %)
2	Time of the month (31.2 %)	Time of the month (39.1 %)	On the rag (21 %)
3	On the rag (19 %)	'On' (24.3 %)	On the blob (20.5 %)
4	On the blob (18.1 %)	On the rag (17.8 %)	Time of the month (18.3 %)
5	'On' (16.6 %)	On the blob (16.7 %)	Menstruation (13.4 %)
6	Painters and decorators (13.9 %)	Painters and decorators (15.8 %)	Painters and decorators (10.7 %)
7	Menstruation (13.7 %)	Menstruation (13.9 %)	Bleed… (8.5 %)
8	Monthly (7.3 %)	Monthly (10.7 %)	8 = Blood… (5.8 %)
9	Bleed… (6.8 %)	The curse (9.6 %)	8 = Ladies', women's, girls' (5.8 %)
10	Ladies', women's, Girls' (6.6 %)	Ladies', women's, girls' (7.1 %)	10 = Crimson wave/tide (4 %) 10 = 'On' (4 %)

popular culture, where 'surfing the crimson wave' is a phrase specific to the film *Clueless*. These terms were more frequent amongst the males, while the most prominent terms for females were 'cyclic' ones, the cyclic experience of menstruation being a commonplace to women. The one 'cyclic' term that did feature amongst males was 'time of the month', fourth in frequency for them, and second in frequency overall.

The most popular term of the ten cited equally by women and men was 'menstruation'. However, this term was given in the questionnaire, and could have exerted influence on both women and men.

Some terms given in my survey were quite creative in their descriptions (see Appendix A: 'riding the red dragon'; 'up on the blocks'; 'to have the painters in'; 'Liverpool are playing at home'). This desire to 'talk around' menstruation, the perception of menstruation as a 'sensitive' topic, and the abundance of euphemistic slang expressions, demonstrate that women's periods are still, to some extent, in a direct sense 'unmentionable'. In addition, slang and euphemisms allow speakers to give a name to menstruation which is their own. For example, one man (in the age group 18–30) indicated that he preferred slang expressions such as 'on the blob', because he considered the standard terms to sound too medical:

> M1B: But with my wife […] I'd say, 'Are you on your blob?' or something, and… like…for us it doesn't really mean much, 'cause we've kind of grown up about it, but it's just a term—other than it sounding very medical. I actually prefer it to the medical terms, because when you've had kids as well they're always on about…erm … 'ovulation cycles', and, you know, all these different things that you have to watch out for.

This notion was also reiterated by a female interviewee:

> F8C: […] I suppose 'your period' is a bit technical…medical, stark… unless you call it a 'girly thing', or something that's a bit softer—sounds a bit nicer really.

The use of vernacular expressions for menstruation allows the language and experience of menstruation to be reclaimed by the speaker. In my survey, women cited terms such as 'Aunt Flo', which personify menstruation and make it familiar. There were only a few unique terms given in the

survey (for example, 'Qs'), and most were variations of core ideas and imagery (jam rag; jamming; jammy dodging; making mother's jam). This stability of themes within vocabulary variation suggests that menstrual slang and euphemisms can be described as a shared cultural discourse about menstruation.

Among my respondents, there was a great variety of terms for menstruation in circulation (see Appendix A). This shows the need of both women and men to find their own words for menstruation, which allow participants to discuss menstruation across different interpersonal contexts and in different social situations. For example, the female school students told me:

> VLN: Why do you think that people use these phrases rather than just saying, 'I'm on my period'?
>
> F8A: 'Cause it's a bit embarrassing, saying it like that.
>
> F9A: Yeah.
>
> F8A: Like…if there's boys around, and stuff.
>
> F9A: Like, trying to hide it, 'cause, like, sometimes the boys don't know what you're on about, if you, like, say it, so if you're just, like, 'I'm on', and then your friends know what you're on about, so you don't…so the boys don't, like …
>
> F8A: Make fun of you.

Embedded in slang and euphemism are cultural ideas about women, their bodies and sex, and women's place in society more generally. For example, with reference to sexual intercourse during menstruation, the terms given by males (all in the 18–46 age range) were: 'mucky jump week', 'blood sports week' and 'bleedin love'. By contrast the women gave terms such as: 'out of order', 'closed for maintenance' and 'out of action'. There is a clear gender divide: all the terms used by the males refer to having menstrual sex, whereas the references given by females mostly allude to the undesirability of having sex during the menstrual period. Some of the men's terms ('blood sport', 'mucky jump week') define women as sexual objects, and confessing to having had menstrual sex in direct breach of that 'taboo' serves only to reinforce the masculinity of the man who has said such a thing. With regard to the terms used by women, these reinforce the menstrual-sex 'taboo', but also give the woman a measure of

control over her sexuality. Stating that she is on her period is an acceptable way for her to refuse sex.

Thus menstrual expressions and euphemisms, and their different uses by women and men, give an insight into the transmission of gender stereotypes, and consequently reflects and reinforces the position and status of women in British society. In addition, it sheds light on how concepts of femininity and womanliness are influenced both by the myths and reality of female physiology and by the way that menstrual slang embodies society's views of women and their menstruating bodies.

When we consider long-standing assumptions about menstruation, we might expect to find numerous terms which point to uncleanliness, to menstruation as an illness or inconvenience, or to parallels between menstruation and danger. In her psychological study of colloquial menstrual expressions, Virginia Larsen wrote:

> Special words and expression as well as verbal taboos are used in most cultures to refer to menstruation. Frequently these expressions are synonymous with 'danger', 'unclean', or 'beware'. (1963, pp. 874–5)

However, what is noticeable from my data was that while these themes did feature, they were not the most popular categories, and in fact made up a relatively small percentage of the terms collected. The most popular terms were euphemisms or slang terms that can be interpreted as jocular, as well as offensive. The double meaning of these terms is important for their usage. It could be seen that blunt words, which point to menstruation directly as being unclean or dangerous, are not as usefully versatile as encrypted euphemisms, or slang, which can be manipulated to fit specific interpersonal contexts.

Continuity and Change: Variation and Stability Within Menstrual Terminology

When I was collating my data about euphemisms and terminology, the same ideas and set phrases kept reoccurring, and that these could thus be taken to be tapping into, and reproducing, established discourses.

The endurance of old terms indicates a cultural resistance to change, and while the etymological origin of a term may be lost, the stereotypes still persist, carrying with them the negative connotations attached to menstruation. A good example of this is 'on the rag'. Menstrual 'rags' have been out of use for many years, yet the term persists today, even within the youngest age group (12–14).[4] The connotations it carries are robust and resistant to change. 'Rag' has perhaps lost its connection with 'menstrual rags' for contemporary users, but the word 'rag' continues as a term of menstrual slang. It would be interesting to see whether interest in reusable menstrual products, such as Mooncups and washable cloth pads, will have any influence on future developments in the naming of menstruation.

Menstrual terminology and euphemisms are both changing and constant, exhibiting a degree of verbal stability within ongoing variation, which allows the same words and phrases to occur again and again. Some of these variants are neutral: 'menstruation', 'menses' or 'menstrual cycle', and 'being on a period', 'having a period' or 'getting your period'. These neutral forms tend to be the 'standard' terms for menstruation. Other terms have both positive and negative variations. For example, 'that time of the month' was also given in more negatively loaded phrases such as 'wrong time of the month' or 'unclean time of the month'. Similarly, with 'monthly', other variations were 'the monthly cycle', but also 'the monthly moan'. For the category referring to gender there were both positive terms, 'ladies' time', 'ladies' week' or 'ladies' day', as well as more negative terms, such as 'women's troubles' or 'women's pains'. This variation within categorical boundaries is evidence that the transmission of menstrual information, ideas, and expressions is a changing process, rather than stagnant.

Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger have also argued that 'new slang terms appear to fit within the same categories, rather than radically challenging them' (2001, p. 156). Although the terms appeal ultimately to an established cultural model or norm, there is scope for some variation and change. If we examine this language, and the content of these terms, we can see that they are open to modification and interpretation by the

[4] However, there has been an increase in recent years in using washable, reusable, 'green' menstrual products.

speaker, which leads to personal adaptations. A number of linguistic techniques are, for example, evident in the terms. Some of these make use of alliteration ('flying the flag', 'blood bum', 'blood bath') or of assonance ('leaky week', 'jam-rag'); some feature straight-forward echoing repetition ('rag-rags', 'drip drip'); some are metaphorical and imagine the period as a person ('Aunt Flo', 'Muriel'); while others are ellipses ('on') or acronyms (PMT, PMS).

Terms which refer directly to the female genitals are rare, and occurrences in the data are either inaccurate ('blood-bum'), slang ('leaky widge'), or clinical ('vagina bleed'). However, there were indirect allusions to women's genitalia as being leaky, oozing, and out of control ('monthly leak', 'on the drip'). Menstruation was also described as dangerous ('code red', 'red scare'), and images of injury were evoked ('blood bath') or of punishment ('bloody hell', 'the curse'). Flags indicated either danger ('red flag') or a specific event ('flag day').

In personifying the period as a visitor, all those visitors who were relatives were described as older females ('Aunty', 'Grandma'). In addition, the names given are now no longer in style ('Auntie Norah', 'Aunt Flo', 'Aunt Muriel', 'Aunt Hilda'). These names evoke images of old, unfashionable, frumpy women. One participant even wrote, 'A.F. (Aunt Flo) O.B. (Old Bag)'. Names such these indirectly depict the vagina as undesirable and unsexy at this time. Sometimes the period was given a Christian name, either male or female ('Pamela', 'Maureen', 'Flo', 'Tom', 'George'). However, when the data was collected, the female names were relatively unfashionable, whereas the male ones were not.[5]

It is evident that speakers have some licence to play around and work with words and ideas. Terms evolve over time, which is evidence that popular discourse is alive, and while generational expressions such as 'the curse' and 'on the blob' survive, these are expanded by creative change coming from the speakers themselves, who scavenge through popular culture in order to find 'new' terms. Inspiration comes from cinema films, such as 'Miss Scarlett' (*Gone with the Wind*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939) or 'Surfing the Crimson Wave' (*Clueless* 1995), or from pop songs, such as

[5] Website: *www.babynames.co.uk*. Accessed 13 June 2009. 'Pamela' ranked 469th, 'Maureen' did not feature, 'Flo' ranked 511th, Thomas 5th, and George 50th.

'Snoopy vs. The Red Baron' (Royal Guardsmen 1967), 'Ruby Tuesday' (Rolling Stones 1967), 'Red River Valley' (folk/cowboy song, popularized as *Red River Rock* by Johnny and the Hurricanes, 1959), 'Red Sails in the Sunset' (1935, but popularized by Nat King Cole, 1951), and 'Bleeding Love' (Leona Lewis 2007). Fictional characters referred to in the data were 'vampire', 'dragon', and 'red hand gang'. Influences therefore come from many different sources; some are older and well established in popular culture and others are more contemporary. They represent a matrix of variation, intertextuality and constant evolution.

The processes which maintain the use of menstrual expressions are, in part, embodied in the adolescents who learn the phrases and take them for granted, since 'that's just what you say'. In adolescent social circles, saying the right thing at the right time is important. It is important to be 'in the know'. Young people learning menstrual terminology for the first time play a 'dual role as both conservators and innovators in ways that tend to follow fundamental patterns, but are basically unpredictable' (Bauer and Bauer 2007, p. 185). In addition, because these terms are transmitted orally, linguistic processes affect transmission. Phrases may be half remembered, or modified to either reduce, or increase, the element of shock intended for the recipient, and certain terms may become more popular or less popular over time.

The Uses of Menstrual Terminology

Euphemisms can be vulgar as well as polite, and, in the case of menstrual terminology, they can have a third function, in that a person might choose a certain term in order to shock, or challenge, the status quo. This could be the female school student declaring 'I'm on the rag' to her peers, or else a male colleague jocularly asking his female co-worker whether she is at 'that time of the month'. Vulgar expressions making direct reference to menstruation could, if uttered in public by a male, have a negative effect on how a menstruating woman perceives herself, because, coupled with crude or base imagery, they draw attention on to the very facts that she is attempting to conceal. The negative connotations of terms, such as 'on the rag', 'jam ragging' or 'on the blob' can transfer to the woman,

making her feel that menstruation is something undesirable, negative, and to be ashamed of, rather than simply physiological. The use of vulgarity might also, of course, have a negative effect on how she sees the man in question.

Over the course of my study, I collected many idiosyncratic euphemisms and/or slang expressions that demonstrated a freedom to modify old phrases and a capacity to create new ones, which may delay reaction and make the listener think twice. Of the frequently quoted euphemisms, many have worn thin, and most adults have become fully aware of what they refer to. Although most menstrual euphemisms are transparent in their meaning, because they are in common usage, slang terms such as 'riding the red dragon', 'fanny pads ahoy', or 'the red river' allow the speaker to rename menstruation for themselves, through allusion to such matters as colour and sanitary protection. Ultimately, because the new expression will not be in common use, or does not refer overtly to menstruation, the listener has to think hard in order to recognize a significance that would be immediately clear to anyone with insider knowledge. This provides a basis for jokes (which I discuss in the next chapter). These are often used to transgress the boundaries of acceptable topics for conversation.

Talk Out of Place

In addition to the use of menstrual euphemisms, it is necessary to discuss 'talk out of place'. In these instances, individuals mention menstruation in a social setting in which it may be deemed inappropriate by others in the group. In this way, individuals can bring about a shift in power through mentioning a taboo topic in everyday social interaction. In the main, these interjections operate on a personal level, and are developed by individuals in order to challenge the perceived restrictions on the public discussion of menstruation. Approaching 'out of bounds topics' in social exchanges can enhance, or alter the status, of the speaker in both positive and negative ways, and by making reference to certain topics, the speaker can both shock and engage an audience. Controversy attracts attention, and there are kudos to be gained from daring to transgress the socially sanctioned boundaries concerning conversation topics. Mary Douglas argues that

there is 'power in the inarticulate area, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries' (Douglas 1966, p. 98), and by violating these restrictions placed on appropriate discourse, the transgressor gains 'power'. The descriptions of interactions between women and men that were given by my interviewees, indicate that, regardless of whether it is the woman or the man who breaks the perceived 'code of respectability' regarding menstruation, the result is a shift of power towards the one who has dared to transgress. In the following example, a woman (aged 31–45 years) breaks the code in order to gain control in a social situation. She appeals to an implicit knowledge of menstruation in her male audience. She transgresses without specifying exactly to what she is referring:

> F6C: […] when I was younger, I used to be able to set the time by it [period], and my friend used to come on two hours later, so we'd go to the pub, and I remember sitting with some male friends, and she just turned to them and said: '*Look*, *mate*, *you're in the worst place in the world*: *shut up*!'—It was countdown-time, and they said: 'Is there anything we could do to make you feel better?'—'*Large brandies all round*, *please*!'

The same woman also expressed a desire to use the perceived sensitivity of the topic to her advantage, and to turn to her favour the social codes governing the times when it can be spoken about. For example:

> F6C: I remember I used to annoy my father in my teens. I would talk about it, and my mother didn't really think that he should hear. So I was, like: '*Dad*, *I'm on my period*, *don't talk to me*', you know.

In this instance, she was using menstruation as a means of challenging paternal parental authority, by deliberately saying something that was outlined as inappropriate in her family group. The female school students also recognized that they could use sharing knowledge of their period to their advantage, invoking menstruation as an excuse to get out of activities they had no wish to join in with:

> F3A: I've got out of PE [physical education] before, for saying I had period pains.
>
> F1A: Yeah, you have, haven't you!

F3A: [Laughs]. Yeah. I've not even started mine yet, but I did say that.
F1A: It was swimming. You got your mum to write a letter, didn't you?
F3A: No, I wrote it. [Laughter].

Boys saw an inequality in the way that girls could manipulate a situation in order to get out of class, especially if the teacher happened to be male:

M3A: Yeah, like, lessons. If you have a supply teacher, not mentioning any names, then the girls'll say, like, to the teacher: 'I really need to go to the toilet', and they'll say: 'No, I'm sorry, 'cause you're not allowed', and they'll just, like, say: 'I *really* need to go', just to get out of lessons.
M4A: Yeah, 'cause it's a bit obvious, isn't it?
M3A: But the teacher can't say… 'cause if some girls don't want to talk to the teacher about it… or if it's a man as well, they can just get out of lessons, like, really easily.

Obviously, this also works in reverse, with males deliberately mentioning menstruation in order to provoke females. Some men admitted that they had teased girls about menstruation in order to get a reaction from them. This demonstrates how, under the pretext of 'humour', drawing attention to an inherently female experience and using it as a put-down can (re)assert male dominance in social situations. One interviewee recalled her brother using menstruation as a slur against women:

F2B: I've got three brothers and they would never mention it—the only time they would mention it would be to say something and about somebody. You know…like …erm…my second-oldest brother, he had quite a lot of, like, girlfriends…a bit of a tart…and he'd always use it as a slur.

During the interviews, some male respondents seemed to think that even taking part in the research was a transgression of normal boundaries. If they shared any information about my study with other men, it was done for reaction, as in the following comment:

M4B: When my mates asked me what I was doing tonight, I told them, straight up, 'I'm having an interview on menstruation'. You should have seen their faces!

Thus, mentioning a taboo topic can influence and shift the social equilibrium, and, as becomes apparent from the quotes above, this can either be done by men towards women, by women towards men, or even between individuals of the same sex. Period talk is powerful. It allows the speaker to draw on a well-established and pervasive axiom of perceived silence. In the disruption of this silence the speaker is able to explore, disrupt and test the gender norms that surround menstruation, and more generally. As is evident from the creativity demonstrated in the large number and variety of euphemisms collected, people can also find it amusing to play around with, and challenge, discourse. This is nowhere more evident than in joking, which is the focus of the next chapter.

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9

Mentioning the Unmentionable: 'Only Joking…'

Jokes, like euphemisms and slang, provide a means of discussing subjects that are sensitive. They are a means of broaching difficult topics, as well as a means of asserting influence, where the teller dares to transgress the accepted boundaries of topics for conversation. Through jokes, we dispel discomfort and break tension, and allow ourselves to express socially unacceptable and non-politically correct opinions. They are used to gain knowledge, test boundaries, and utilized as power-play in verbal exchanges.

Understanding Jokes

Jokes, and joking as a unique exchange of discourse, a social process, and a form of the exercise of power, have long been a focus of study for philosophers and linguists. The insertion of a joke can be used turn a situation around, break tension or cause insult. Sigmund Freud's *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (1905; English edition *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, 1976) became fundamental to later writing on jokes and joking. For Freud, jokes could be either innocent or tendentious:

V.L. Newton, *Everyday Discourses of Menstruation*,
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> The pleasurable effect of innocent jokes is as a rule a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearer. […] A non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious ones so irresistible. […] Where a joke is not an aim in itself—that is, where it is not an innocent one—there are only two purposes that it may serve, and these two can themselves be subsumed under a single heading. It is either a *hostile* joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, or defence) or an *obscene* joke (serving the purpose of exposure). (1976, pp. 139–40)

Many of the jokes that I came across in my research were tendentious, aimed at one particular group, menstruating women, and passing hostile and obscene comments about the physical state of such women. Thus, jokes are a cover under which to explore sensitive topics, which the teller finds intriguing, titillating, or exciting. A person who laughs at a dirty or taboo joke is, in a roundabout way, finding pleasure in activities, or opinions, which are not usually socially acceptable. However, amusement and enjoyment are not the only outcome of tendentious jokes. The effect of the joke is caused by the sensitive nature of the topic: in exploring a sensitive topic it therefore acts as a form of release or relief. The telling of a taboo, dirty or smutty joke allows a socially unacceptable opinion, or act, to be explored without fear of major repercussions. It is therefore arguable that jokes transgress social boundaries about what is considered 'wrong' to say without seriously challenging taboos.

'What's Red and White and Sits in Trees? Sanitary Owls!'

The joke in the subheading, above, although initially innocent at the outset, points in its punch line to knowledge about 'private matters'. Just as menstruation is a sign of womanhood, the knowledge and understanding implied by a joke also suggests a more developed understanding of the world, especially if shared by adolescents. Therefore jokes provide a means of sharing information, and through this, they can also be a form of social bonding. Sanford and Eder found that 'humour plays a central

role in adolescent socialization. Its ambiguous nature allows adolescents to explore sensitive issues, like sexuality, without having to reveal explicitly the extent of their actual knowledge in this area' (1984, p. 235). Jokes are a mode of learning. Joking about a subject which is not fully understood dissipates anxieties, but also offers a method of talking about something that they and others are experiencing, without divulging how much they do, or do not actually know. In addition, the ability to tell jokes can also be seen as a form of power: those in a peer group who know, tell, and understand the jokes, gain the respect and attention of others by doing so. The joke tellers are put in a position of influence.

Across the questionnaire survey, an awareness of jokes was given only by a small percentage of respondents. This is possibly because of their difficulty in recalling jokes. More men and boys than women and girls reported that they had heard jokes about periods (5.8 % of the males answering the questionnaire, compared to 1.4 % of girls and women). The most popular joke was: 'What bleeds for [a number of] days and doesn't die?'. One female respondent called the joke 'a classic', and one male (18–30 years) recalled that it featured in a controversial animation film:

> There is the *South Park* movie line about not trusting something that bleeds for 3 days and doesn't die, or something like that.[1]

There was variation in the wording of the joke, mainly regarding the number of days of bleeding. As argued in the previous chapter, variation of this kind demonstrates that the joke is a still-extant tradition, or popular form that is being communicated orally between social groups.

> F14B: Oh yeah, I've thought of a menstrual joke!
> VLN: Oh go on then…
> F14B: [laughs] Don't trust anything that bleeds for, like, 5 days and you can't see where it's, like, cut,…or something.

The fact that jokes about menstruation are told at all provides insight into how menstruation is dealt with and expressed in everyday life.

[1] *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (Paramount Pictures, 1999): 'Well, I'm sorry, Wendy. I just don't trust anything that bleeds for five days and doesn't die' (Mr Mackey to Wendy Testaburger).

As reported by my respondents, there are occasions when menstrual jokes will be told, just as there are occasions when they will not. Several interviewees reported that men made jokes and comments in a social situation where there were women present. They did this in order to see how the women reacted, providing us with an example of the wider gendered power-struggle between men and women:

> M1B: I don't think a period joke is that funny, when it's just a bunch of blokes. So when we're down the pub, it wouldn't be, 'Oh, here's a great one—it's a period joke', 'cause we'd be, like, 'That's actually not that funny'. I think what we actually crave is the reaction from the women more. […] We'll do silly jokes that are about, you know, blokey things, but we tend to reserve those ones for when there is a woman present—for the reaction. There is always…tends to be more of a reaction to that kind of a joke from a woman than from us, so […] we tend to reserve them for special occasions, when there are lots of women present.

In a male friendship group there might only be one or two individuals who frequently tell jokes for the amusement of others. In the above account, the men craved the reaction of women to jokes about menstruation. Among the school students, however, it was suggested that boys do not really understand menstruation and what it is to have a period, and this is why they joke about it and find it funny. In both cases, the humour is created from sexual difference:

> VLN: Do you think that boys and girls have different attitudes towards periods?
>
> F4A: Yeah. Boys, I think they think it's all funny…
>
> F5A: Yes, because they don't know what it's like, because they never have to do it, so they just think it's funny, and take the mickey out of you.
>
> VLN: Why do you think that the boys would treat it as a joke?
>
> M2A: 'Cause it don't happen to them.
>
> M1A: 'Cause they, like, don't really care about it, and stuff.

It became clear that it was the general subject of menstruation itself that the school students found amusing, and not really whether a woman was actually on her period:

F5A: No, I've never really thought about it, and I don't…I know they're, like, making a joke about it, but I don't think they are usually that interested in whether you are actually *on* the period or not, but just like making fun about it.

The jokes and teases might also be viewed as a means for the teenage boys to gain knowledge about females and sexuality. One male, in the 18–30 year age group, recalled teasing a girl about the size of tampon she used. This is intriguing, because it blurs the line between menstruation and sexuality. By insinuating that a girl needs a larger tampon, the boy is implying that she has a larger vagina. A larger vagina is generally seen as an indicator about a female's sexual history—her vagina is larger because she has had more sex:

M1B: […] I think there was something once about…the size of the tampons and the, well, not the size, but, like, the 'super', and I think somebody had 'super super', and it was, like, kind-of funny at the time, well, not funny, but we thought it could be used—as all 'teen boys do—that it could be used as something to tease them about. It's dreadful, isn't it?

Joking for adolescents can be a means of learning about the world around them. Menstrual jokes exaggerate or twist social observations and discourses. However, because their observations are allowed to be distorted within the context of a joke, the adolescents are not committing themselves to any concrete views, and, therefore, cannot be reprimanded for their misrepresentation or controversial viewpoint. The school students pick up on social discourses about sex difference and how menstruating women are perceived in society, and they then turn these into jokes or teases. One boy wrote on the questionnaire:

Q: Why do girls get periods?
A: They deserve them!

Some overlap of jokes, as reported by male and female school students, was present on the questionnaire. The boys reported taunting the girls with a call of 'Bloody Mary!', which the girls recalled as 'Oh look, it's

Bloody Mary'.[2] Another joke reported by the males was: 'If the river's running red, take the dirt track instead.' When this joke was reported by a girl, it had become: 'River's red!, go from behind!'. Here the boys' rhyme had been lost, though the implication remained the same, as a reference to anal sex as an alternative to menstrual sex. It appears there is a hierarchy of taboo or unclean sex, with anal sex being seen as either a better alternative to vaginal sex during the menstrual period, or that the menstrual period is a time to try and instigate anal sex. One woman (18–30 age group) went further in challenging the menstrual sex taboo: 'You're not a man until you've dipped your sword in blood.'

Overall, 12.0 % of all the females and 13.8 % of all the males answering the questionnaire said that teasing had taken place in their experience, while 5.5 % of the females reported that most of the menstrual teasing came from males. Examples of this teasing were:

- 'You're in a mood' or 'you've got PMS' (reported by 4.9 % of females);
- 'You smell' (2.2 % of females);
- 'You're on t'rag/the rag (2.2 % of females);
- 'You're on t'blob/the blob (1.4 % of females).

The female school students I interviewed also noted that they were teased about being unclean:

> F4A: They'll make a comment sometimes, like 'You're dirty, you're not clean if you have you're period, you know, 'cause you're dirty,' and stuff.

One male in the 18–30 age group reflected on how the girls had been teased when he was at school:

> M5B: I think it was just, like, as banter, you know—I don't think you could actually tell, but the rumour was, or just the, you know, abuse, was it?…was used, as, 'Oh, are you on your period? 'Cause we can smell it. You stink'.

[2] Oxford English Dictionary *Bloody Mary*: (1) A nickname for Mary Tudor (1516–1558), Queen Mary I of England (1553–1558), daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon [1657]; (2) A cocktail containing vodka, tomato juice, and other (usually pungent) flavourings, typically served with a celery stalk or similar garnish [1939].

'Banter' is often referred to as a means by which attitudes and behaviour can be covered up under the guise of humour (Phipps and Young 2015, p. 311). This statement reflects wider popular ideas about the need for women to manage their menstruation, and also, as menstruating women as unclean.

Some of the menstrual jokes I collected used traditional joke formulae, or word play, such as:

- What does an elephant use for a tampon? *A sheep!* (Female, over 60);
- Why is the Red Sea red? *Because Cleopatra used to bathe there periodically!* (Male, over 60);
- Why did the blonde jump off a building? *She thought her 'Always With Wings' would mean she could fly* (Female, 18–30);
- There will be no menstruation jokes. *Period!* (Female, 18–30).

The following joke also uses word play in its discussion of the materials of menstruation and the crossing of bodily boundaries:

> Two sanitary towels are floating down the sewer, they float towards two tampons and one sanitary towel says to the other, 'Hey you think we should talk to those two tampons?' The other replies, 'Nah, they're stuck up cunts' (Female, 18–30).

Other jokes I collected were more complex and narrative. For example, one man in the 18–30 age group wrote the following narrative joke on his questionnaire:

> A vampire walks into a pub, and approaches the barman and orders a pint of blood. 'Don't do blood', replies the barman. 'Oh', says the vampire. 'I'll have a pint of lager then, please.' The vampire takes the pint and sits at a table in the corner. A second vampire enters and approaches the bar. 'Pint of blood, please.' 'Don't do blood', replies the barman. 'Oh, pint of bitter then, please.' He takes his pint and joins the other vampire. A third vampire enters the pub and goes to the bar, and orders a pint of blood. 'I've told your mates, we don't do blood!' The vampire thinks for a second, 'Can I have a pint of boiling water please?' 'Yeah OK.' He takes his pint of boiling water and sits with his friends, taking out a used tampon and hanging it

> into the water. The other vampires look at him in bewilderment. 'What?' he says. 'You never heard of a teabag?'[3]

Another man in the 18–30 age group also recalled 'a long-winded joke about two vampires in a pub that culminates in a vampire producing a tampon and saying, "Haven't you ever heard of tea bags?"' This joke was also quoted by three women in the 18–30 age group, but more concisely: 'Vampire asking for hot water to make tea with a tampon', for example. It is possible that the women had heard the menstrual joke, but had paid little attention to it.

Another joke, about menstrual blood being ingested, was recalled by a female respondent in the 18–30 age group:

> I remember hearing a really tasteless one when I was about eleven about a woman having an affair and concealing the bloke when her husband came home in her underwear drawer and him mistaking used pads (don't know why she still had them hanging around …) for jam sandwiches.

Although the woman who provided the joke commented on how tasteless she found it, the idea that men do not understand menstruation also occurred in other menstrual jokes collected on the questionnaires. For example, I collected the following from a man in the 46–60 age group:

> Man chats up a young lady in a bar and asks if he can see her home. She replies 'Sorry but I'm on my menstrual cycle'. 'No problem', he replies, 'you go ahead and I'll follow in my Citroen.'

I would suggest that the telling of these jokes by boys and men demonstrate that the teller is 'in the know'. They are able to find both the butt of the joke and the man's humiliation funny. In the following joke, from a female respondent in the 18–30 age group, the misunderstanding is caused by innocence:

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[3] *Urbandictionary* (2003) logs Vampire Teabag as 'Another name for a tampon, specifically a bloody one.'

> Two young boys go into a pharmacy and pick up a box of tampons. The man at the counter asks the older boy, 'How old are you?' The boy replies, 'Eight.' The man says, 'Do you know what these are for?' The boy goes, 'They aren't for me, they're for him. We saw it on the TV that if you buy these you can swim and ride a bike. Right now he can't do either.'

Other jokes dealt with exposure that results from making private matters public, as in the following joke that was told in an interview:

> Two women walking down the road, dressed up for a night out. One says to the other, 'Why do you have a tampon behind your ear?' The other one replies, 'Oh my God! What have I done with my fag?'

When I asked the man who told it (from the 18–30 age category) what he thought of the joke, which he had first seen printed on a comic postcard propped up on his aunt's window-sill, he replied:

> M6B: It was quite amusing…I was quite young when I saw it actually … and my auntie had it on her window-sill, because somebody had bought it for her.
>
> VLN: It must have made an impression on you, though, because you remembered it.
>
> M6B: I did remember it. I remember…just…, 'cause I can actually remember these two women in the cartoon picture were absolutely repulsive, and it was just so…I suppose you'd say, 'rude'.

The women who were the butt of this joke were shown on the postcard as being 'repulsive', hence through association menstruation itself becomes something repulsive and shaming, which, besides disturbing usually-observed public and private boundaries, also infringes personal, social and bodily boundaries. In the following narrative, given as a 'joke', a woman is put to shame purely because she has failed to control her 'backstage' bodily functions (menstruation and has sex), which are made public:

> Well…There was a guy and a girl who had sex one night, but unfortunately the girl was on her period and didn't realize. The story was spread around. Obviously they didn't talk after this. However, one night they were in the

> same club. She was at the bar and one of the guy's friends came up to her. He kept saying, 'Go on, he's over there, you have another chance'. She kept saying 'No'. Eventually, the friend gave up, and said, 'What are you ordering?—A Bloody Mary?' (Woman, 18–30 age group)

The man who has spread rumours about her and shamed her, now ignores her, and her refusal to talk to him, even when prompted by a friend, reflects this, so the friend feels he must insult her further by offering her a 'Bloody Mary', an implicit reference to menstruation.

Jokes also revolved around perceptions of mood changes and PMT. The idea of a menstruating woman being angry was a theme in women's jokes:

- How many women with PMT does it take to change a light bulb? *One, for fuck's sake!* (female, 31–45 age group)
- What is the difference between a pre-menstrual woman and a bulldog chewing a wasp? *Nothing!* (female, 31–45 age group)

The bulldog joke could also be interpreted as a warning for men to keep their distance. This is overt in the following aphorism, which refers to PMT being used successfully as a defence in court: 'I'm on my period and therefore legally able to kill you.' (female, 18–30 age group). Something similar was given by a male (18–30 years) in what would be considered a 'sick joke', since it draws a comparison between a woman on her period and Myra Hindley (1942–2002), the infamous Pennine Moors murderess of 1963–1965:

> What is the difference between Myra Hindley and a woman on her period? *One's a crazy, ranting woman, and the other is Myra Hindley*.

Although jokes appear to disrupt social boundaries, explore 'unsafe' ideas, and question authority, they are a powerful conservative force. By recognizing what is taboo in the joke, and laughing at it, we are acknowledging that the content of the joke is not an acceptable thing to mention, or do, in everyday life. Thus the joke reinforces existing gendered power structures, ideologies, codes of conduct, societal norms, and values. It is a safety-valve, allowing exploration without breaking

boundaries. As Alan Dundes noted: '[folklore] treat[s] in fantasy what is avoided in reality' (1987, p. 4).

Many jokes and teases hinged on differences between women and men, and as noted, some focused on negative aspects of mood. These referred to a woman as being subject to her hormones and unable to control her mood, as well as to her perceived poorer performance, when compared with a man in the workplace. One male interviewee said of this inequality:

> M2E: When I was in full-time teaching, if a woman had been under-performing (and I've known this, I've known this professionally) in her job, and I've said, 'What's up with [name], then?'—'Oh well, you know she's going through "that time"…"that time of the month",—but the contrast is that in the man's case, if you said, 'Oh, bloody hell, I had a really, really bad night, I was pissed out of my mind last night', that's totally accepted.

This was also a theme recognized and enacted by the male students in the classroom:

> M4A: Yeah, we, like, say stuff about teachers when they're all mardy.
> M3A: Yeah, if the teachers are all like grumpy [laughter], oh God! [laughter], then, then they'll [the boys] just say, like, *Period!* [laughter], like, muttered to their mates.

This also occurred between peers at school. One man (M5B, 18–30 years) reflected:

> Yeah, it was common, like, if a girl was angry or 'angsty', you'd be, like, 'Oh, what are you—on the blob?', or, 'What's the matter? You got your period, or something?'—so it was using it as an excuse for any kind of slightly odd atmosphere, and they'd, it would just normally shut people up, 'cause they'd be, like, 'No, no, I'm not! Shut up!'

In the main, there was a strong association between periods and bad moods. When I asked the male school students if they knew what PMT was, they started making up words to fit, all of which were negative: 'Period, Moody, Trauma—Yeah! Period–Moody–Trauma!' (M3/4/5A)

This association was also made within close relationships, and in school and at work:

> M1B: My sister was always grumpy in the mornings, and things like that, and we always used to tease her, 'Oh, is it that time of the month?'…I'm not sure that it was, probably 80 % of the time we were saying it.

Although many male interviewees made this stereotyped comment, some also felt that women used periods simply as an excuse to be angry or to justify a mood:

> M6B: I don't know, it just seems like it could be just a cop-out for when a woman is in a foul mood—she can just blame it on her PMT, and everyone is just, like, 'Oh, it's fine…it's fine, then'.

From the female point of view, this immediate association of bad moods with periods may prejudice a woman's ability to express herself freely, since she is seen as being no longer in control of her moods, and her hormones have taken over. One interviewee (F9B) pointed out:

> Slightest little thing, if I get annoyed or anything, he [her boyfriend] always says, 'Oh, my God! Is it that time of the month again?', and I'm, like, 'Actually no, it isn't. I'm just in a mood with you'.

While it is a positive thing to be able to speak about at least one aspect of menstruation in public, it is striking that this same aspect is something which, as Sophie Laws tells us, can be used as a put-down:

> While women have wanted to be able to speak in public about mood change related to the menstrual cycle, 'premenstrual tension', as it has emerged, is an idea which has many benefits for men. It can be used publicly to discredit women generally, and privately to undermine a particular woman at particular moments. (Laws 1990, p. 214)

In popular literature and culture, PMS/PMT was seen as a jibe which could be used by males every time a woman was in a mood that others saw as less than perfect. It was not seen as acceptable, or normal, for a

woman to have fluctuations in her mood and behaviour, since these are not consistent with the male-biased viewpoint of the human body. In consequence, popular magazines aimed at women paid a great deal of attention to PMS, not least in the reporting of the 'PMS murders' in the UK in the 1980s, where PMS was accepted as a mitigation of murder.[4] However, discourses about PMS do not always benefit women or make menstruation a less difficult subject. PMS discourses can depict women as subject to control by hormones, which make them irritable, irrational, argumentative and aggressive.

We should, perhaps, ask how women are supposed to have a positive attitude towards menstruation, when menstruation and the changes that take place during the menstrual cycle are continually medicalized as problematic. On the one hand, as a society we maintain that we do not really want to hear about menstruation, since this is a private process and should be kept that way; so if a woman feels unwell, she should take painkillers and carry on as normal, as seen in television and magazine adverts. On the other hand, ribald remarks are passed, and jokes told, about menstruation and PMS whenever a woman is being argumentative. If the woman is accused of menstruating—'What are you? On the rag or something?'—she loses face. Instances such as these contribute towards the reinforcement of gender differences and the gendered balance of power:

> What we have is a menstrual etiquette, part of a larger etiquette of behaviour between the sexes, which governs who may say what to whom, and in what

[4] www.abc.net.au/health/features/stories/2005/12/08/1836110.htm, accessed 30 June 2009: (UK court trials 1981) 'Twenty-nine-year-old barmaid Sandie Craddock got off a murder charge after stabbing another worker to death when she pleaded diminished responsibility because of PMS. The judge accepted the argument that PMS was a mitigating factor in the incident because it turned Craddock "into a raging animal each month".'

(UK court trials 1981) 'Christine English [36] killed her married lover when she rammed him against a pole with her car after a fight. The court was told English had an aggravated form of PMS which contributed to a drop in blood sugar and an over-production of adrenalin before the incident. The court reduced the murder charge to manslaughter on grounds of diminished responsibility.'

(UK court trials 1988) 'Anna Reynolds [18] killed her mother by hitting her on the head with a hammer. At her trial, it was argued that she suffered from PMS, which led to the temporary loss of control and impairment, reducing her culpability. The murder charge was reduced to manslaughter.'

> context. Women are discredited by any behaviour which draws attention to menstruation (Laws 1990, p. 211)

Behind the jokes and teasing about menstruation lies the reproduction and reinforcement of an already established underlying social order. Poking fun at what we do not speak about does not break the everyday silence, but can reinforce it:

> Though jokes feed on subversive thought, on deviations from the normal and expected, they reinforce established views of the world. Though their content appears to undermine norms, […] established power and authority, jokes are potent in preserving the status quo. (Wilson 1979, p. 228)

Even so, joking, like euphemism, does have a dual quality, in that it allows for a form of public 'talking about menstruation'. There is a need to talk about it and so people find their own methods and their own ways. When silence dominates, it is vernacular discourse, as discussed here and in the previous chapter, which rises to fill it. This is not only the case for menstruation, but for other sensitive topics, such as sex and death, too.

Breaking the Silence: Visual Menstrual Discourses

Many young risk-taking adults are readily tempted to test the limits of perceived restrictions, of whatever kind. But not too radically, of course: drawing attention to a subject in order to shock others ultimately only reaffirms what is acceptable. Echoing Douglas's definition of dirt as 'matter out of place' (1966, p. 35), menstrual practical joking is usually preoccupied with sanitary products, tampons and towels, placed outside their intended context. The products are brought into a front-stage setting, and attention is drawn to them in public, whereas usually they are unseen, relegated to handbags, drawers, toilets. To give an example from my own experience, I once saw university students drop a tampon into a pint of 'snakebite-and-black' [a lager, cider and blackcurrant mix], and then leave it outside the bar exit-door, as though 'used'. On another occasion,

a clean, but unwrapped, panty-liner was dropped on a sofa in a student bar, allowing 'pollution beliefs' once more to come into play. Despite being 'clean', the panty-liner had become repulsive and dirty. No one would sit on that sofa, and a comment from a male student about to sit there was: 'Eww, mate! Would you fucking look at that!' By later on that evening someone had dripped blackcurrant on it, visually reinforcing the idea that it had been used. When sanitary products are made ridiculous in this way, it is a form of social control which draws attention to women's bodies as though being in need of 'tending' or 'repair', and thus reinforces patriarchal normativity over them.

Menstrual practical joking appears to be established in student culture. Many of the instances of visual joking that I collected took place in university student bars and at student parties. University students are well-known to have 'licence' to play practical jokes and engage in high jinks, due to their status as a social group unrestrained by family ties or considerations of employment. They also form an entity in its own right, a self-contained group with shared practices and language use. The following visual joke about menstruation that I saw took place in a student bar in 2008, during a discussion about my research topic. When the males in the group mentioned that they had never seen a tampon, a tampon was passed around, and the result was a joke, when one student pretended to smoke both it and its applicator, prompting great guffaws.

An earlier example of menstrual joking that carried over into visual display took place in 2006, at a so-called 'Bad Taste Fancy-dress Party'. Two male students, independently from each other, had decided to dress up as used tampons. When they arrived at the party, each was disappointed to learn that his original 'theme' had been duplicated, but humour soon took over and the mood was restored. The intention of the party was for people to dress up in a provocative, non-politically correct way, in order to shock. Used tampons were quite acceptable, as were other shocking costumes, such as versions of Saddam Hussein (who was due to be executed at the time), 'Superman' actor Christopher Reeve in a wheelchair, and Steve Irwin, Australian TV wildlife presenter, with the stingray which killed him protruding from his chest. All these representations would be viewed by many, if not most, people as being in the very worst taste, but what they have in common is that they dealt with a *very* difficult and

sensitive subject: death. Death is another topic which people find it very difficult to speak openly about in our culture. For the students, extremely distasteful costumes which dealt with such a subject provided transgression of socially acceptable conduct under the guise of 'banter'.

In university sports teams, there can be wholly male groupings in which displays of masculinity are conspicuous. From such teams I collected two examples of highly gendered menstrual lore. My first example came from a UK university American-football team, which holds an Awards Evening every year. Once the serious presentations have been made, attention turns to the 'Tampax Award'. The player receiving this is the one who has sustained the greatest number of injuries during the season, and carries the slogan 'In for a week, out for a month'. The award itself is a packet of sanitary towels and a box of paracetamol painkillers (rather than tampons, and perhaps accuracy came second to the spectacle of presenting the award).

One respondent in the 18–30 age bracket provided the second example on his questionnaire, noting that when he was at university, the men's hockey club used to sing a song called 'Tampax Factory', at the club's Wednesday-night drinking sessions. The song's chorus went as follows:

> For weeeeee,
> Tampax factoreeee
> Shout out your orders loud and clear, loud and clear.
> We got large, we got small
> Oh, we supply them all
> When the end of the month comes around.

This was accompanied by many verses on the theme of 'Why you can't shag your bird (because she's on her period)', always introduced by 'You can tell by…' A few examples included:

> You can tell by the smell that she isn't very well
> You can tell by the moaning that she's leaking haemoglobin
> You can tell by the rope that you haven't got a hope
> You can tell by the cunt that you'll have to anal shunt.

This verse reinforces the idea that, just like menstruating women themselves, vaginal menstrual sex is unacceptable. It reinforces the position of

the menstruating woman as unavailable and that for sex to take place a man would *have* to use the situation to attempt to instigate anal sex with her. The song sets in high contrast the hyper-masculinity expected of the sports hero against the perceived 'flaws' expected of women. Phipps and Young (2015) argue that this kind of 'lad culture', characterised by competitiveness and misogyny, has enormous sociocultural power and impacts upon both identity and experience.

Nor was composing verses about menstruation confined to university students. Some of the school students informed me that boys would compose verses that mocked the girls for their menstruation:

> F4A: Yeah! In PD, they [boys] just come out with songs.
> VLN: Are they, like, do they…are they the same songs every time, or do they just make them up on the spot?
> F4A: …make them up on the spot! They'll all sit there, and then they'd, like—one person will say something, and then everyone else will add to it… all the other boys.

One male school student, aged 12, even wrote down a 'song' on his questionnaire:

> My fanny's bleeding dun dun dun,
> my fanny's bleeding dun dun dun,
> I'm having a period!

So we can see that that breaking the menstrual taboo in the form of joking and teasing appeals to adolescents and young adults, alike. While the examples that I collected indicate that it is more common amongst the males, females do also occasionally participate. Thus adolescents and young adults add shock value to already existing popular, but transgressive, ribaldry. Students singing bawdy songs is not a new phenomenon, but the incorporation of the 'Tampax' imagery pushes the performance one step further beyond the boundaries of what is politically correct and socially acceptable. What may previously have remained unsaid, is apparently fair game. These discourses, often extremely distasteful, position the menstruating girl and woman in society. Exposing them through joking, slang and bawdy songs,

reinforces an etiquette which ensures that menstruation, as a physical process, is kept within bounds, and 'in place'. At the same time, girls and women are also put in their place.

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10

Closed for Maintenance: Backstage Spaces, and Selling Shame

This chapter discusses the structures which determine and influence the production and reproduction of menstrual etiquette. Drawing on the conceptualization of social control found in Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* (1971) and *Discipline and Punish* (1977), power does not flow down from individuals, but is held and exercised within networks. Within these networks, social control can be exercised through the observation and sequestration of problematic individuals and behaviour. In Foucault's terms, bodily functions, such as menstruation are 'confined' within appropriate boundaries, and kept there by discourses that compel us to carry out activities in their proper place and to do the accepted thing. How symbolically-marked boundaries connect and interact with each other helps to construct our concepts of female and the feminine, and what 'normal' behaviour, appearance, and experience equate to. Susan Bordo puts this as follows:

> Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female

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> bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement'. (2003, p. 166)

Apparently trivial activities, such toilet habits, polite etiquette and table manners can thus be viewed as modes of social control. Sanitary products are rigorously kept from the public gaze, and just as 'any landscape is composed of both the seen and the unseen; what is hidden may be as telling as what is on display' (Rebecca Ginsburg 1996, p. 374). These spatial regulations impress attitudes of appropriate behaviour on us and impel us to conform to societal values. However, the same levels of privacy have not always been demanded of the human body as in contemporary society; it is worth reiterating here that each culture and historical period has had its own ways of viewing the body. With regard to the growth of privacy, Deborah Lupton remarks:

> The heightened concern with regulating and policing the openings of the body and what is emitted from them is a specifically modern approach, developed in the wake of the 'civilized' body. (1998, p. 86)

Hence, as everyday social life became more regulated, so too did our relationship to the body and its processes. Mary Douglas draws parallels between society and the body:

> The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body. (1966, p. 115).

What is expelled from the boundaries of our bodies can thus be seen as problematic, if not utterly undesirable. In the historical development of privacy around the body, 'containing one's body boundaries and exerting more control over the disbursement of one's bodily fluids became a central aspect of proper deportment' (Lupton 1998, p. 78).

Beliefs concerning pollution to some extent serve to keep bodily matter within its 'proper' bounds. In the UK, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, the most desirable kind of body came to be seen as one which is whole, does not leak, and is contained and controlled: 'We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind' (Douglas 1966, p. 121). In contemporary Western societies, women's rather than men's bodies tend to be subject to this control, because women's bodies 'leak' and have more anatomical entrances and exits. The development of the 'closed' body led to the identification of certain bodies as:

> less contained, less able to control the flux of fluid emotions into the external world and therefore as less 'civilized'. In the context of western cultures, these include members of disadvantaged social groups such as the poor, working class, non-whites and women. (Lupton 1998, p. 104)

It is within this historical context that women today are keeping their menstruation within bounds and away from public view, and managing their periods so that the blood is contained and does not pollute the immediate environment by soiling clothes and chairs. A woman manages her menstruation both on behalf of herself and on behalf of others, so that others do not see her pollution.

It became evident during the course of my fieldwork that while individual experiences may vary in specific detail, many of the interviewees shared the same common experiences, had the same worries, and told the same stories about menstruation. This goes some way towards demonstrating how societal discourses act upon women's bodies, regulating not only bodily functions but also, beyond that, bodily experiences. Women put pressure on themselves to police their own bodies, and expect similar behaviour from others: 'Menstrual etiquette depends most fundamentally for its success upon women's ability and willingness to watch themselves' (Ginsburg 1996, p. 373). Lee and Sasser Coen (1996, p. 60) similarly note that: 'Young women play a significant role in their own subordination through these practices of femininity, even though they may experience the competence that goes along with the careful and thorough management of bodily processes.'

A Place for Everything, and Everything in its Place

Over the course of my research, I became increasingly aware that women's toilets had a role as gendered 'back-stage' spaces: away from the male gaze, where more open discussion can be held about menstruation and where, for example, if a woman is caught out by her period and does not have any towels or tampons, it is acceptable to ask a stranger for such things. The toilet is also a place that is scripted with signs about where and how bodies are managed. It has also become a site of activism and political commentary, insofar as women's toilets facilitate the scrawling of messages concerning 'alternative' menstrual products, and contain signage providing women with directions for the 'proper' disposal of their used tampons and towels. 'Latrinalia', or graffiti in public toilets, is fascinating; women's toilets, no less than men's, have long been inscribed with the political, religious, sarcastic, and often provocative messages of anonymous hands. Emily Martin (1989, p. 95) writes about the gendered space of toilets:

> These private areas also allow certain forms of resistance […] the double-edged nature of the shame of women's bodily functions here works in their favour: if private places must be provided to take care of what is shameful and disgusting, then those private places can be used in subversive ways.

Some of this subversion is reserved for sanitary products. Reusable ('alternative') menstrual products now include cups, sponges, and washable pads. One form of menstrual cup is branded 'Mooncup', and I first found it advertised on the wall of the women's toilets in a University Students' Union in 2006. I have seen it advertised many times since in public toilets. Mooncup is a silicon, cup-shaped device that can be inserted in the vagina to catch the menstrual flow. The cup is then taken out and the blood poured away. The appliance is promoted as being healthier than tampons, because of the link between tampons and Toxic-Shock Syndrome, and recent debates about the levels of dioxin present in tampons.[1] Mooncup

[1] A carcinogen brought about by the bleaching of the rayon material used in tampons.

is also marketed as a more eco-friendly method of managing menstruation; the potential woman customer is told that she need buy only one Mooncup, whereas over her lifetime she will use over 11,000 disposable sanitary products. The Mooncup's marketing assures us that these products, with their packaging and applicators, will end up as landfill or in the sea.[2]

Regardless of the fact that the Mooncups are reusable, and promoted as healthier and greener, they are not considered 'mainstream'. For example, another Mooncup advertisement that I saw had been defaced with an additional bullet point: 'Safer, Greener, *weirder*, Cheaper', and a further instance of graffiti was found on the wall nearby: 'Mooncups are rubbish, just another form of guilt'. This feminist message makes the point that women are shamed into concealing their menstruation and that the prospect of having to consider using a 'greener, safer' option to save the world 'one flow at a time' is just another burden to bear.

Another type of reusable product, Jam Sponge, was also advertised in the same women's toilets. Drawing explicitly on vernacular euphemisms that I documented in Chap. 8, the advert tells us that, 'Jam Sponge is a natural sea sponge that you can use instead of a tampon. Aunt Flo recommends them!'[3] To which an anonymous graffitist had responded, 'Is anyone really worried about this idea of a "jam sponge"!!?!? I think it's the name that gets me.' This may be because the name 'Jam Sponge' rejects polite, euphemistic names for similar products. It moves into an informal sphere, draws on slang terms and references, and has crossed the boundary of what is deemed 'proper'. The marketing taps into vernacular discourses in which 'jam rag' is a popular term for a sanitary towel, and the allusions continue with, 'Don't beat around the bush! Aunt Flo recommends them'. 'Bush' is, of course, a slang term for pubic hair, while 'Aunt Flo is in town', as we saw in Chap. 8, is a way of saying you are having your period. As in the case of Mooncups, the graffiti is perhaps a condemnation of the use of coarse slang terms in menstrual advertising, as derogatory to women, and a resistance to reusable projects as just another form of coercing women's bodies and making women feel guilty about how they

[2] www.mooncup.co.uk. Accessed 1 December 2009.

[3] www.jamsponge.co.uk. Accessed November 2009.

manage their menstrual flow. These examples demonstrate that women's self-policing of the control of their menstruation, may extend to writing visual, public comments on toilet walls in order to protest against what they see.

In addition to stickers advertising alternative menstrual products, I also recorded signs in women's toilets that, placed on the walls and doors of cubicles, offered instruction on the disposal of used towels and tampons. Sometimes the language was straightforward: 'phs [Personal Hygiene Services]—please place tampons and towels in the disposal unit provided. Thank You.' Against this, however, many were ambiguous, or made coded reference to the disposal of this kind of waste. Some signs were wholly euphemistic, especially the 'non-commercial' ones such as the one I saw in a café in a shopping centre in October 2009: 'Please only put toilet tissue down the toilet'. In some instances, paper bags carried the message 'Please use Sanitary disposal provided' (Southall's Hygiene Services, in a university toilet, June 2009), while bins might be labelled 'For Feminine Hygiene Use Only' (shopping centre toilet, November 2009). Terms like 'sanitary disposal' and 'feminine hygiene', which occur again and again are not plain messages, but euphemisms providing distance from the reality of what they represent (the disposal of used tampons and towels). By verbally wrapping the process in this way, it appears more formal, clinical and thus sterile, while the actual meaning is left for the art of British understatement to interpret. Women must be instructed in every instance on how to 'care' for their bodies properly. They are inundated with reminders to keep their bodily processes within check, to dispose of their waste in the correct place and in the correct manner.

Sanitary bins are placed in toilets. These are areas away from the public gaze and designed for the sole purpose of dealing with transgressive material in the 'right' way in the 'right' place. In reality, however, the facilities provided for women to carry out these tasks often fall short of these expectations, and are inadequate for ease and comfort. Sue Cavanagh and Vron Ware, in *At Women's Convenience*, their handbook on the design of women's public toilets, address these issues:

> Sanitary towel bins are a common form of disposal system and they have the advantage of being relatively cheap, easily located in each cubicle and

> with no fear of mechanical breakdown. Disadvantages are that bins can be offensive if not emptied regularly; they also take up space and in small cubicles, particularly those with service panels that have back walls close to the WC pan, they are often too close to women's clothes and bodies when they are seated. (1990, p. 65)

However, after consideration of other possible methods of disposal, including the communal incinerators that are now mostly no longer used, they 'recommend that a system of sanitary towel and tampon disposal is incorporated into each cubicle, so that women do not have to carry them outside and dispose of them more publicly' (1990, p. 66).

As pressures on space become ever more evident, sometimes women's cubicles are not big enough to accommodate these bins in an effective manner. Opening the lid of a bin crammed next to the toilet can be difficult for a person seated, and in some confined cubicles, there is scarcely any room at all. The most incredible positioning of a sanitary bin I have so far seen was in a pub toilet in London in 2015. There the bin was placed high up on a window sill, precarious, and behind the toilet. Any slight tremor could have sent this particular bin, complete with its contents, crashing down, straight onto the head of the user seated below. The contents of any resultant claim for exemplary damages can only be imagined.

Advertisements for Menstrual Materials

There is a growing literature about the menstrual products industry and its advertising. For example, Elizabeth Kissling has written about the business of menstruation in *Capitalizing on the Curse* (2006), while the cultural and political history of menstrual hygiene technology is discussed by Sharra Vostral in *Under Wraps* (2008). Rather than review this literature in depth, my goal here is to position the subject within my participants' observations on menstruation as they viewed it in the mass media and popular culture, and the wider social context. When I asked my respondents about the advertising of menstrual products, a significant number of the adults commented on the relatively recent arrival of menstrual advertising on domestic TV screens. It is, indeed, only since

1986 that adverts for menstrual products have been broadcast on UK television.[4] Television advertising is particularly important, because it is not restricted to women viewers in the same way that advertisements in women's magazines might be.

It is unsurprising, but somewhat disappointing, that one of the most commonly reinforced ideas on TV is that menstrual blood is something 'dirty'. The advertising industry presents menstruation as predominantly a hygiene issue, implicitly reiterating and reinforcing the stereotypical and traditional viewpoint that menstrual blood is 'unclean'. Women's menstruating bodies are presented as polluting and in need of management, in order to keep their blood-flow in check, using sanitary products that are specifically designed, we are told, to keep women 'clean'. Lee and Sasser-Coen (1996, p. 68) argue that, 'such "sanitary" products are designed to help women decontaminate themselves and protect others from their potentially polluting influences, as well as to conceal evidence of their periods from the world'. The power of the advertisements is derived from the coupling of 'slick advertising techniques of modern times with the strictures of an ancient taboo against menstruating women' (Treneman 1988, p. 154).

There are guidelines for the TV advertising of sanitary products.[5] To some extent, these guidelines both inhibit and open up discourse.

[4] http://www.bized.co.uk/current/mind/2005_6/120905.htm. Accessed 19 January 2008.

[5] Notes of guidance for the advertising of sanitary protection are available on Clearcast, a non-governmental organization which pre-approves British TV advertising. In March 2010 there were eight guidelines which referred specifically to sanitary products (http://www.clearcast.co.uk; 2 March 2010). These were as follows: *Avoiding offence and embarrassment*: 'This product category [sanitary protection] is unusually sensitive and commercials for it can easily cause offence or embarrassment even among people who have no objection in principle to its being advertised on television. Because it is often viewed in a family setting, television advertising needs to be treated with restraint and discretion.' (Para 15.1.1); *Appeals to insecurity*: 'No commercial may contain anything which, either directly or by implication, is likely to undermine an individual's confidence in her own standards of personal hygiene. No implication of, or appeal to, sexual or social insecurity is acceptable. Commercials may not suggest, by whatever means, that menstruation is in any way unclean or shameful and variations of the word 'clean' are unacceptable in advertising for this product category, as are other potentially offensive words such as 'odour'. (Para 15.1.2); *Visual treatments and product description*: 'Visual treatments much be tasteful and restrained, and particular care is needed with shots of unwrapped towels or tampons, whether actual or diagrammatic. Detailed references, whether in sound or vision, should avoid graphic descriptions which might offend or embarrass viewers.' (Para 15.1.3); *Comparisons*: 'Comparisons which name or otherwise identify a comparative product are not acceptable.' (Para 15.1.4); *Promotional techniques and*

Advertisers are told that the product category is 'unusually sensitive' and should be treated with 'restraint and discretion'. There are also restrictions on times of broadcast. However, the same guidelines state that, 'No commercial may contain anything which, either directly or by implication, is likely to undermine an individual's confidence in her own standards of personal hygiene'. What's more, 'commercials may not suggest, by whatever means, that menstruation is in any way unclean or shameful'. Nevertheless, the majority of adverts appeal to the insecurities that women have about their bodies, and to their need to retain control and keep their menstruation a secret. If they did not, they would not be effective as advertising.

Indirect and direct references to odour and cleanliness are not uncommon. For example, in an advertisement for 'Carefree-plus' panty-liners, which was broadcast in March 2010, the voice-over informed the female viewer that:

> It is incredible how the new Carefree-plus can change your life. Discover from Carefree the plus in protection which can control *odour* for up to 12 hours to keep you fresh all day long.

In this particular advertisement, a woman goes through a door in her bathroom, which opens up on to a carnival-style street party. There, odour-free and carefree, she dances with a handsome male actor. It is only in recent years that scented sanitary products have come on to the market; these scented tampons, towels and panty-liners give out the message

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testimonials: 'Normal promotional techniques, e.g. on-pack offers or samples, are acceptable. Testimonials, whether from members of the public or celebrities, are also acceptable. However, claims or impressions of medical endorsement of a product are not acceptable.' (Para 15.1.5); *Presenters and voice-overs*: 'Female presenters and voice-overs are generally more appropriate than male in commercials for sanitary protection products. However, the acceptability of male presenters and voice-overs will be judged on the merits of individual cases.' (Para 15.1.6); *Very young women*: 'Particular discretion is required when referring to a product's suitability for very young women. Girls appearing in advertisements for sanitary towels should be, and appear to be, at least 14 years old. In the case of advertisements for tampons, the acceptable minimum ages of girls featured depends on the context.' (Para 15.1.7); *Restrictions on times of transmission*: 'Sanitary Protection advertisements may not be transmitted in or adjacent to children's programming or programmes, which though not specifically children's programmes, may be of particular appeal to younger children under 10.' (Para 15.1.8)

that women's genitals are really very smelly, and that any discharge must be concealed with a flowery perfume.

Advertisers promote the idea that menstruation is a female affliction for which numerous care-products, or 'cures', must be purchased. Although the explicit emphasis is on the positivity of smelling good, it is implicit—but nonetheless clear—that without these products women run the risk of leaking, smelling, being unclean and being unhealthy. As Park notes: 'A post-modern marketing strategy […] masks this renewed version of female biology as destiny, making it appear we can cure our ailments by simple consumption' (1996, p. 165). As new products come onto the market, with added 'safety' features to protect against leakage and to keep menstrual blood safely within the bounds of the product, women are led to believe that if they do not buy into the latest gimmicky sanitary product, they run the risk that their menstrual blood will stain and contaminate their clothes, and also their reputation.

The need to be in control of one's bodily functions is the key to understanding how the influences and pressures of menstrual advertising and etiquette bear down on girls and women. Lee and Sasser-Coen note the links between discipline and advertising:

> Self-discipline and policing through the everyday acts of feminine bodily care and the use of menstrual products and other commodities perpetuates corporate capitalism at the same time that it creates disciplined bodies. (1996, p. 69)

In menstrual advertising, women are bombarded with images of freedom (i.e. being in control) and of lives that are successful, stress-free and fulfilling. However, in order to have this kind of life, women must buy whichever product is being advertised. Women being in control of their lives and their bodies boil down to obedient consumption.

In a 'Bodyform' campaign, broadcast in October 2007, the idea of consumer-driven menstrual success became clear. In an advertisement drawing on a discourse of fashion and image, a highly fashionable young woman appears, whose image is then ruined by the revelation that she is menstruating. The young woman is depicted walking along the pavement

carrying her fashionable dog, a Chihuahua, in her handbag. When she reaches her destination, she enters the building, puts her bag on the floor, and, to her absolute mortification, the Chihuahua jumps out and runs off with a sanitary towel stuck to its rear-end. It only becomes clear then that the advert is promoting Bodyform towels, which come with a free container, so that they do not spill out in handbags. Women are thus pressured to use Bodyform, with the container, in order to keep their sanitary products out of sight and their menstruation a secret, successfully hidden away.

The need for concealment is strongly reinforced by the advertising industry. The fact that the girl depicted in the Bodyform advert is high-styled in the latest fashions, and groomed to perfection, shows how female bodies are expected to present themselves in order to appear properly feminine. This control of self-presentation, maintaining an appearance, is time-consuming and expensive, and the message is clear: women must discipline their body if they are to be successful, fashionable, and presumably wealthy. The girl in the Bodyform advert conforms to this image, but the message for the consumer is that it is vulnerable: all this can easily be shattered. No matter how much effort you put into your grooming, if you do not use the right sanitary product your public façade may crack, revealing you for what you are, a menstruating woman. No amount of make-up or expensive clothes can save you, if your choice of sanitary product is not Bodyform, with its accompanying container.

As one last example of how using a particular product can be sold to women in order to apparently enhance their lives, I looked at a 'Tampax Compak' advertising campaign from 2007. The heroine of this advertisement faces three challenges. Firstly, she is menstruating. Secondly, she has taken a risk on her clothes: she is wearing a skirt and white underwear (and, into the bargain, she is unaware that her skirt has become tucked up in her knickers). Finally, she is surrounded by men, who point and stare because they can see her knickers, and who might discover her secret, that she is menstruating. She overcomes these challenges by taking care to have the correct protection. She is wearing a Tampax Compak with a skirt, and thus has no visible bulky sanitary pad marks. She is not at risk of

leaking, and the product itself gives her sufficient confidence to overcome the embarrassing situation. She comes out on top by successfully passing as not menstruating, and by humiliating the men who were pointing at her by telling one of them that his trouser flies are undone.

The, previously very serious, demeanour of menstrual advertising has been changing in recent years. The Tampax Compak campaign demonstrates a humorous thread, with the girl 'getting her own back' on the boy who mocks her. Another campaign that was intended to be humorous was the Tampax Pearl campaign of 2009. A glamorous young woman, obviously a model or an actress, is on a photo shoot, when a well-dressed, but slightly sinister middle-aged woman walks in holding a small red gift-wrapped box and inquires, 'Having fun anyone?' The young woman looks horrified, 'Mother Nature, not now!' Mother Nature replies, 'I've brought you your monthly gift, Sweetie, you know, your period, and I think you'd better stop shooting right now.' The implication here is that the young woman has temporarily lost her position in the glamorous world of fashion because of her impending menstruation. When a handsome male model gets up to leave, the young model retorts, 'Actually we can stay'. She pulls the male model back into his position on the set, and continues, 'Ever heard of Pearl?' Mother Nature thinks the model is talking about jewellery and proudly pats her earrings, saying: 'Pearls? I invented them darling!' The model replies, 'Not this one', and the advert then leads into a description of the product, the tag line being, 'New Tampax Pearl—Outsmart Mother Nature'.

In order to persuade consumers to purchase their products, advertisers need to create the impression in the mind of the potential consumer that they are lacking something (Newton 2010, p. 54). In this case, it is the ability to control 'Mother Nature'. The possession of a particular product, 'Tampax Pearl', signifies that the possessor is on top: she is successful, beautiful and, more importantly, in control of her body. This campaign has been expanded and a number of different advertisements (some still broadcast in 2015) follow the same format: a beautiful and successful woman is about to have her fun ruined by 'Mother Nature', a sinister yet hapless Old Auntie figure (perhaps even Aunt Flo), but with the help of the product, the young woman 'cheats nature'. Perhaps the best thing that can be said about 'Mother Nature', is that at least this approach to

advertising contrasts with its predecessors, which lacked humour in their focus on women being able to conceal and silence their bodies.[6]

The findings of my survey suggest strongly that the main brands of sanitary materials advertised in the UK were, and indeed still are, 'Tampax', 'Always' and 'Bodyform'. These have now been joined by a newer brand, 'Moxie'. 'Moxie' tampons come in an attractive little container, which the promotional material sells as follows:[7]

> Finally you can say goodbye to bulky, unattractive boxes of tampons that scream 'I HAVE MY PERIOD' and replace them with Moxie's gorgeous, girly, boudoir styled products that will complement your handbag, beach-bag or bathroom.

The advertisement itself is intended to be a light-hearted view of the actualities of menstruation. Periods might be unpleasant, but at least you can use stylish sanitary wear! However, the message this advertisement is giving out is negative, and reinforces the idea that periods are hellish, painful, miserable affairs that women must endure. Yet in the meantime women can have a beautiful day. A press-release from 'Moxie' tells us:[8]

> When you're bloated, have got cramps and have just gorged a family block of chocolate, it's period hell. Now, we're not pretending we can make it better, but we can bring a touch of glam to your worst days…

Some women experience menstruation in this way—as 'hell'—but not all women. The 'Moxie' catch-phrase 'Have a beautiful day in hell' is loaded with multiple meanings: women are in 'hell' during their period, but they can turn this around and have a 'beautiful day' simply

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[6] The 'Mother Nature' advertisements also accord with recent developments in biomedicine, which allow women to use hormonal contraceptives in order to curtail their bleeding altogether, and 'cheat nature':

> Modern women have at their disposal a variety of contraceptive methods, many of which perturb monthly vaginal bleeding. OCs [oral contraceptives] are still widely used to regulate monthly menses but, in addition, women now have the option of extended pill regimens to decrease the number of vaginal bleeding episodes, or to use progestogen-only methods of contraception and potentially eliminate bleeding altogether. (d'Arcangues et al. 2011, p. 10)

[7] *www.moxieproducts.co.uk/uk/* (accessed March 2010)

[8] Website, 3 March 2010

by using a 'beautiful' product. It is evident from the press release that it is the product itself that is promoted as beautiful, not the menstruating woman. She is 'bloated, [has] got cramps and [has] just gorged a family block of chocolate' and as a consequence is painted in a (sexually) undesirable light, where all signifiers point to her being fat and out of control. However, by using this beautiful 'Moxie' product she can assimilate some of its glamour and turn her day around.

It cannot be denied, and should be acknowledged, that contemporary advertisements are increasingly open in the attitudes that they adopt towards menstruation. Advertisements for menstrual goods appear in plain sight on television, and are now no longer restricted to women's literature. Menstrual promotional packs travel through the post in branded envelopes, whereas previously only plain packaging would do. The products themselves are now stacked openly on supermarket shelves, rather than being concealed under the pharmacist's counter. Even so, there has yet to be any move away from the notion that menstruation is something from which women must be 'protected'. Women must guard themselves against embarrassment and must use the correct product, so that they can appear successful, glamorous and clean. This assumption may be over-generalized by the industry, because although there are women, and perhaps many women, who wish to 'out-smart Mother Nature' and to be 'feminine', there are also many women who settle for simply managing their flow, and some indeed who, in defiance of dominant narratives of restriction and dirt, prefer to be 'free bleeders' (Bobel 2010, p. 8). Since 'free bleeders' do not, however, represent a financially lucrative market, they may as well be invisible in the world of advertising.

Menstrual product advertisements appear, paradoxically, to be instructing women on how to appear totally 'feminine', in terms of what society deems this to be, even though the same women are still seen as having to 'endure' something which is utterly central to female existence:

> Despite the fact that each woman knows her own belaboured transformation from female to feminine is artificial, she harbours the secret conviction that it should be effortless […] To the uninitiated […] the image must maintain its mystery hence the tools of transformation are to be hidden away as carefully as the 'flaws' they are used to remedy. (Chapkis 1988, p. 5)

In addition, these adverts indirectly reinforce conventional women's roles and promote a normative view of how they must manage their menstrual cycle and behave towards it. They urge women continually to be on their guard, in case they are found out to be what they are: menstruating women. This situation has not changed in decades: Treneman's view that, 'The trick of the modern menstrual ad campaign is to masquerade shame as liberation' (1988, p. 156), remains as accurate as when it was first written. This is true for the 'Tampax', 'Bodyform' and 'Compak' advertisements of 2007, and the 'Tampax Pearl' campaign, in which the images of beautiful, successful women are tainted by the threat of exposure, whether from a leaking towel or tampon, or because their sanitary product has fallen out of their handbag.

Today's menstrual product advertisements still underscore menstrual bleeding as a threat to hygiene; in that they are more explicit and open, they do so perhaps even more strongly than in previous times. From the onset of their periods, and before, young women are beset with images concerned with cleanliness and keeping clean, so that even to wear a skirt during their period they have to be 'brave'. The women depicted in the advertisements are dressed in high fashion and belong to the modern world, but they only arrive there, or can stay there, through the use of the product recommended. This commodity helps them to escape into a realm in which they can live life happily, free from leakage and odour. Should they shun the new products on the market, then they run the risk that their bodies will get out of control and put them to shame. After all, what is clearly evident from the highly styled and sexualized female bodies depicted in these adverts is that both sex and shame sell products, with the desirable female body being viewed at odds with the menstruating body.

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11

Keep Bleeding

In this book, I have explored a wide and diverse range of informal, or vernacular, knowledge about menstruation. This 'menstrual lore' addresses, and arises out of, the everyday nature of menstruation. It is alive and open to change, in reflection of broader changing contemporary attitudes, about gender and sexuality, in particular.

The preceding chapters have presented many different types of discourse, which come together to position menstruation as a phenomenon that is both socially constructed and physiological. Menstruation is never, therefore, framed solely as a monthly bleed. It is evident from early medical writings and studies by twentieth-century anthropologists that menstruation has always been located within a larger sociocultural framework and reflects the gender relations of any given time and place. The study reported here draws on data gathered from a small geographic area, north Derbyshire in the UK. While I make no claim that the experiences recorded in this study represent, in any strict sense, those of people in other areas of the UK, they are not unique. Many readers of this book will recognize these experiences and be able to draw parallels with their own.

Menstrual discourses are complex, and a blunt and 'out of place' reference to menstruation in public is still viewed by many as

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distasteful; attitudes and expressions that devalue women by virtue of their bodily functions remain commonplace. However, these are not the only views that one encounters; menstruation has other aspects. For example, in the restrictive environment of the school there might be power-play around menstruation between girls and boys. So, too, amongst the young adults that I studied, there were instances in which menstruation mentioned out of context brought about an intended shift in the social equilibrium. In these utterances, the speakers draw on their immediate resources and exploit societal sensitivities to upset the balance. Some of my research participants scavenged through popular culture for inspiration, finding it amusing to meddle with, and challenge, 'period talk'.

This is particularly evident in my chapters dealing with menstrual euphemisms and joking. Where there is a 'taboo', or strict guidelines about appropriate speech, resistance is inevitable. Usually this is done to shock or cause the amusement of others. However, although they may often be intended to be jocular, there is, as we all know, no such thing as 'just a joke': these utterances also challenge perceived sensitivities, as well as reinforcing them. Cultural scavenging of the immediate social environment, present and past, is also in evidence in vernacular knowledge and beliefs about menstruation, particularly, perhaps, those about the avoidance of menstrual sex. The reasons that participants gave for menstrual avoidance came from within their own cultural context, and, in turn, encourage a sort of 'folk etymology' of people's reasoning about why different beliefs and practices are upheld.

However, female participants of all ages in this study, gave voice to routine, and common, anxieties about body management. The menstruating body is still subject to concealment, secrecy and shame, and, in this respect, little seems to have changed over the past five decades. Menstruation is a shared experience, which touches every woman, whether she bleeds or not, and, bound up in it, are broader social attitudes to, and about, women. For those who menstruate, there is, in their experience of bleeding, a consistent fear of exposure, leaking, and being 'found out'. These themes are evident in all of the generations that are represented in this study, even though the twentieth century undoubtedly witnessed a shift towards a public discourse that was more open about menstruation. In this respect it is probably no coincidence that the 'openness' has been largely driven by capitalism and its communications arm, the advertising industry.

Despite this apparently more open public discourse, menstruation is something that largely remains 'unseen'. Even in contemporary Western society, we might still consider the menstruating woman as 'hidden'. Although women experiencing their monthly period are in the workplace and at social gatherings, they conceal their menstruating status by adopting various methods of body management. Women might be engaging in day-to-day activities, but menstruating woman, as her whole self, is concealed and her presence denied. Thus we have witnessed a historical shift from the invisible menstruating woman to invisible menstruation. Discomfort around menstruation is still pervasive, and bodies must be managed. This process remains ongoing, at a time when images of sexual women are ever more visible, and marketing and the media presents us with sexualized images of an ideal woman who is 'available' 24/7. At the same time as we see this hypersexualized woman, the menstruating woman, with her sexual 'unavailability', is kept hidden.

I have presented illustrations of this menstrual sequestration drawn from television advertising campaigns for menstrual products. Here we are presented with images of fashionable and attractive young women who are able to keep up their 'front' by using the product advertised. Conversely, we are also presented with the threat that if women do not use the product, they run the risk of exposure and shame in unintentionally revealing their menstruation to a public audience.

Menstruation is a fact of life. As such, we do, of course, talk about it, but generally only in socially abstract terms. When the focus shifts to the individual, and menstruation moves from the abstract to become 'my menstruation', then if it becomes known that 'I' am on 'my' period, most women experience a level of discomfort, and worry that their status could be revealed accidentally by a slipped towel, or leaking tampon (Newton 2012). Discomfort around menstruation remains pervasive, and bodies must be managed, lest they be seen to be stained.

Most body management takes place away from the public sphere, in backstage areas, such as bathrooms and toilets. These spaces are gendered, and a freer discourse exists there. Signs hang on the wall instructing women on how to dispose of their used items. In private, women can speak more directly about menstruation with friends, daughters, and partners, while relationships between peers and family members can also allow for freer discourses of menstruation. But this is something that is

relatively recent. Some of my older informants reported that menstruation was kept secret, even at home. By contrast, many other, younger, informants insisted that menstruation is something which can be discussed openly in family circles and in peer groups. Some of the secrecy surrounding menstruation and its management becomes relaxed in private, and menstrual products can be left freely in the bathroom and not hidden in handbags; and menstrual sex is used as a natural, though unreliable, form of contraception.

The study of vernacular knowledge can tell us much about everyday understandings of health and the body. Vernacular discourses are central to the continuity, and evolution, of popular, everyday knowledge—folklore by any other name—and offer us a privileged window onto cultural variation and stability, terminological creativity, tacit and unspoken understandings, and, in this case, specialised menstrual etiquette and language. These discourses help to shape the menstrual experience by making available resources for negotiating the complex 'lived experience' of menstruation, which is simultaneously made up of what is natural (the menstrual processes) and what is socially constructed (etiquette, attitudes). In these respects, the study of folklore and vernacular or popular knowledge can provide fresh insights into both individual and group attitudes towards, as well as experiences of, the menstruating body and other bodily themes. This interdisciplinary approach is key, and could find wide application and use in future studies concerning experience of both personal and everyday life. Folklore studies are, in essence, a social science—the inability to accept this may be one of the reasons why the discipline has not prospered in the UK recently—and its prime value lies in its far-reaching application to all aspects of human life: folklore, understood as everyday vernacular knowledge, is intrinsic to the informal education of every one of us.

My fieldwork for this study was conducted during 2007 and 2008. Whether attitudes have remained unchanged, untouched by new influences, is something about which I cannot be definite. Perhaps the safest conclusion in this respect is that it seems unlikely that much, if any, change has occurred. During my further research with women since 2011, looking at issues of reproductive control and sexual health, it was evident that menstruation and bleeding still hold a symbolic function for

women as signifiers of the 'normal' body (Newton and Hoggart 2015). It is also clear that when it comes to the reproductive body, women still value the informal knowledge systems that they share with their family and friends (Hoggart and Newton 2013). Although there was not scope in this book to explore women's in-depth attitudes towards hormonal contraception and bleeding, this is a further, promising avenue for future exploration, given that there are tensions between the opportunity for women to control their menstrual cycle hormonally, and the medical professionals who control these technologies (Hoggart and Newton 2013); another example, perhaps, of how women's subjective understandings of their bodies are overlooked, in favour of the knowledge of 'experts' (Walker 2012, 2013). In the face of biomedical advances in reproductive control, and the development of newer contraceptive technologies such as LARC (Long Acting Reversible Contraception), it is important to understand the meaning of bleeding, now and as it might be in the future. Conflicts are evident between those women experiencing the 'need to bleed' and those for whom the bleed simply signifies a 'complete pain in the uterus' (Newton and Hoggart 2015). In a world in which monthly menstruation can be prevented, what lies in store for the bleeding bodies of the future?

Finding the Words

Writing up this research has been challenging at times. The 'correct', 'proper', or 'polite' terms that we have to describe menstruation are relatively few in number, and I found this lexical limitation frustrating. Writing phrases such as 'menstrual products', 'sanitary protection' and 'sanitary disposal' often vexed me because I found the terminology inadequate. This 'coded' language provides an insulating layer of distance between the word and the process, and I often felt that the words used to name menstruation did not engage with the process itself. I always felt that I was, to some extent, 'talking around' the subject, because I did not have the words to get to its core. For me, phrases like 'sanitary pads' and 'menstrual hygiene' are wrapped up and concealed, perhaps to shield us from what is considered to be a 'nasty' process.

Thus, my own experience and exasperation in attempting to find the right words to describe menstruation may shed further light upon why we turn to vernacular language in order to talk about menstruation. The proper words just did not fit, they were too impersonal, too coded, too clinical and too stark to describe what for women is a sensitive, personal and, while it is happening, everyday experience. I think that the multitude of vernacular terms for menstruation, as evidenced in Appendix A of this book, exists in an attempt to evade these 'official' terms.

Sometimes talking about menstruation is not easy. Social codes dictate that we should not talk about bodily functions in public. I myself occasionally had this difficulty, particularly when I was asked to discuss my research with someone who was either a stranger, or uninvolved with my topic and not already familiar with what I was doing. The interviewees were aware of my research area before I interviewed them and had put themselves forward, but it was difficult to discuss my research with, for example, a friend of a friend at a social gathering. I recall one evening, where I was with some old colleagues that I had not met in eight years. They asked what I was doing in life, and after I told them I was gently mocked and ridiculed, with comments such as 'No, really now—*what* are you doing?'

Since then, I have become interested in sexual health research, and topics such as contraception and abortion have led me to realize that we perhaps never find it easy to conduct sensitive research, because its very 'sensitivity' brings with it associated stigmas. A researcher can be at ease with the topic, and yet find difficulty when negotiating tricky-in-the-eyes-of-others social issues.

The centrality of language, and its role in framing experience and practice, is one of the reasons that I champion the usefulness of folklore studies in pursuing health research. Misperceptions, 'sexual health myths' and 'contraceptive-lore' are very much alive in vernacular discourses dealing with reproductive bodies, and they can influence behaviour. Knowing how women understand their body, and its reproductive character, is a small step in supporting them in their reproductive control. But at the moment, it is a topic which is largely overlooked. Lay lore and knowledge about the body is a crucial area for future inquiry (as, in fact, is lay lore and knowledge about any topic that you might care to mention).

The Turn of the Crimson Tide?

I want to end this book on a positive note. There can be no question that there is still some way to go in challenging everyday attitudes about menstruation in Britain. For example, in 2015 in the UK, sanitary products still carry 5% Value Added Tax (VAT)—reduced from 17.5% in 2000. However, a campaign is challenging this, arguing for VAT to be abolished in the UK on products which the majority of menstruating women find essential in order to ensure that during 'that time' they are able to pursue their normal life-styles. During 2015, it has also come to my attention that a new wave of activism has arisen, through digital media, in which menstruation is no longer a matter for shame. One campaign bears the name of 'Period Positive'. It is led by 'Adventures in Menstruating' fanzine editor Chella Quint, with the goal of challenging media representations of menstruation and positively influencing menstrual education.[1] Another social media movement active in 2015, attempting to break the perceived silence about menstruation, is the Twitter hashtag #livetweetyourperiod, which sees women sharing and making public the actualities of their experiences with menstruation.

In January 2015, when Britain's Number One tennis player Heather Watson blamed 'girl things' on her first-round defeat in the Australian Open, a media frenzy broke out about the impact of menstruation in sport ('the last taboo').[2] Charities, too, have become involved; for 'Menstrual Hygiene Day' 2015 the charity PlanUK launched the #JustATampon campaign, which encouraged women and men to take a 'selfie' holding a tampon. They were then to share this 'selfie' on the social media, and to text a donation of £3, as a contribution to providing girls in Uganda with sanitary products.

In light of these activities and public discourses it does feel that perhaps, finally, attitudes are changing; a trickle, perhaps, and not yet a 'crimson wave'. As researchers, activists and health educators, we should 'go with

[1] https://periodpositive.wordpress.com/. The hashtag #periodpositive has also attracted much attention on social media.

[2] http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/tennis/30908551 and http://www.theguardian.com/sport/shortcuts/2015/jan/21/menstruation-last-great-sporting-taboo

the flow' and harness this interest while the tide *is* turning, with the goal of improving menstrual education and challenging the stigma which surrounds what is, when all is said and done, a process that is fundamental to human reproduction.

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Appendix A

Medical Terms

Medical terms were used by 63.2 % of respondents. I grouped terms which were medical in origin together with terms a woman might encounter during medical check-ups, such as 'when was your last period?', or with terms that people might use when they wish to use 'correct' language to describe a period.

(1) *Period and variants* ('being on her period'; 'having your period'; 'getting your period'; 'on my period'; 'on your period'; 'having a period'; 'on a period'; 'period'; 'periods'). Expressions based on the term 'period' are neutral in tone and are considered a correct or polite name. It was the most frequently cited overall, with 48.8 % of all respondents giving this term (54.1 % of females and 34.8 % of males). The first use in print of 'period' in the sense of 'an occurrence of menstruation' is recorded by the Oxford English Dictionary (online) for Dr Smellie's *Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery* (Smellie 1762), vol. I, p. 109.

(2) *Menstruation and variants* ('menstruating'; 'menses'; 'mens'; 'menstrual cycle'). These are predominately medical terms. The word 'menstruation' occurred in the wording of the questionnaire, and this

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may have had an influence on the number of people citing it, 13.7 % of females and males together. There was no noteworthy sex difference in the frequency of use of these terms.

(3) *PMT/PMS and variants* ('PMT'; 'PMS'; 'Tammy Huff'[1]; 'AMT'/'DMT'[2]). These are contractions of the medical terms *PMT* 'premenstrual tension' and *PMS* 'premenstrual syndrome'. When used as a term for the menstrual period they perhaps carry with them negative connotations, associated with being in a bad mood. They also promote the menstrual-cycle changes as a 'syndrome', problematizing it rather than having it accepted as a natural part of the cycle. Of all those answering the questionnaire, 2.2 % gave this term. It was most popular in the 31–45 age group, where 10.3 % cited the term.

(4) *Courses and flux*. These archaic medical terms were given by a small number of respondents, 'courses' (recorded by two women, age groups 18–30 and 46–60) and 'flux' (given by one woman over 60).[3]

Cyclic Terms

These make reference to time and/or the cyclic nature of menstruation. They were given by 42.4 % of respondents.

(5) *Time of the month and variants* ('time of the month'; 'that time of the month'; 'wrong time of the month'; 'unclean time of the month').[4] This term, sometimes coupled with negative adjectives such as 'wrong' or 'unclean', was the second most frequently given, cited by 31.2 % of females and males, twice more frequently (39.1 %) by females than by males (18.3 %).

(6) *Monthly and variants* ('monthly'; 'monthlies'; 'monthly cycle'; 'monthly moan'; 'monthly course'; 'on my monthly'). Women were almost six times more likely than men to give this term (females 10.7 %; males 1.8 %).

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[1] A prolonged, melodramatic sulk of a feminine, pre-menstrual, hormonal nature; derived from tampon + huff = sulk (*www.urbandictionary.com*, first logged 14 April 2011).

[2] AMT 'After MT'; DMT 'During MT'.

[3] The OED records the first reference to 'courses' in the sense of 'menses' as 1563 and to 'flux', in the sense of a 'flowing of blood from the bowels and other organs', as 1388.

[4] The OED records 1931 as the date of first citation of 'time of the month' in the sense of 'the time during which a woman is menstruating' (USA).

(7) *Cycle and variants* ('cycle'; 'your cycle'; 'monthly cycle'; '6 day cycle'; '4 day cycle'; 'menstrual cycle'; 'lunar cycle'). Overall, 3.7 % of respondents gave this term, often made clear with an attribute such as '6 day' or 'monthly'.

(8) *La regle*. This French term occurred only once, given by a female in the age group 46–60.[5]

Descriptive Terms

These describe the actual experience of menstruation, and also refer to the flow of the menstrual blood. They were given by 32.5 % of respondents to my questionnaire.

(9) *Blob and variants* ('on the blob'; 'the blob'; 'on t'blob'; 'on blob'; 'blob on'; 'blob week'). These are slang terms, the fourth-highest terms occurring overall, with 18.1 % of respondents giving 'blob' in their response (16.7 % of females and 20.5 % of males). It was most frequent amongst the 18–30 age group, where 80.6 % of males gave this term and 43.9 % of women. The term was predominantly given by males, and was also high in the 31–45 age group, where it was found among 69.2 % of males.[6]

(10) *Bleed and variants* ('bleed'; 'bleeds'; 'bleeding'; 'fanny bleeding'; 'bled vag'; 'bleedin love'; 'bleeding love'; 'on the bleed'; 'the bleed'; 'the vagina bleeds'). These forms were given by 6.8 % of informants overall (5.7 % of females; 8.5 % of males). They were more frequent amongst males than amongst females, perhaps because the process and experiences of bleeding differ between women and men. For women, menstrual blood is more familiar, since a woman will probably experience menstruation more often than she will bleed from a physical wound. However, for men blood is usually exclusively associated with a physical wound or injury.

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[5] '*La règle*' (singular). The French is properly '*les règles*' (plural), as in '*avoir ses règles*' (to have one's periods).

[6] The origin of 'on the blob' is difficult to trace. Partridge (1984, p. 96) records 'to be blobbing, i.e., a gonorrhoeal ulcer: low: C. 20th.' However, although the entry in Partridge makes no reference to menses, one can be found in *www.urbandictionary.com*¸ in which an entry dated 17 March 2003 says: 'When a girl is on the blob, that means she has her period: *Dis bitch's a lil' bitchy, I fuckin' think she's on da blob*'.

(11) *Blood and variants* ('blood sport'; 'blood monster'; 'blood'; 'the blood'; 'bloody hell'; 'bloody mess'; 'blood bath'; 'blood loss'; 'blood bum'; 'blood coming out'; 'blood coming out of your widge';[7]'bloody'; 'bloody Mary'; 'pissing blood'; 'blood sports week'). 'Blood' as a term was given by 5.1 % of all respondents (4.6 % of females and 5.8 % of males). As with 'bleed', it was more frequently cited by males than females. All references were given by either school students or young adults in the age group 18–30.

(12) *Leak and variants* ('leaky widge'; 'leaky week'; 'monthly leak'). The term 'leak' indicates that the period is uncontrollable, and the vagina is leaking. It is a negative term—the vagina is malfunctioning, like a leaking water tap. Four female school students (1.1 % of the women) and one male school student (0.4 % of the men) gave this term. As it was only the school students who responded with 'leak', this might indicate apprehension about their bodies that are growing up and moving out of their control.

(13) *Drip Drip* ('the drip'; 'drip'; 'on the drip'). As with 'leak', the term 'drip' suggests an uncontrollable flow of liquid. It was given by a small number of people, 0.8 % of females (given by three) and 0.4 % of males (given by one school-aged male).[8]

Reference to Menstrual Materials

These were given by 20.1 % of respondents, and make use of imagery associated with the material culture of menstruation. Some terms are archaic in their references, but their usage persists in contemporary society. This suggests that there is something resilient about the term, even if the original meaning has been lost to general knowledge. The terms must have some sort of appeal or else embody a notion which is still relevant to society today in order to stay active and survive. All the terms are either crude, have negative connotations, or else make a joke out of

[7] A *www.urbandictionary.com* entry for 14 May 2005 logs *widge* as 'UK English Primary school word for penis' [sic].

[8] In addition, a small number of respondents gave other terms descriptive of the menstrual flow: *gush*, *flow*, *flooding*, and *losing*, all referring to an uncontrollable force of liquid.

menstruation. Some terms appear on their own with no variants, but typically there are many variations and plays on words, demonstrating the speaker's freedom to modify, and perhaps to create their own. The speaker is thus not bound by set language-use, but can instead adapt existing imagery to their own ideas.

(14) *On the rag and variants* ('being on the rag'; 'rag week'; 'rag days'; 'rag time'; 'rag'; 'rags'; 'the rag'; 'the rags'; 'rag rags'; 'rags up'; 'red rag'). Variants of 'on the rag' are slang terms and were the third most frequently given, at 19 % of all females and males, subdividing into 17.8 % of females, and 21.0 % of males. They were thus more frequent among males than among females, and were at their highest in the 31–45 age group, at 61.5 % of males. The term is crude, and its monosyllables make it direct, and easy to say and to remember.[9]

(15) *On the cloth*. This was given by one school-age female (0.3 %), and is a reference once more to an outdated type of sanitary protection. That it was known to the youngest generation I interviewed reveals some transfer of these older terms between the generations.

(16) *On the towel*. This was given by one school-age female and one male over 60. The term has retained its meaning, but its context has changed. Whereas it referred originally to the terry-towelling strips used by women as reusable sanitary pads, the meaning has now been transferred to press-on types, for which the term 'sanitary towels' is still used.

(17) *The belt*. Given by one male aged over 60. A further reference to an outdated mode of sanitary protection—the sanitary belt to which a towel or pad would have been clipped.[10]

Humorous terms

Other terms demonstrated individual creativity and imaginative imagery:

[9] The OED defines it thus: 'Rag: originally a piece of cloth used by women to absorb menstrual flow. In later use (chiefly US slang): a sanitary towel'. Partridge (p. 956) lists 'to have the rags on' as 'women's low colloquial, from about 1860.'

[10] The OED traces 'the belt' to the *Sears, Roebuck Catalog 998/Z* of 1908: 'The EZ Sanitary Belt fits the body so smoothly that it is not felt when worn over or under garments.'

(18) *Pad Straddling*. Given by one female in the age group 18–30 (0.3 % of females). The pad appears as something the woman has to sit on or to straddle, as she would a horse.[11]

(19) *Fanny pads ahoy!* Cited by one male 18–30 (0.4 % of males), making fun of sanitary protection. 'Ahoy' is a nautical phrase, drawing attention to something seen at a distance. Here, the phrase draws attention to the possibility that a sanitary towel might be showing through a woman's clothing, while in British slang 'fanny' refers to the female genitals.[12]

(20) *Hammock Day*. This was given by one male in the age group 18–30 (0.4 % of males). Again it is an outdated term. Few women still wear menstrual belts and clip-on pads, since sticky-back pads are now available, and the term probably persists because the imagery is meant to be humorous (a woman lying or sitting on an enormous and visible pad, strung like a hammock between her legs).

(21) *Blue-string time*. Given by one female in the age group 46–60 (0.3 %). This is an example of a reference to modern-day sanitary protection, where some brands of tampon have blue strings.

(22) *Hide the sheep!* Given by one male in the age group 31–45 (0.4 %). This is an insider reference to a menstrual joke: 'What does an elephant use for a tampon? A sheep'. Here the use of a sheep as a tampon probably arises from the concept of the '*vagina infinita*', a vagina so vast that a sheep can fit in it.

Change of State

These are terms describing a change of state. The period can be 'on', 'due', or 'starting', and the woman is different from her normal state of being, in that a menstruation is periodic and does not happen all the time. Change of state terms were given by 18.3 % of respondents.

[11] Joffe (1948, p. 183) has 'riding the cotton bicycle', and Ernster (1975, p. 6) 'riding the cotton pony'.

[12] The OED: 'Fanny (Chiefly British English): The female genitals. 1879 *Pearl* I. 82 'You shan't look at my fanny for nothing.'

(23) *On and variants* ('being on'; 'to be on'; 'come on'; 'I'm on'; 'on'; 'are you on'?; 'coming on'). 'On' was the fifth-highest term overall (16.6 % of respondents). It was much more frequently given by women than by men (24.3 % of females and 4 % of males). 'On' can be seen as ellipsis for 'on my period', or even for 'on the blob/towel/rag/cloth'. The fact that it was given by a far greater number of women than men suggests that the ellipsis is used as a way of talking about periods without having to make direct reference to them. If something is 'on' as opposed to 'off', the indication is that it is active and working properly, as with a woman's body at the time of menstruation.

(24) *Due*. This was given by one female in the age group 18–30. It suggests that a woman must be alert if a period is due. She must take precautions and prepare for when it arrives, by carrying tampons or pads with her.

(25) *Starting* ('have you started your period?'; 'have you started?'; 'starting'). This term was given by five females (1.4 %): two school-aged females and three females over 60. It might have had particular significance for these age groups, where the school students are anticipating the menarche and the post-menopausal older women reflecting on their life cycle.

(26) *On heat*. This was given by one female in the age group 18–30. It is a reference to the rutting behaviour of animals, and in this context apparently supposes an erroneous analogy between the oestrus in mammals and menstruation in women.

(27) *Other* ('other way'; 'the other way'; 'other road'). Given by three females in the age group 18–30 (0.8 % of females). The period is labelled 'other', different from the normal state of being.

Maintenance Terms

These terms were cited by 14.6 % of respondents and refer to the period as being a time when the body is under repair or preparing for a new cycle.

(28) *Painters, decorators, and variants* ('decorators'; 'she's got the decorators in'; 'getting the decorators in'; 'the decorators are in'; 'decorating

the room'; 'having the painters in'; 'painters'; 'getting the painters and decorators in'; 'painters and decorators'; 'painting and decorating'). This was the sixth-highest ranking term overall, given by 13.9 % of all respondents (15.8 % of females and 10.7 % of males). The reference is to a room or a house that cannot be used for normal purposes because it is being decorated. Here the room is representative of the vagina, which is out of use, messy, and a space which cannot be occupied, meaning 'no sex available'. The paint imagery could also be an implicit reference to colour and redness. This term was used by all age groups except the over-60s.[13]

(29) *Out of order*. This was given by one female in the 18–30 age group. The phrase sees the female reproductive system as being in a non-functional state at the time of menstruation, and signals sexual unavailability, under the menstrual sex taboo which dictates that the vagina cannot be 'used' at that time. It is 'out of order', as a toilet or a mechanism might be.

(30) *Closed for maintenance*. This was given by one female (age group 18–30). The vagina is 'closed for maintenance', and sexually unavailable.

(31) *Up on the blocks*. One male (age group 18–30) and one female (age group 31–45) gave this term. The imagery is that of a ship or a car up on blocks [of wood] in dry-dock or a garage, and under repair. In the case of menstruation, it indicates that the vagina is unavailable for sexual intercourse.

The Colour Red

These terms (nos. 32–38) are direct or explicit references to the colour red. They were given by 10.5 % of respondents.

(32) *Red + Water variants* ('red tide'; 'the red waterfall'; 'the river is flowing red'; 'river's running red'; 'when the river runs red'; 'river's red'; 'undamming of the Red river'; 'surfing the red wave'; 'Red river'; 'the Red Sea'). These terms include the word 'red' as well as a reference to

[13] Cf. *HddA*, 9, Nachträge, 393, 8, 'Der Schuster bedeutet auch die Menstruation. So sagt man: *den Schuster haben* … Bei älteren Weibspersonen *macht de Schueste s Lade zue*' [The shoemaker also means menstruation. Thus the people say: *to have the shoemaker* … In the case of elderly females, *the shoemaker's shutting up the shop*].

naturally occurring water sources, which either flow (river, waterfall), or else are tidal (sea, tide, wave). This suggests that their periods are a force of nature. These terms were given by 2.4 % of all respondents (7 female and 7 males, all school age or 18–30).

(33) *Crimson wave and variants* ('crimson wave'; 'crimson tide'; 'riding the crimson wave'; 'surfing the crimson wave'; 'riding the crimson tide'; 'surfing the crimson tide'). Although similar to 'red' + 'water', these phrases are subject to less linguistic variation. This could be because the phrase 'Crimson Wave' occurs in the film *Clueless* (Paramount Pictures, 1995).[14] The phrase was given by 3.9 % of respondents. All the 14 females who gave the term were in the 18–30 age group, and almost all the nine males, except for one, were in the 31–45 years age group. The film *Clueless* was therefore contemporary to this age range and was probably watched on initial release by many then 18–30 year olds.

(34) *Red + Non-Water variants* ('red road'; 'red hill'; 'red day'; 'on your reds'; 'painting the town red'; 'riding the red dragon'; 'running red'; 'the red scare'; 'red week'; 'red hand gang'; 'code red'; 'red sails in the sunset'; 'flying the red duster'; 'red rag'; 'red flag'). These terms, which refer to red, though not with water variants, were given by 3.9 % of all respondents (4.9 % of females and 2.2 % of males).

In this category there are also terms that draw on popular culture for inspiration. These are as follows:

(35) *Miss Scarlet*. This was given by one female in the age group 18–30 and is probably taken from the character Miss Scarlet in the Cluedo board game (UK, US 1949). Miss Scarlett O'Hara is also a character in the feature film *Gone with the Wind* (MGM, 1939).

(36) *Curse of the Red Baron*. Given by one female in the age group 18–30. In popular culture, 'The Curse of the Red Baron' refers to the cartoon character Snoopy [a dog], which rose to prominence in 1966 in a cartoon book, *Snoopy and the Red Baron*, where the dog's catchphrase was 'Curse you, Red Baron!'.[15]

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[14] The character Cher Horowitz (played by Alicia Silverstone) explains her late arrival by saying to the teacher: 'I was surfing the crimson wave. I had to haul ass to the ladies'.

[15] This was further reinforced by a pop song, 'Snoopy versus the Red Baron', sung by a Florida rock band, the Royal Guardsmen (Laurie Records). Historically Snoopy's fictional adversary was a development by the American cartoonist Charles Schulz (1922–2000) of the semi-mythical character of

(37) *Red Hand Gang*. One male in the age group 31–45 gave this expression, based on *The Red Hand Gang*, a pre-teen American TV show (1977 and subsequently). The group was so named 'because its members left red hand prints on the fences to mark where they had been' (Wikipedia). The term could therefore be a covert menstrual reference to women who might get blood on their hands when changing their sanitary pad or tampon.

(38) *Ruby Tuesday*. This term was given by one male in the age group 18–30. The apparent reference is to the hit record 'Ruby Tuesday' (Rolling Stones, Decca, 1967).

Visits

These are terms which personify the period and describe it as though a visit from a friend or family member. They were given by 7.6% of respondents.

(39) *Aunt or Grandmother visiting* ('auntie's come to visit'; 'a visit from Aunt Flo'; 'Aunty Flo's visiting'; 'Aunt Flo is in town'; 'Aunty Flow'; 'Aunt Flow has come to visit'; 'Aunty Norah's visiting'; 'Auntie Norah's'; 'Aunt Hilda is in town'; 'Aunt Muriel"; 'Aunt Sally'; 'being visited by Aunt Irma'; 'A.F.' [Aunt Flow]; 'O.B.' [Old Bag]; 'to have granny staying'; 'grandmother's visiting'): 5.4% of all respondents gave this term, though more females than males (6.8% and 3.1%, respectively). It was quite frequent in most of the female age groups: 18–30 (13.3%), 31–45 (11.1%), 46–60 (10.3%). The term personifies the menstrual period, which is made familiar and given the status of a well-known visitor.[16]

(40) *Friends visiting* ('got my friend visiting'; 'my friend'; 'friend'; 'my good friend has come to stay'; 'Pamela's come to visit'; 'visitor'; 'visitors'; 'having visitors'; 'Flo's come to town'). These terms were given by 1.7% of respondents, mainly, however, by women, 2.5% of females (nine

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the World War I German air ace, Baron Manfred von Richthofen (1892–1918), known from the red colour of his aircraft as the 'Red Baron'.

[16] Partridge (p. 31) notes also that to 'go to see one's aunt' as a woman's euphemism for visiting the toilet came into currency about 1850.

adult women), compared with 0.4% of males (one man). Discounting the school students, 4.4% of adult women gave this term.

(41) *Maureen*. This was given by one female in the age group 18–30.

(42) *Tom (at the door)*. Sometimes the period was given a male name, as in this phrase, which was offered by one male in the age group 18–30.[17]

43) *Vistin' George*. This was given by a young male, in the age group 18–30.[18]

Biblical Terms

(44) *Curse* ('the Curse'; 'having the Curse'; 'on the Curse'; 'the Curse of Womanhood'). This term was far more frequently cited by females than males (9.6% of females and 0.9% of males). The women who gave the term were older, 38.5% of females aged 46–60, and 31.9% of females over 60. This term is biblical in origin and suggests an awareness that females are thought to be inferior. It was perhaps cited by older women more than by younger ones, since familiarity with the Bible is now greatly reduced among young people.[19]

(45) *Wrath of God*. This term was given by one female who was over 60. It is a reference to God's punishment on Eve (Genesis, III, 16).

(46) *Devil*. This was given by one school-aged male.[20]

Gender-Specific Terms

These terms mark menstruation specifically as a female-only event. They were provided by 6.6% of respondents.

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[17] The OED records 'Tom' as indicating a prostitute: '1968 J. Lock *Lady Policeman* ii. 12 A prostitute was a "tom"…and to practise prostitution was "tomming"'.

[18] *www.urbandictionary* (logged 8 March 2009) lists 'Georges' as another word for 'period'.

[19] The OED notes: 'The Curse: menstruation. Colloquial 1930'. Partridge (p. 280) has 'The Curse of Eve: The menses: domestic colloquial C19th–20th; Curse Rag: A sanitary towel: Women's Royal Naval Service, 1939+.'

[20] The term is perhaps connected with 'Blue Devils' (Partridge, p. 102): 'Low spirits from about 1780: colloquial, from about 1850; by 1880 this had become The Blues.'

(47) *Female troubles and variants* ('women's problems';' women's troubles'; 'women's complaint'; 'women's issues'; 'women's things'; 'women's days'; 'women's pains'; 'ladies' problems'; 'ladies have wombies';[21] 'ladies' things'; 'lady pains'; 'lady time'; 'ladies' time'; 'ladies' day'; 'ladies' week'; 'girly thing'). These expressions were given by 6.6 % of respondents, and they mark out menstruation as an explicitly female occurrence, emphasizing a gender difference. Some terms, such as 'women's pains', 'women's complaint', and 'women's issues', carry with them the stereotype that women's bodies are innately flawed and less strong than men's (an attitude that still persists in medical approaches to menstruation).

Events

These terms mark menstruation as a specific event and were given by 4.6 % of respondents.

(48) *Team playing at home and variants* ('United are playing at home'; 'Nottingham Forest are playing at home'; 'Forest are playing at home'; 'Liverpool are playing at home'; 'Liverpool at home'; 'Man U are playing at home'; 'Arsenal are playing at home'; 'The Reds [Nottingham Forest] are playing at home'; 'The Reds are at home'). These were given by 1.9 % of respondents overall, all of them in the 18–30 or 31–45 age range, though by more males than females (females 1.4 % and males 2.7 %). This term is of interest since it places menstruation in the traditionally male sphere of football. Its word-structure is fairly stable, and the variation comes from different football teams, all of whom wear a red strip (Liverpool, Arsenal, Nottingham Forest). 'At home' probably refers to the vagina of the female in question, and also carries with it connotations of ownership.

(49) *Flag* ('flying the red flag'; 'flying the crimson flag'; 'flying the Japanese flag'; 'Japanese flag day'; 'flying the flag'; 'red flag flying'; 'red flag day'). This term was given by 2.0 % of respondents overall (2.2 % of females and 1.8 % of males). A red flag could be an indication of danger, or be a symbol of a specific event such as 'Japanese Flag Day', where the

[21] *Wombie* Wombie possibly a reference to 'womb' i.e. women have wombs.

red sun disk on a white background of the Japanese flag is seen in this phrase as symbolic of menstrual blood on a white sanitary towel.

(50) *Party time*. This was given by one female in the age group 18–30. It marks out menstruation as a time largely but erroneously seen as proof against conception, and therefore a time to celebrate (and have sex).

(51) *Special time*. This was given by one male in the age group 18–30. Again, it marks menstruation down as being a positive time fit for celebration (and sex).

(52) *Time of space*. This was given by two school students, one female and one male. It may be a reference to menstrual isolation and seclusion as practised by some religions, but is otherwise somewhat enigmatic.

Illness and Inconvenience

These terms describe menstruation as being problematic for a woman. They were given by 3.9 % of respondents.

(53) *Ill and variants* ('ill'; 'unwell'; 'poorly week'). These were given only by females (seven women, 1.9 % of females). No young women of school age or 18–30 gave this term. This perhaps demonstrates older attitudes towards menstruation, in which menstruation was viewed as an illness and affliction.

(54) *Pain* ('pain'; 'painful'). This term was given by both females and males, four school students (two female and two male), and two 18–30 respondents (one female and one male). It was found only amongst younger adults. It does not connote 'illness', but articulates both the physical pain and inconvenience that menstruation can cause ('it's such a pain to have my period on holiday').

(55) *Cramps and Tummy Ache*. These terms were given by two females in the age group 31–45.

(56) *Out of action*. This was given by one female aged over 60. It implies that the woman is in an injured state during her menstrual period, and cannot take part in the usual activities.

(57) *Off my bike*. This term was given by one woman over 60. She has fallen off her bicycle 'injured' during her time of menstruation.

(58) *Funny Week and variants* ('funny week'; 'wrong week'; 'week off'). This term was given by 1.4 % of females, while only one male gave this term, which describes the menstrual period as being different from what is usual. It is the 'funny' or 'wrong' week of the month.

(59) *Issues*. This term was given by three females, in the age group 18–30. It could mean that having a period causes difficulties, either physically or psychologically (she is having 'issues'). OED records 'issues' in this sense as 'originally and chiefly USA', first citation 1982. A connection to the biblical 'issues of blood' seems extremely unlikely.

Behaviour

These terms describe a change in behaviour (usually negative), attributed to women who are menstruating. They were given by 1.9 % of respondents.

(60) *Stressy/Mental Time*. Given by two males (0.9 %), 'stressy' in the age group 18–30, and 'mental time' in the age group 31–45.

(61) *Womb Rage*. This term was given by one male in the age group 18–30. It indicates that women's reproductive organs generate aggression.

(62) *Screaming*. Given by one male in the age group 18–30.

(63) *Moody*. Given by one male in the age group 18–30.

(64) *Hormone Time*. Given by two males in the age groups 31–45 and 46–60, and the phrase once more indicates that women's moods are influenced by their bodies.

(65) *Off-Games Week*. This term points out a change in behaviour. The girl cannot 'do games' at school, because she has her period. It reinforces the idea that women's bodies are more vulnerable at this time, and they cannot carry out all the activities that they usually are able to. It was given by one male in the age group 31–45. The phrase may also be an allusion to 'excused' sex.

(66) *Handbag to the toilet time*. This term was given by a female (31–45). It points to the secrecy surrounding menstruation. A woman does not feel comfortable just taking the tampon or sanitary towel that she needs to the toilet, and so she must take her entire handbag in order to hide her menstrual products.

(67) *Shouldn't wear white*. This term was given by one female school student. It acknowledges the practical problems of having a heavy period and 'leaking'.

(68) *Dib-Dabs*. This term was given by one female in the age group 31–45.[22]

Food Stuffs

These terms were given by 1.9 % of respondents.

(69) *Jam* ('jam rag'; 'jam ragging'; 'jamming'; 'jam sandwich'; 'jammy dodging'; 'making mother's jam'). These terms, in numerous variants, were given by 1.7 % of all respondents, and more often by males than females (1.4 % of females and 2.2 % of males). 'Jam' probably refers to the colour and consistency of menstrual blood itself.[23]

(70) *Cheese*. This term was given by one school-aged male. Although not in direct reference to menstruation, Partridge (1984, p. 204) notes that 'cheesy' is used for 'smelly' in 'low and schoolboys' colloquial, late C. 19th–20th. From the smell of strong cheese'.

Nature

These are terms which draw upon images from nature to denote the menstrual period. They were given by 1.5 % of respondents.

(71) *Rainbow*. This was given by five female school students. The term refers to cunnilingus performed while the woman is menstruating (*www.urbanddictionary*, logged on 17 November 2003). See also Chap. 4, pp. 80–82).

(72) *Moon* ('Moon'; 'moon time'; 'wrong time of the lunar cycle'). 'Moon' and 'moon time' were given by two females (18–30), and 'wrong time of the lunar cycle' by one male (18–30). The terms point to a supposed connection between menstruation and the moon.

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[22] Partridge (p. 1) lists 'dib dabs' as a variant of 'in the screaming abdabs' (in a state of enraged frustration; Royal Navy; Merchant Navy, since about 1950).

[23] Partridge (p. 611) reports 'jam' as 'the female pudenda: C. 19th–early 20th. Whence "to have a bit of jam", to coït.'

(73) *Wave*. This term was given by a single male school student. It could be a contraction of 'the crimson wave' in reference to tides and waters, or to the cycle of the moon in supposedly controlling menstruation, as it does the ocean tides.

Horror and Torture

These terms describe the menstruation as frightening, painful, and something of a torment. They were given by 0.7 % of respondents.

(74) *Horrible Horrors*. Given by two female respondents, one school student and one woman in the age group 31–45. Partridge (p. 571) lists 'horrors' as 'menstruation: schoolgirls' slang: later C. 20th'.

(75) *On your Rack*. This was given by one male school student. This could be an example of misunderstanding of 'on the rag' as 'on the rack', in a supposed reference to torture; here transformed to 'on your rack'.

(76) *Vampire Day*. This term was given by one male in the age group 18–30 and makes a reference to vampires' desire for blood, as in the menstrual joke: 'What does a vampire use for a teabag? A used tampon!'.

Part of Life

These terms (nos. 77 and 78) describe menstruation as a normal part of life. They were all given by women and demonstrate an acceptance of menstruation as being simply a part of the life cycle. They were given by 0.7 % of respondents.

(77) *One of those Times*. This was given as 'one of those times' (one female, age group 18–30); 'that time' (one female, age group 46–60); 'it's that time' (one female, age group over 60).

(78) *The Usual*. This was given by one female in the age group 31–45.

Cleanliness Issues

These terms put the menstrual period forward as an unclean process. They were given by only 0.3 % of respondents.

(79) *Mucky-Jump Week*. This term was given by one male in the age group 31–45. It is a reference to menstrual sex. Partridge (p. 631) lists 'jump' as 'an act of sexual intercourse: colloquial since C. 17th'.

(80) *Unclean*. This term was given by one female in the age group 46–60.

Anomalous Terms

There was only one term that I could not place in any of the above categories. This was given by three school students only.

(81) Qs: *'Q'*, *'Qs'*. Given by two females (1.2 % of the group of 12–14 years) and one male (0.6 % of same group). Only this group reported 'Qs'. There were no further references to 'Q' as a menstrual period.[24]

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[24] *www.urbandictionary.com* (27 Jan. 2008) logs 'q-sauce' as 'queef-sauce', and 'queef sauce' (logged 8 Feb. 2007), as 'the liquid that comes out of a girl's vag when she queefs or orgasms'. The 'queef' itself (logged 27 Feb. 2003) is 'an expulsion of wind from the vulva during coitus; a vaginal fart'.

Appendix B

Guide to Interviewee Codes

Each interviewee was given a code indicating their sex, interviewee number, and age-group, for example, F7B or M1C.

The first letter of the code indicates if the interviewee is female 'F' or male 'M'.

The number distinguishes between the different interviewees within an age-group.

The final letter of the code indicates the age-group of the interviewees. The age-groups are as follows:

A = 12–14 (School students)
B = 18–30
C = 31–45
D = 46–60
E = over 60

So, for example, F7B indicates that the interviewee is female, her identifying number is 7, and she is aged between 18 and 30.

'V' or 'VLN' refers to myself.

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Guide to Transcription and Quotations Convention

Where an interviewee code is indicated (e.g., F3C) the text is from an interview. Where no specific interviewee code is indicated, the quote is taken from a questionnaire answer.

All interviews were transcribed by myself, and all punctuations are in line with how I heard and interpreted the flow of conversation. Unpunctuated transcription, as in discourse analysis for linguistic purposes, I felt was inappropriate to my informants' narrative texts. In the texts, I have indicated any pauses by using three full-stops in succession …, and [laughs] when laughter occurred. I have also transcribed sentence 'fillers' such as 'erm', 'like' and 'sort-of'. Finally, […] indicates where I have excluded some text from the quotation either because it was too long or else there was a digression.

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