



Menstrual Injustice: Listening to and
Learning from Women's Experiences of
'Period Poverty' and Menstrual
Injustice in Newcastle Upon Tyne

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Abstract

This PhD thesis seeks to explore the lived experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice of women living in Newcastle upon Tyne. Drawing on qualitative research, including interviews with 38 working-class women and ethnographic observations from volunteering in a local foodbank, this PhD research illuminates the gendered and classed dynamics of period poverty and menstrual injustice. I seek to answer three research questions. Firstly, what are the barriers adult women face in accessing menstrual products and resources for menstrual management? Secondly, in what ways do women navigate this landscape of menstrual injustice? Finally, in what ways are women supported through this unjust socio-gendered and embodied landscape?

I use the more common term period poverty as a starting point to explore the socioeconomic influences of women being unable to access or afford menstrual products to manage their periods. This money- and product-focussed understanding of period poverty develops into a conceptualisation of participant's experiences as menstrual injustice. Period poverty is only one part of menstrual injustice. There are significant personal, political, and structural forces at play which create an unjust landscape for women to manage their periods comfortable. Through the frame of menstrual injustice, we see how access to money, materials, and space to manage one's period is impacted by women's socioeconomic status, gender-based violence, homelessness, changing living circumstances, and support networks. Significantly, this thesis highlights how women's experiences of period poverty are more unjust and more complex than just access to money, which popular understandings of 'period poverty' suggest. I argue that with the intellectual concept of menstrual injustice, we broaden our understanding of period poverty as a complete absence of menstrual products to include intersectional experiences of social, economic, physiological, and gendered inequalities in relation to menstruation.

Engaging in a feminist epistemology, I draw out answers to these research questions intimately from the data and lived experiences of participant's lives. Focusing on their experiences gives voice to the neglected gendered social issue of period poverty and illuminates the wider menstrual injustices at play. From a feminist standpoint, I highlight the impact of period poverty and menstrual injustice on women's lives. Using this data, I conclude with some reflections on how we can achieve menstrual justice for women across Newcastle and the UK.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“Because I know when I didn’t have money to purchase [menstrual products], I know how it feel, it was horrible. And it’s not an easy thing to share with someone. So I’d like this to be free for everybody.” – Kasia (33)

“Yeah I just think that, I think us women should have them free. I don't think we should even be paying for them do you know what I mean? [...] why can't we get tampons to protect ourselves from feeling paranoid going out and being uncomfortable, do you know what I mean?” – Sarah B (33)

“...you know the kids that started their periods early, they don’t always have money on them and sometimes their parents can’t afford them, you know, all the time. So there is a bit of a struggle for them. But like I say they should be free. Especially handed out in schools they should be free yeh, you know. Then people that want some can go there. And like homeless people. They haven’t got nothing.” – Moana (34)

In its simplest form, period poverty is the inability to afford or access menstrual products. This leaves menstruating women and people having to find alternative materials to absorb their menstrual flow, sacrifice other daily necessities to afford products, and deal with the mental health consequences which impact their everyday lives. Over the past few years, period poverty has been revealed as a growing issue in the UK. In England, policy, media, and activist focus is heavily on schoolgirls to mitigate the impact of period poverty on their education. Academic and activist research (of which there is little) has only just begun to expand its scope beyond the context of schools and schoolgirls to highlight adult women’s experiences of period poverty.

Over the past two years, menstrual scholars and activists have made calls for an understanding of period poverty to be about more than a lack of money for menstrual products (Bobel and Fahs, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Christou, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2022). This widens our understandings of period poverty to recognise the lack of menstrual health education for young people, the impact of menstrual stigma on how girls and women navigate their periods in everyday life, and that adult women can also suffer from period poverty. These are significant and have given rise to a UK menstrual movement which seeks to improve the menstrual health and wellbeing of all girls and women in the UK.

However, I found that there are many more injustices related to menstruation that are not appreciated within current understandings of period poverty, nor the calls for a wider comprehension detailed above. This is where the idea of menstrual injustice comes in.

US-based scholar Margaret Johnson (2019, p. 1) was first to explore the idea of menstrual justice by examining injustices and oppression of menstruating people ‘simply because they menstruate’ in North American legal research. Johnson (2019) argues that menstrual justice as a legal frame for human rights has not received enough attention, a perspective with which I strongly agree, especially in the UK context. In my research, I use menstrual injustice as an intellectual term to conceptualise a broader set of conditions and circumstances that shape women’s uneven experiences of their periods. Period poverty is a part of this, but it is not the only way women experience inequality and injustice in relation to menstruation. My thesis illustrates that injustices are rife in women’s experiences of menstruating. This is a significant and original contribution to academic research because until recently it has been ignored.

In this chapter and those that follow, I draw together academic research, literatures, and concepts to build a critically analytical picture of period poverty and menstrual injustice in England. I centre and frame the structure of my thesis around my participant’s lived experiences within a feminist epistemology. A feminist approach to this research is crucial because it gives voice to my participants, cis women (most of whom were working-class). Through listening to, learning from, and giving voice to the women I spoke to in this research, I identified various menstrual injustices.

Importantly, what I learned from my participants (and what might initially seem contradictory to my point about menstrual injustice), is that money is the biggest barrier to accessing or affording menstrual products. The opening quotes of this chapter illustrate immediately how menstrual products are important to my participants, and the desire for them to be free (thus not needing to spend money on them) is central to women’s negotiation of their periods and practical ideas for achieving menstrual justice. This is especially important when they have struggled to afford or access them, as I go on to illustrate throughout this thesis. However, I also highlight that it is not a case of ‘simply’ not having enough money for products. This is vital to understand the more complex and nuanced injustices at play which create experiences of menstrual injustice. There are personal, political, and structural forces at play which limit a woman’s income and thus ability to afford menstrual products. These create a complex landscape of injustice for menstruating women, as I discuss in this thesis.

Despite the growing menstrual movement, few people are researching period poverty in the UK. Before I move on to the specifics of my PhD research, I provide some background to the recognition and growth of period poverty as a social issue in the UK to broadly contextualise my research. In the next section I focus more on the English context but also expand to Wales and Scotland to illustrate the way period poverty is being responded to in these contexts.

1.1. Background: The Origins of Period Poverty in the UK

The language and idea of 'period poverty' was originally identified in 2016 and slowly spread through the media in the UK in the following years (Brooks, 2016; Carter, 2016; Buchan, 2017; Ross, 2017; Elsworthy, 2018; Oppenheim, 2019; De Benedictis, 2020). In England, public and media attention was solely on schoolgirls' experience of period poverty. In 2017 a school in Leeds reached out to the UK-based charity Freedom 4 Girls (who at the time only tackled period poverty in East African countries) asking for help with menstrual products because girls were missing school because of their periods (BBC, 2017). The headline 'Girls 'too poor' to buy sanitary protection missing school' went viral in 2017 and outrage exploded within educational institutions. In response, there was an increase in the popularity of campaigns and public efforts to tackle period poverty for girls in education. For example, Plan International UK's (2017) research into period poverty in the UK revealed that 1 in 10 girls (aged 14-21) had been unable to afford menstrual products, 1 in 7 girls struggled to afford menstrual products, and more than 1 in 10 girls have improvised menstrual wear due to issues of affordability. Early activist campaigns such as Free Period and The Red Box Project, both fighting for policy change, discovered a hidden and intrinsically gendered experience of inequality across the country.

In January 2020, the English government pledged to provide menstrual products for state-funded schools. At first only secondary schools in England were eligible, but after some campaigning it was widened to include state-funded primary schools and further education institutions. This policy was a huge feat for activists working for the campaign and it received significant attention in the news and media. However, there were some caveats to the policy. Most significant was the opt-in nature of the support. A government document released in 2021 showed that nearly 60% of primary schools and only 24% of secondary schools had signed up to the programme (Department for Education, 2021). This suggests that the schools who did not opt in were not providing menstrual products for their students. The reasons for institutions not opting in remain unidentified, however it is clear that the government shifted responsibility of preventing students from falling into period poverty to individual schools without adequate advertisement or awareness about the importance of the scheme (BBC, 2020b; Shearing, 2020). Furthermore, and of particular importance for contextualising the state of period poverty in England, this government scheme ended in July 2022 with no discussion of its continuation.

The English period poverty provision landscape is fractured in comparison to wider UK policy action. Expanding the geographical scope briefly, Wales and Scotland are also fighting to tackle period poverty. In 2018 the Welsh government pledged £1 million to fund menstrual product distribution through local initiatives such as community groups and foodbanks (BBC Wales Politics, 2018). This initial funding was also provided to improve school toilet facilities.

In 2020, campaigns led by youth activists in Wales persuaded the Welsh government to provide a further £3.1 million in funding for every school and college in Wales to prevent period poverty (Welsh Government, 2020).

In Scotland, news of period poverty reached the headlines earlier, and notably these did not focus solely on schoolgirls. In 2016, BBC journalist Libby Brooks was writing about the need for adult women in Scotland to have access to support and products when experiencing period poverty (Brooks, 2016). Scottish Labour MP Monica Lennon successfully campaigned to pass a bill in January 2021 to have menstrual products available in all public spaces for women to access (Diamond, 2020). In August 2022 Scotland became the first country in the world to make access to free menstrual products a legal right (Barry, 2022; BBC, 2022).

Thus far I have outlined policy and activist responses to period poverty across the UK. Many of these, especially in the earlier years, were not front-page news or considered big social issues in England. This changed in 2020 when the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In January 2020 the first cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19) were identified in Newcastle upon Tyne. The country went into a flush of panic as deaths from the virus skyrocketed in China, where the virus was first detected (Butler, 2020; Taylor, 2021). The UK government response put the country into a national lockdown on the 23rd March 2020 (The Week, 2021). This saw the closure of offices, schools, shops, and social venues. England's cities, towns, and villages were deserted with everybody except key workers (for example NHS, food, and necessary goods employees) living, working, and playing at home (Kelly, 2020). From June 2020, the English government announced a phased route out of lockdown with policies of social distancing, limiting numbers for social gatherings, and necessitating the wearing of face coverings in public places. Shortly after the easing of lockdown restrictions England went into another mass lockdown following a significant increase in coronavirus cases on the 4th November 2020. This lockdown was geographically uneven with a tiered system of restrictions in place across England allowing some places to have relaxed social gathering rules over Christmas. Nonetheless, on the 6th January 2021 England was put into another lockdown for three months. From March 2021 a gradual phasing out of coronavirus lockdown restrictions was implemented, with no restrictions in place at all from February 2022.

During each lockdown restrictions on shops, social venues, schools, and workplaces were put in place, preventing the majority of the population from being mobile and accessing a range of services (Institute for Government Analysis, 2021). During these periods of lockdown many services, places of support and access to menstrual products were limited if not completely inaccessible. For example, the English government pledge to provide menstrual products to educational institutions was put in place, only to have schools and colleges closed for prolonged periods three months after it was initiated in January 2020.

The pandemic exposed the fragility of period poverty support services. From this there was significant momentum from local organisations and mutual aid groups across the country to support women in period poverty. The period poverty movement arguably achieved a lot of traction over the pandemic and gathered more support from the public (Hampson, 2020; Plan UK, 2020; Dickens *et al.*, 2021; Williams, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022). Both knowledge and experiences of period poverty rapidly increased during the three-month UK lockdown at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (Christou, 2020; Morgan, 2020; Plan UK, 2020). The increasing media coverage of the rise of period poverty driven by charity advocacy across the UK starkly revealed the hardships girls and women in particular faced in the pandemic.

Looking at the wider context of how everyday life was severely impacted by the pandemic, the lockdown saw more people relying on welfare support as the economy came to a sudden halt. Almost 500,000 people were reported applying for Universal Credit in 9 days in March 2020, and a rise from 1.2 million people receiving Universal Credit to 4.2 million recipients was reported by the beginning of April (Peachey, 2020; Proctor, 2020). The pandemic and lockdown plunged even more people into financial difficulties, leaving them dependent on a welfare state that was being dismantled by austerity policies implemented in 2010. This had significant impacts upon the individuals and households who took part in my research. They had to severely adjust to a limited income which impacted women's, girls', mothers', and daughters' ability to afford menstrual products along with extra expenses that come from being at home all the time (like food and energy bills).

Concerns grew (and continue to grow) as the government response to the pandemic and subsequent economic downturn undoes the progress made towards tackling period poverty over the past two years, particularly in educational institutions (Christou, 2020). There is increased demand for menstrual products coming from other areas including NHS nurses who faced struggles when working during the coronavirus pandemic (Williams *et al.*, 2022). Charities are supplying five times as many menstrual products as before lockdown, with more individuals reaching out to charities who previously had worked through other organisations such as foodbanks or asylum shelters (BBC, 2020a; Irise, 2020). Combined with the sociopolitical context of austerity, severe welfare reforms, the rise of homelessness, multiple modes of aid (including food aid, clothing banks, and hygiene banks), a global pandemic, and a cost of living crisis, period poverty is a major crisis in contemporary Britain (Plan UK, 2018; De Benedictis, 2020; Plan UK, 2020).

1.2. Research Questions, Thesis Aims, and Developing Menstrual Injustice

The aim of this thesis is to draw attention to working-class cis adult women's experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice in Newcastle upon Tyne. There is an urgent need to shed light on adult women's experiences in particular because policy, education, and media

attention in England has – until very recently – focussed on girls’ struggles with period poverty. Only in the past year or two have menstrual activists and scholars begun to direct their attention to adult women’s menstrual health needs and experiences of period poverty. Undeniably the COVID-19 pandemic played a central role in uncovering the extent of and exacerbating period poverty as I discussed in the previous section. My aim is to delve deeper into women’s lived experiences and use this thesis to highlight and analyse why women experience period poverty and menstrual injustice in contemporary Britain. I engage with gender and class as intellectual concepts to analyse women’s experiences.

My research is underpinned by three research questions:

- 1) In what ways are period poverty and menstrual injustice experienced by women?
- 2) How do women navigate period poverty and menstrual injustice in their daily lives?
- 3) Where do women access care and support when experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice?

These questions developed over time, but all initially stemmed from the examination of adult women’s experiences of period poverty. When setting out to do the research, I did not anticipate the development of menstrual injustice as a concept. However, in conversation with the women who participated, I discovered a wide-ranging set of experiences and stories that did not fit within the standard definition of period poverty (despite its expansion over recent years). Incorporating menstrual injustice into my research questions and data analysis opened an avenue through which I could develop a wider understanding of the injustices of menstruation and see how period poverty was just one part of this.

Menstrual injustice is an intellectual term I develop to conceptualise a broader set of conditions and circumstances that shape women’s uneven experiences of their periods. North American scholar Margaret Johnson (2019) conceptualised the idea of menstrual justice as a way to identify the oppression of menstruators and recognise the injustices at play in their lives. The concept of menstrual injustice is yet to be utilised in the UK academic sphere or UK-based literatures. I develop the concept of menstrual injustice through the empirical data presented throughout this thesis and argue for greater recognition of its role in women’s everyday lives in Britain. The more popularly known phenomenon, period poverty (which I identify as a lack of money for menstrual products), is a part of menstrual injustice, but not the only way women experience inequality and injustice in relation to menstruation. There are significant personal, political, and structural forces at play which create an unjust landscape for women to manage their periods comfortably. Access to and use of menstrual products is intersected with the body, menstrual experience, class, gender, stigma, taboo, and is temporally and contextually experienced. Women’s experiences of period poverty are more unjust and more complex than just access to money, which popular understandings of ‘period poverty’ suggest. There are layers to menstrual (in)justice which

are temporally and contextually influenced. For example, one month a woman might be able to afford her preferred menstrual products, the next she may be financially stretched because she had to replace her children's school shoes so she must buy the cheaper products, which are less effective for her menstrual experience and make her feel anxious that she may leak menstrual blood.

The everyday lives of participants in this study are impacted by intersecting forms of menstrual injustice including a lack of money, limited spatial and material resources, menstrual stigma, and gendered violence. Other forms of inequality including gender-based violence and homelessness are also identified as playing a role in why women may experience barriers to accessing menstrual products, hygiene facilities, and a safe space to manage their periods. Menstrual injustice is a highly gendered social phenomenon, but it is also a very real lived experience, which I explore through the analysis chapters of this thesis, particularly in chapter 7. In developing the intellectual concept of menstrual injustice, we broaden our understanding of period poverty as a complete absence of menstrual products to include intersectional experiences of social, economic, physiological, and gendered inequalities in relation to menstruation.

My research is also underpinned by a feminist epistemology and methodology. I seek to increase knowledge of women's experiences, be an advocate for menstruating women, and take action for positive change. In my thesis I explore how working-class menstruating women are grappling with three stigmatised identities and experiences: being a woman, being working-class, and being a menstruator. Taking a feminist approach to these assists in choosing the best qualitative research methods, challenging research power dynamics, and raising consciousness of women's struggle. Feminist epistemology, methodology, and ethical praxis help me achieve these research aims.

1.3. Research Context

In this section I outline the specific geographical and social context of my PhD research with adult women living in Newcastle upon Tyne.

It is widely acknowledged that welfare reform is geographically uneven, reflecting the Thatcherite legacy of rapid deindustrialisation and subsequent rising levels of unemployment (Hamnett, 2011). The uneven distribution of welfare support parallels the widening North-South divide, with deindustrialisation resulting in jobs being harder to find in mainly Northern (and Welsh) ex-mining and old industrial regions (Hamnett, 2011). Through an analysis of statistics on welfare distribution, geographer Chris Hamnett (2014) notes that all ex-industrial areas have welfare recipient figures above the national average and 25% of workless households are situated in the North East. This likely reflects the

availability of jobs in a legacy of deindustrialisation rather than attitudes to work (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013; Garthwaite, 2017).

The cuts to welfare support are disproportionately experienced in areas of deindustrialisation and consequent low job availability. This is because people in these areas rely on these public services in both employment and welfare support more than more advantaged areas (Poinasamy, 2013). The 2010 government's austerity policies cut Newcastle City Council's budget by 32%, or £335 million, which is equivalent to a loss of £2,454 per household in the city (Holland, 2022). According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, Newcastle is ranked the 32nd most deprived city in the UK, 28% of children live in relative low-income families, and 31.8% of children are eligible for free school meals (Newcastle City Council, 2021).

Newcastle is therefore a significant city within which to situate my research. It is likely that period poverty is a problem given the austere context and impacts of welfare reforms in the region. There are also several initiatives across Newcastle acting to fight period poverty, including school Health Hubs and the M-card organised by the young people's charity Streetwise, both initiatives which provide free menstrual products and a space to talk about menstrual health (Lough, 2019). Increasingly, charities are broadening their scope and we are seeing foodbanks, women's organisations, and mother support groups all seeking donations for menstrual products to distribute to those in need (Newcastle West End Foodbank, 2015; The Big Issue, 2021). Particularly throughout the lockdown, there has been a huge drive for more menstrual products and need for support for girls and women across the North East (The Big Issue, 2021). Because of this, it is critical that our understanding of period poverty and menstrual injustice rests on women's experiences. My research based in Newcastle can help to lead the way for the rest of England to tackle period poverty and achieve menstrual justice.

1.4. Learning from Women: Argument and Thesis Structure

Before I move on, it is critically important to note that women experience multiple forms of socioeconomic disadvantage (Crossley *et al.*, 2019). 'Period poverty' is not experienced in isolation, rather experiences of menstrual injustice (of which period poverty is one form of menstrual injustice) will intersect with experiences of food poverty, clothing poverty, energy poverty etc. Scholars have critiqued the fragmentation of different 'poverties' to highlight how the underlying causes of poverty remain unaddressed (Crossley *et al.*, 2019). Providing poverty-specific services (such as menstrual products or food parcels) as 'solutions' to individual 'poverties' only help people in the short-term and act to make invisible the structural issues at play. These are valid and important points, and although my PhD focuses on one such 'poverty', this focus is highly significant in an academic, policy, and public context.

My PhD research focuses on a small but incredibly significant (in terms of underrepresentation and hidden) stream of poverty which disproportionately impacts women in momentous ways. There is a lack of understanding of this form of gendered poverty and a lack of experiential accounts of period poverty. Without talking to women who have struggled with period poverty and menstrual injustice we cannot truly understand their lives, nor can we accurately take efficient action to improving their lives, menstrual health, and overall wellbeing. Developing the concept of period poverty into menstrual injustice encompasses more experiences and more acutely illustrates how and why women's periods are unequal in Britain. By deeply understanding the complex and diverse experiences of menstrual injustice, which intersect with gender, class, race, age, socioeconomic status, geographical location, access to healthcare service and much more, we can accurately and efficiently work for menstrual justice.

In this section I provide an outline of my thesis structure and pinpoint the argument I make throughout.

My thesis explores the intersections of being a woman, working-class, and a menstruator to uncover the complexities of period poverty and menstrual injustice for working-class women in Newcastle upon Tyne. These three identities are stigmatised in their own ways as I introduce in a review of existing literature and research in chapter 2 and discuss using my data through chapters 4-8. I investigate how these stigmatised identities compound and create a complex and unjust landscape for working-class women navigating their periods.

To do this I situate my analysis around three main concepts: respectability, menstrual crankiness, and the lifecourse. Engaging with scholarship across sociology, human geography, anthropology, feminist, and menstruation studies, I explore the development and significance of these concepts for my analysis in chapter 2, the literature review. In chapter 3 I present my methodological choices, including the feminist epistemological standpoint of my thesis, navigating doing research in a pandemic, what qualitative methods I used, and the practical ways in which I gathered my data. After laying these foundations, I move into 5 data analysis chapters.

In chapter 4 I argue that menstruation is a highly individual experience. Although many women will experience menstruation, a menstrual cycle and periods, their experience of them will be personal and therefore different. As everyone's periods are different, so is how they choose to manage them. I focus strongly on the menstrual product as a key way in which participants navigate their periods and manage their menstrual flow. This is because when my participants spoke about struggling to manage their periods, it was always based around an absence of menstrual product. Therefore, the menstrual product is significant in my thesis because it is necessary for my participants to manage their period and participate in everyday life when menstruating.

Period poverty because of a lack of money is an obvious argument to make, but I am making it in this thesis because no one else is making it as strongly as it should be made. I discuss this through women's lived experiences in chapter 5. My research identified money as the biggest barrier for women to access or afford menstrual products. A lack of money from low incomes (both from wages and from Universal Credit), homelessness, and financial abuse meant women could not afford menstrual products. The absence of materials for menstrual management creates messy materialities, impacts women's mental health, mobility, sense of self-confidence, and their ability to go about their daily lives. These consequences of period poverty are highly disruptive to women's lives and have wider menstrual and mental health impacts which contribute to feelings of taboo and stigma around both periods and period poverty.

The occurrence and impact of period poverty and menstrual injustice is not isolated to single events. Rather, it is a fluctuating experience lived by women throughout their lifecourses. I conceptualise this as a spectrum or continuum of experience: period poverty and menstrual injustice is experienced episodically over the lifecourse. By this, I mean that women can fall in and out of period poverty at different times in their lives for different reasons. This is a significant finding in my research because it highlights the longevity and deep-rooted issue of period poverty. I spoke to women who were perimenopausal and menopausal (coming to the end of their menstrual lives) who had been experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice throughout their lives. From menarche, many of my participants had struggled with accessing and affording menstrual products for a range of reasons. It is a fluctuation in that women are not always in period poverty or experiencing menstrual injustice. Their experiences are episodic based on their available monthly income, relationships, and access to support services. Some months and years women will not struggle with period poverty, but at other times in their lives they might. I explore this in depth through two participant life stories in chapter 6.

As I have previously mentioned, I found that the term 'period poverty' did not cover all the experiences of my participants. Even with the calls from menstrual scholars and activists for understanding period poverty as more than just money for products, I found a gap through which some of my participant's experiences fell. I explore this in chapter 7. Access to menstrual products and the menstrual product of choice is still centred, but there are other barriers obstructing women's access to them which are not solely about money. Gender-based violence including sexual assault and financial abuse, experiences of homelessness, and unequal access to preferred menstrual products all create a landscape of inequality for how women can manage their periods. As with period poverty from a lack of money from individual income, menstrual stigma and taboo intertwine with menstrual injustice. These create circumstances in which women have unequal and unjust experiences of menstruating, but they are lost within current understandings of period poverty. The

element of money is still there, but there are wider gendered, social, and violent forces at play which construct menstrual injustice. This is the focus of chapter 7, although I also point to experiences that fit more broadly within menstrual injustice in the earlier chapters.

As I have outlined in the research background section of this chapter, most media and research examines how women may receive support when experiencing period poverty, and how funding for support is lacking. This theme came up in my interviews and I conceptualise the lack of support or inefficient support as a form of menstrual injustice. This is not to say it is all negative. To the contrary I explore how women support each other – their daughters, mothers, friends, and neighbours – on a grassroots and community level in chapter 8. As I argue, this everyday lens is missed out in current research and understandings of how women navigate period poverty. Indeed, it may be one reason why period poverty has been hidden, in that women have just gotten on and dealt with it. How women support each other and are supported by external organisations is important to see how support can be improved. Factors like stigma and accessibility must be considered in how we support women through experiences of menstrual injustice, and my participants highlighted both subtle and more obvious obstacles to support and justice.

Finally, I draw this thesis and my research to a conclusion in chapter 9 and an epilogue. In chapter 9, I address how I have answered my research questions, reflect on any research limitations, and provide suggestions for areas of further research. The epilogue is a reflective space to give further voice and gratitude to the generosity of my participants for giving their time and experiences for this research.

1.5. A Note on Terms and Language

Menstruation is a broad term that encompasses many things in everyday speech. Medically speaking, menstruation is part of a woman's reproductive lifecycle (NHS, 2019a). The female reproductive system contains organs (the ovaries, fallopian tubes, uterus, and vagina) which prepare themselves for the possibility of conception each month. This is called the menstrual cycle, which centres around the release of an egg from the ovaries every month. During the menstrual cycle, the female hormone oestrogen causes the uterus lining to thicken in preparation for a fertilised egg. Importantly for the context of my thesis, if the egg is not fertilised, it breaks down, reduces the level of hormones produced by the egg, and causes the thickened uterus lining to also break down. The egg and uterus lining are then shed in blood by the body through the vagina during menstruation. This part of the menstrual cycle is known as a period, and the menstrual cycle starts again.

In my thesis, I use the terms 'period' and 'menstruating' interchangeably. Broadly when I talk about menstruation I mean the period (rather than other parts of the menstrual cycle).

In everyday language these terms are used interchangeably, and so I use them interchangeably in my thesis.

Where I mean more than the period I signpost this, because I acknowledge that part of menstruation for many women is other symptoms including tummy cramps, back aches, headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, constipation, mood swings, and likely other experiences I have missed. Whether a woman will experience any extra symptoms when menstruating is dependent on their individual menstrual experience. Taking a personal example, I experience heavy bleeding, tummy cramps, hormone related migraines, and sometimes nausea. My sister experiences lighter bleeding, whole body cramps and vomiting. My best friend hardly has any other symptoms with her bleeding, just the occasional headache. Every woman is different and thus every woman's menstrual experience is different (as I explore in chapter 4 with my data).

Adding to this, I use the term menstrual products to mean single-use disposable menstrual products. Like many menstrual scholars and activists, I make a conscious move away from the terms 'feminine hygiene products', 'sanitary products', and 'sanitary towels', as they negatively associate menstruation with dirt, pollution, and the need for sanitation. This is a personal act of feminist resistance against equating the female reproductive body with pollution and hygiene. Having said this, my participants still use these terms (understandably, I used them up until the second year of my PhD and even now catch myself slipping into the terms I had grown up with). Further, as I explore in the discussion chapters (particularly chapter 5), my participants associated hygiene when menstruating with a sense of dignity. This played a significant role in how women perceived themselves as respectable and worthy of value in a society which devalues the working-class, women, and menstruators separately and combined. This is another factor of why women still used the terms 'sanitary towel' and 'feminine hygiene'.

Furthermore, all my participants used single-use disposable menstrual products. For many menstrual scholars who intersect studies of menstruation with sustainability and climate activism, the consumption of single-use products creates tense debate. There are arguments for reusable menstrual products as a solution to period poverty. In theory, being able to wash and reuse menstrual products rather than buying fresh ones every month is a sustainable solution. However, and as I discuss in more detail in chapter 4, there would require a relearning of menstrual management. Further, the initial cost of, for example a menstrual cup (retailed at £20), would be a considerable expense for many of my participants, one they simply could not afford. I come back to this in chapter 9, but for now this is brief context for why my participants used disposable period pads and tampons.

I do not want to assume that all readers of my thesis have an understanding of the different forms of menstrual management, so I outline the main type of menstrual product and how

they are used next. Period pads (otherwise known as ‘sanitary towels’) are a strip of absorbent padding that have a sticky side which is stuck to the inside of a pair of knickers. Some come with sticky wings to fold around the crotch material, others are just a strip of padded fabric. They come in various sizes, lengths, and absorbency for women to choose the ones most suitable for their period. Tampons are small tubes of cotton with a string attached to one end that are inserted into the vagina. They soak up menstrual blood before it leaves the body. There are two types of tampon; one with an applicator and one without. An applicator can be a plastic or cardboard tube within which the tampon sits and makes inserting the tampon easier for some women. The applicator is removed whilst the tampon remains in the vagina. Non-applicator tampons are inserted into the vagina with fingers. It is recommended that tampons are removed and a new one inserted everyday 4-6 hours, and period pads be changed when they become saturated (NHS, 2019c; NHS Inform, 2022). Of course, in practice, how often menstrual products are changed depends on personal preference and menstrual experience. Period pads and tampons were the only type of menstrual product my participants spoke about using.

Another important point about the terms I use must be made about my discussion of periods and women. Periods are not only a woman’s health issue as transmen, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people with female reproductive organs may also menstruate. As many menstrual scholars have argued, not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women (Laws, 1990; Bobel, 2010). However, my participants understand and frame their experiences around gender binaries of male/female, man/woman. This is because all participants identified as cis women. These gendered categories are significant to how they navigate their social worlds (Clisby, 2014). Therefore, it is these framings which I use in this thesis. I come back to this point in chapter 9 when providing some reflections on my research limitations and areas for more research.

Another term I use is ‘underserved communities’. The term originates in medical research and health service provision and refers to populations who face additional barriers to accessing and using certain services. Such barriers include geographic location, age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, and obstacles created from local authority distribution of funding. I use this term because it reminds us that inclusion of this group in research – or lack of inclusion – is not due to faults of their own, it is structural conditions which create underserved communities and groups (NIHR, 2020). In this way, the term ‘underserved’ is more empowering than ‘underrepresented’ or ‘disadvantaged’ because it immediately recognises the external forces at play which fail to serve and limit women’s access to menstrual support services and intimately structures women’s experiences of menstrual injustice.

Finally, I explain the terms period poverty and menstrual injustice, and their use in my thesis. As I illustrate throughout this thesis, period poverty and menstrual injustice refer to the social, economic, gender, class, culture, and structural factors that plunge women into being unable to access or afford materials to adequately manage their periods. As menstrual scholars and activists argue, period poverty is more than just not having money to buy menstrual products (Briggs, 2020; Vora, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2022). Increasingly it has come to be understood as more, with the intersections of class, gender, and stigma. I explicitly distinguish the two terms because there is an assumption that period poverty is focussed on the affordability of menstrual products. I use menstrual injustice to encompass the material struggles of being unable to afford menstrual products along with the violent gendered, spatial, and circumstantial influences which are often overlooked but can leave women with restricted access to menstrual management materials. These include gender-based violence, homelessness, and changing circumstances plunging women into precarious socioeconomic positions.

The next few chapters (especially 4-6) tend to lean on the term period poverty to illustrate how money was identified as the biggest barrier for the women in this study. From chapter 7, I move to the broader term menstrual injustice as I introduce experiences of domestic abuse, homelessness, and the precarious nature of supporting menstruating women in need. Fundamentally, I argue that we need to use the term menstrual injustice to more deeply understand the intersectional experiences of how and why women are unable to manage their periods the ways they want to. Menstrual injustice as a term allows this more holistic conceptualisation to improve women's menstrual health and wellbeing, and society's understanding of our needs. I still use the term period poverty in this thesis, however, as it has been so deeply ingrained in British society and projected by the media that it is valuable in how this research is received by readers, academics, policymakers, and other interested parties alike. People would not necessarily equate this research with partly tackling the growing social issue of period poverty if I did not use the term period poverty.

1.6. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has introduced my PhD research questions, context, and thesis aims. I have set the scene in a socio-political context and outlined the specific terminology I use throughout this thesis. I move into chapter 2, the literature review, to lay the academic foundations from which I build my academic argument and analytical framework to answer my research questions.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the academic literature and existing research I have engaged with to build the foundations of my analysis. From my review, I discovered that a UK-focussed class analysis of period poverty and menstrual injustice has yet to be fully undertaken. This is one aim of my PhD research and I critically engage with a wide range of literature across multiple disciplines to achieve it. In this chapter I illustrate the academic context of austerity, poverty, and periods in the everyday. I also introduce the concepts I go on to thread through this thesis: respectability, menstrual crankiness, and the lifecourse.

2.1. Setting The Scene: Austerity and Poverty in Britain

My PhD research was conducted within the broader background of austerity and crisis in the UK. In this section I give a brief outline of the UK's austerity policies and reasons for implementation. I provide this information as explanation of the specific policies implemented in 2010 tends to be absent in recent research on the everyday impact of austerity on people's lives and it is a useful reminder of the structural changes that took place. I then explore debates within academic literature which explore how austerity impacts people's everyday lives. I conceptualise how austerity has been justified through embedding taboo about poverty and highlight research which challenges this taboo by illustrating the struggle, hardship and vulnerability created through dismantling the welfare state. This section provides the academic foundation for understanding and analysing the role of austerity and experiences of poverty that intersect with my participants' lived experiences.

2.1.1. Understanding Austerity Policies

Following the 2008 financial crash, the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition introduced austerity as their fiscal policy. Austerity policies included harsh welfare reforms which entrenched deep economic hardship for many people in the UK (Greer Murphy, 2017). The policies have gradually eroded state provided housing, quality education, and vital public services essential to the welfare of British society (Greer Murphy, 2017). Deemed essential to fix "Broken Britain" – a term used by the Conservative Party to describe the country's 'social decay' – welfare reform resulted in an estimated £45.4 billion cuts in welfare spending from 2010 to 2021 (Dagdeviren and Luz, 2019). 50% of these cuts were targeted at benefits and local governments, the two most valuable public services keeping Britain's most vulnerable people supported and able to live and participate in society (O'Hara, 2014).

As part of welfare reform, the introduction of Universal Credit in 2013 combined individual benefits into one payment per individual or household as the new monthly income for

people eligible for financial support. Theoretically simplifying the welfare system, policies applied to Universal Credit actually increased impoverishment across the country (Barnard, 2019). The digitalisation of Universal Credit assumed digital literacy and access to an electronic device and the Internet, neglecting the fact that many experience digital poverty and that access is becoming harder due to cuts to services that would otherwise be able to support people through the digital process (Alston, 2018). Furthermore, Universal Credit serves to displace families with children further into poverty with a two-child cap on receiving extra income (Brocklehurst, 2017). There is a five-week delay in receiving benefit income when applying for Universal Credit, leaving many people exposed to impoverishment during this time (Booth and Butler, 2018; DWP, 2022b). Strict penalties are imposed on claimants who fail to meet the criterion required by the state to receive benefits (Dagdeviren and Luz, 2019). With a penalty policy of benefit sanctions, benefit payments can be stopped for several weeks, months, and even years.

Furthermore, welfare reform is geographically uneven following the Thatcherite legacy of rapid deindustrialisation and subsequent rising levels of unemployment (Hamnett, 2011). The distribution of welfare support parallels the widening North-South divide and cuts to welfare support are disproportionately experienced in areas of deindustrialisation and consequent low job availability because people in these areas rely on public services more (Hamnett, 2011). The post-industrial shift taken place in these areas coupled with severe public service cuts has significant impacts upon the health and wellbeing of people living in the North of England (Kitson *et al.*, 2011; Bamba and Garthwaite, 2015; Bamba, 2016; Omstedt, 2016; Bhandari *et al.*, 2017).

Particularly relevant to this PhD thesis is research revealing how austerity policies disproportionately impact women (Dalingwater, 2017; Durbin *et al.*, 2017). Women in the UK face deeply entrenched and long-standing structural inequalities and obstacles in gaining employment and a source of income (MacDonald, 2018b). The Women's Budget Group (2018) evidenced that in the UK, 21% of adult women are living in poverty compared to 19% of adult men. Across the UK, 48% of single-parent households live in poverty with 86% of these households having a mother as the single parent (Women's Budget Group, 2018). Among pensioners living in poverty, 23% are women compared with 18% who are men (Women's Budget Group, 2018).

Within the context of austerity there is a high social cost experienced specifically by women (Griffin, 2015). Women face disproportionately negative impacts of the public expenditure reductions. They are more reliant on these services because of gendered caring and employment expectations. The House of Commons Library (2016) report on the gender impact of welfare reforms showed that women lose more income than men at every level of the income scale, with women losing on average £940 per year compared to losses of £460

for men (Keen and Cracknell, 2016). Through the welfare reforms it is suggested that single mothers will lose an average of £3860 in net income and £4860 in the value of public services they receive, which equals an 18% decrease in living standards each year by 2020 (Dalingwater, 2017; Women's Budget Group, 2018).

Reductions in state welfare spending have additional consequences for women in a less visible way (Craddock, 2017; Jupp, 2018). Research shows that women are more dependent on welfare support as caring responsibilities may prevent them from entering the workplace (Macleavy, 2011). Even in-work women are more likely to hold unstable, part-time, and low-paid employment whilst undertaking childcare (Macleavy, 2011; MacDonald, 2018b; Women's Budget Group, 2018). Further, as policy researcher Ellie MacDonald (2018) notes, 'workfare' reforms (policies encouraging people into work) penalise two-earner households by benefit reductions which disincentivises women to work (who are often characterised as the second earner through lower incomes). Such welfare reforms are reinforcing traditional male-breadwinner families and fortifying both a socioeconomic and socio-political gender divide in British society. Following the embedded traditional domestic roles of women, they more often take on the household budgeting responsibilities and thus the emotional burden of managing during times of economic hardship (Jupp, 2017; 2018).

Finally, Universal Credit makes it harder for women to leave abusive relationships. This is because the payment is received in one sum to a joint account for those living in the same household as a couple. Poverty may exacerbate domestic violence by prolonging women's exposure to it and reducing their ability to leave. For half of the domestic violence victims living with their abuser, financial abuse prevents them from leaving the relationship (Sharp-Jeffs, 2015; Brocklehurst, 2017; Women's Budget Group, 2018; Postmus *et al.*, 2020). Not only does this demonstrate Universal Credit as socioeconomically problematic, it also illustrates how women are disproportionately impacted in negative ways by Britain's austerity and welfare reforms.

Austerity's economic and social impacts are continued to be felt by many today. Despite being the 5th richest country in the world, 14.2 million people are living in poverty in the UK (Social Metrics Commission, 2018). Austerity policies are implemented in physical economic cuts but also controlled and justified symbolically through public discourse (notably political and media narrative) condemning those not in work as lazy. I explore this discourse-led justification in the next section. This provides context to the role of social class intersecting with everyday austerity and experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice (discussed more in sections 2.2 and 2.4).

2.1.2. Justifying Austerity Policies by Constructing Taboo

Poverty and being poor is stigmatised and made taboo through public policy and government rhetoric. Powerful platforms for disseminating ideas of a 'culture of dependency' and generational worklessness are used to publicly justify austerity policies (Garthwaite, 2011; Chase and Walker, 2013; Slater, 2014). The post-2008 political narrative rooted the cause of the financial crisis in an expensive and out-of-control welfare state rather than the reality of high-risk global banking strategy (Blyth, 2013; Slater, 2014). Critics note how coalition and conservative policy documents and media representation minimised the structural causes of poverty in favour of a narrative proposing that solely individuals are to blame for their impoverished situation, thanks to their poor choices, weak quality of social relationships, and choice in a 'welfare lifestyle' (Garthwaite, 2011; Wiggan, 2012; Patrick, 2014; Patrick, 2015; Garthwaite, 2016c). Changing the political narrative to insist the welfare state is the cause of welfare dependency and utilising a rhetoric of worklessness, dysfunctional families, and the underclass justified austerity policies and significant welfare reform as a means of social crisis management (Slater, 2014; Edmiston, 2017).

Particularly relevant for this thesis is scholarship that examines these discourses in relation to foodbanks. Policy scholars Kayleigh Garthwaite (2016c) and Rebecca Wells and Martin Caraher (2014) illustrate how the rise in foodbanks has been accompanied with a discourse of moral judgments, misconceptions, and perpetuating myths about food aid recipients. For example, the growing ideology of 'shirkers' and 'strivers' paralleled increasing foodbank use, and politically-charged newspaper articles frequently showed characterisations of foodbank users as incapable of managing personal finances and taking advantage of a network of free food (Garthwaite, 2011; Wells and Caraher, 2014). Kingsley Purdam et al. (2016) indicates that while a food parcel might be 'free', there are significant hidden costs of shame and social stigma. As Garthwaite (2017) also notes, charity is not given to social equals and a narrative of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor is strengthened through the process of institutional referral to most foodbanks in the UK. Charitable food is not an entitlement offered to all citizens and it profoundly distinguishes 'the needy' from the volunteers, constructing a hierarchical sense of status and expectation on each side (Garthwaite, 2017). Psychosocially, the intersecting experiences of having to use foodbanks as a last resort and needing charitable resources to look after oneself on a basic level forges intimate feelings of shame, embarrassment, stigma, and a sense of failure in not being able to live comfortably or support a family. Adding to this, phrases such as 'dependency', 'unwilling', 'workshy' or a 'culture of worklessness' are used by the state through media and public speaking platforms such as parliamentary debates to label those receiving health-related benefits (Garthwaite, 2011).

Such negative narratives do not go unnoticed by those they are used to describe. In a study of 42 adults living in poverty in the UK, sociologists Elaine Chase and Robert Walker (2013) witnessed how pejorative words were used by participants to describe how they felt about themselves, and how they felt others perceived them. Words including 'guilty', 'uncomfortable', 'worthless', 'useless', 'dirty', 'crap', 'embarrassed', and 'failure' were used by participants, illustrating the shame intimately felt by those living in poverty and the contemporary embedding of stigma and taboo around poverty (Chase and Walker, 2013). As Chase and Walker (2013) argue, the persistent language of 'shirkers' and 'strivers' exploited by the government for their justification of fiscal policy becomes an internalised, embodied, and lived taboo by those affected by austerity and reliant on welfare support.

Such discourses can be and are rejected by those living in poverty, however. Building on two years of ethnographic observation in a Trussell Trust foodbank in Stockton, Garthwaite (2017) explores the relationship between the idea of the 'active citizen' and the lived experiences of foodbank users and volunteers. Garthwaite finds that her participants' experiences and behaviours challenge dominant political narratives that blame individuals for their poor and selfish choices. Drawing on Ruth Lister's (2015) recognition of living in poverty as highly active, time-consuming, and physically and mentally exhausting to just survive, Garthwaite (2017) theorises the idea of 'active unemployment', rejecting the 'workless' and 'idle' rhetoric that perpetuates political discourse. The daily work behind making a little food go a long way, maintaining a comfortable home, choosing whether to 'heat or eat' (p.287), and caring for children, friends, and family was often hidden by those engaged in it and ignored in public, media and government discourse of the headline (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012; Garthwaite, 2016c; Pemberton *et al.*, 2016). These are experiences and narratives that are made invisible and ignored by state policy and discourse. By understanding poverty as active and not a passive 'workless' or 'idle' state reflects how the government privileges the economically active citizen and undervalues the important unpaid work 'behind the scenes' to support the economy and the ideal 'active citizen'. In this thesis I draw on these ideas in parallel with menstrual management on low incomes to illustrate the behind-the-scenes work by working-class women that is frequently ignored and severely underappreciated in the context of taboo.

2.1.3. Understanding The Austere Everyday

As highlighted by the scholarship on foodbanks, it is important to recognise that austerity is not just about large-scale economics or spending cuts but about how those reductions are lived and felt in everyday spaces and seemingly mundane situations (O'Hara, 2014; Hitchen, 2016; Hall, 2017). A household and personal scale to investigate the lived experiences of austerity is valuable to map how austerity – its social, economic, and political implications – intimately cuts across different practices and spaces of everyday life (Clayton *et al.*, 2015;

Hall, 2019a). More than an economic and political decision, austerity is inherently social and emotional, and experienced on the ground in people's everyday lives in various ways with various manifestations and impacts (Hitchen, 2016). Individual and familial behaviours and emotions are forced to change in subtle and not-so-subtle ways which implicate the day-to-day and week-to-week activities, security, and mental health of those living the localised consequences of austerity policies.

Geographer Sarah Hall (2019a) has researched and written extensively about 'everyday austerity'. Across a range of empirical studies in the North of England, Hall gives a close-up examination of how government level fiscal policy is lived in the everyday lives of Britain's most vulnerable communities (Hall, 2016; Hall, 2021). Hall (2019a, p. 770) powerfully writes how government policies 'bleed into the very fabric of everyday geographies' and she presents a case for a relational geography to explore how families, friends, and social networks work together and individually in and through austere times and financialisation of everyday life. Differentiating between living *in* austerity (the wider backdrop of austerity Britain) and living *with* austerity (bearing the brunt in the everyday), Hall (2019b) emphasises the importance of analysing the impact of austerity on personal and familial everyday scales through a relational approach. This relational approach highlights how austerity's impact seeps beyond those bearing the direct brunt in social, emotional, and financial ways.

Further, an everyday approach to researching austerity has revealed how those living in poverty tend to normalise everyday socioeconomic hardship through a rhetoric of coping (Chase and Walker, 2013; Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013). With the aim of giving visibility to personal experiential accounts of poverty (that discourse-focussed and policy-based literature does not account for), sociologists Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald (2013) draw on life histories of 60 people living in Middlesbrough. The authors note how participants were keen to stress the unremarkable normality of their lives, putting themselves in the same 'nobody's rich around here' position as everyone else in their community (Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013, p. 290). Similarly in Chase and Walker's (2013) research, 'poverty' was associated with not working and benefits as the primary income source rather than material deprivation. So rather than using terms such as 'poor' or 'poverty', references to 'hard times' and 'tough decisions' were made to represent life under austerity and distance themselves from the taboo of poverty (Chase and Walker, 2013).

In addition, much empirical research explores how austerity is inherently embodied, creating feelings of physical weariness, emotional exhaustion, and being 'squeezed' (Patrick, 2014; Hall, 2019c; Stenning, 2020). Living in austerity is intimately connected to making difficult decisions to 'get by'. Social policy researcher, Ruth Patrick's (2014) longitudinal

research of 15 Job Seeker's Allowance recipients revealed that such tough decisions often led to 'doing without', particularly for parents to provide food, warmth and clothes for their children. Patrick's research exposed how efforts to 'cope' on benefits were heavily time intensive and emotionally draining, requiring intricate skills of agency, domestic management and ingenuity to get by (Patrick, 2014). The intensification of socioeconomic hardship and impoverishment through stagnating incomes and inflating costs of living place greater tensions on already frail household budgets (Shildrick *et al.*, 2012; Pemberton *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, building on the everydayness of austerity, researcher Esther Hitchen's empirical work (2016) explores austerity through the concept of atmosphere and the affective presence of austerity in everyday life. Hitchen (2016) argues that attention to the day-to-day practices and processes of the everyday, the individual and the household in an austere context is vital to understand how life under austerity is fluctuating, dynamic, and messy. Using empirical research with 11 families who have children with disabilities, Hitchen brings an analytical closeness to the body and everyday objects as affective tools which intensify how people feel, move, and behave in relation to complex and fluctuating austere changes in the everyday. Hitchen (2016) highlights the temporal impacts of austerity as well, exploring how monetary changes impacted family's activities and behaviours from day-to-day, week-to-week, and in relation to school holidays. An everyday relational lens brings to light the daily struggle and temporal challenges austerity policies and welfare state changes has on people in already vulnerable positions. Understanding how austerity is lived through individual, familial, temporal, and local realities can intimately highlight the deep personal impact a national political agenda can have on everyday lives (Hitchen, 2016).

These themes and debates around the impact of austerity are central in my PhD research. Women are disproportionately affected by austerity and are frequently the most vulnerable in society, hit the hardest by public services cuts simply because they rely on them the most. Austerity policies have had devastating impacts upon Britain's most vulnerable, seeing people already living in poverty have their conditions worsen and thousands more drop to near or below the poverty line (O'Hara, 2014; Alston, 2018; Hall, 2019a; Hall, 2019b). Families are faced with increasing financial precarity and employment uncertainty (Hitchen, 2016; Edmiston, 2017). Low-income households are increasingly struggling with daily essentials and experiencing food insecurity, fuel poverty, ill health, and social/familial breakdown (Garthwaite, 2014; Patrick, 2014; Pemberton *et al.*, 2017). The layer which has yet to be examined in academic research and debate, and to which this thesis contributes, is period poverty.

2.2. Poverty and Social Class

Before I expand on research around period poverty, I examine the debates and ideas around social class. Social class is central to this thesis because my participants were mainly working-class and experienced specific forms of menstrual injustice due to various intersecting identities, of which class was a significant one. Class is an incredibly complex and evolving concept and is significant in analysing forms of inequality. I draw on class as a central concept through this thesis and this section lays the foundation alongside austerity for a deep critical analysis of who experiences period poverty and menstrual injustice, why and how.

2.2.1. Exploring Theories of Social Class

Social class can be conceptualised in different ways depending on the research focus, academic discipline, and epistemological standpoint of the researcher. Often class is thought of as the struggle between people of different economic positions within capitalism. Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) was a key thinker of these ideas of social conflict. During the industrial period, Marx's notion of class struggle was based on how the division of labour facilitated a class partition, between labour and capital. Those with capital (the bourgeoisie) comprised a new middle-class, whereas those labouring (the mass proletariat) made up a working class (Nayak and Jeffrey, 2011). Asking the question of who benefits from this prevailing social structure, Marx argued that capitalism is a system that serves the already rich and powerful as those who control the 'economic base' have more opportunities to reproduce and amass wealth (Nayak and Jeffrey, 2011). Marx was aware of the distinctly different lifeworlds of these two classes, placing emphasis on the economic possibilities of the wealthy becoming wealthier through the economic exploitation of the lower working class.

However, I focus on ideas of class developed from the 1970s cultural turn. Cultural turn scholars directed research to more contemporary debates about culture which saw scholarship diverge from Marxist theory to understand class as not simply a set of economic signifiers such as housing or employment; class is also something that we are (Lawler, 2005b). As these scholars argued, class is a much more complex and historically associated concept than one's place in the labour market (Savage, 2015). It is a highly dynamic and complex system of inequality that is in continual (re)making in both large- and small-scale practices and processes in everyday life. Economic inequalities are important but it is not enough for only economic capital to define class.

The influential social thinker, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), brought attention to sociocultural ideas of class privilege in terms of access to capital. Reaching beyond Marxist frames of monetary economic organisation, Bourdieu argued for scholars to also include the

systematic organisation of the symbolic through four main types of capital: economic, social, cultural, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1983; 2021; Skeggs, 2004; Savage, 2015). Economic capital refers to money and financial assets; social capital is the networks of friends and associates; cultural capital describes ideas of taste in leisure activities; and symbolic capital represents the resources accessible to construct and perform reputation. It is through these ideas of capital that we can understand class as social categories (re)produced through relations with money, people, hobbies, and materials (Gagnier, 2000; Lawler, 2005a).

It is important to note that capitals are context specific (Skeggs, 2004). Certain capital may be valued in one context but not in another (Bourdieu, 1983; 2021). These contextualised capitals produce affective class contexts, cultures, and experiences marking 'lesser' and inferior classes as immoral and worthless. Class, then, is no longer simply about economic asset. If class is solely understood as an objective relationship to the economy, then the subjectivities, identities, discourse, and performances of class are essentialised, embedding socially constructed notions of the working-class as immoral and worthless. The dynamic conceptualisation of class is related to classed identities: what we *are*. We can understand class as a politicised site of struggle with identity, moral worth, and a sense of the valued self, which I explore over the next sections.

2.2.2. Class as Culture: Taste, Social Value, and Self-Worth

Scholars argue that class as a mode of social classification has always been a moralised category (Bourdieu, 1999; Savage, 2015; Walkerdine, 2015). Contemporary class inequality circulates through symbolic and cultural forms designating people as morally worthy with the 'right' (middle-class) moral values. Class is a highly charged issue because of its strong associations with injustice and moral evaluation (Sayer, 2002). Working-class lives and identities are directly positioned against middle-class sociocultural ideals and ideas of morals (Bourdieu, 1984). Middle-class culture is seen as 'real culture', characterised by relative affluence as well as signifiers including intelligence, taste, highbrow activities, ideas of good parenting, and so on. Working-class culture is constructed as the opposite: characterised by 'chavs', mobs, masses, and immorality. In this sense, the working-classes have no taste – that is, not the 'right' taste (Skeggs, 2004).

Psychosocial conceptualisations of class are used to explore how class is a lived moralised identity struggle. In discussing the psychic landscape of social class, sociologist Diane Reay (2005a) argues that social class in British society is etched not only into our cultures, but also in our psyche. How we think and feel about everyday activities creates classed identities, and vice versa this class thinking generates classed practices. This, which Reay (2005a) terms 'psychic economy', profoundly contributes to how we act, think, feel, and the ways that we are (Lawler, 2005a; Reay, 2005b). As this scholarship shows, the emotional experience of class is incredibly important. The affective aspects of class are experienced as

feelings of ambivalence (Walkerdine, 2003), ideas of inferiority and superiority through class culture and wealth (Friedman and Laurison, 2019), visceral aversion and distaste of other classes (Skeggs, 2004), and class markings of taste (Lawler, 2005a). Such affect constitutes the psychic economy of class.

Building on this argument, political economy scholar Andrew Sayer (2002; 2016) recognises the psychic landscape of class in themes of embarrassment and shame in ethical and moral evaluation of the 'other'. Despite the 'accident of birth' inheritance of social class, people may feel pride or shame in feelings of deserving their class position. Individuals care about how they are positioned in their social class and in turn how others perceive and treat them based on class (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Affective invocations of pride, shame, resentment, embarrassment, envy, and compassion also act as evaluating judgements – as forms of emotional reasoning – for how people are treated in relation to what they value. Sayer (2016, p. 959) powerfully argues that 'one of the most important features of class inequalities is that they present people with unequal bases for respect, not just by being objects of unwarranted respect or disdain, but as having unequal access to the practices and goods that allow them unwarranted respect or conditional recognition'. In other words, unequal access to materials and practices results in class inequalities related to social and moralised ideas of respect. Those without capital to perform normative ideologies through materials, goods, practices, taste, and the 'right' morals are therefore seen to lack social worth.

Taste may not be determined by class, but it is evidently used as a marker of class. Ideologies of taste are used to invoke and obstruct feelings of class (Lawler, 2005b; Lawler, 2005a). Through this, the identification of class becomes a source of respectability because taste is perceived to be an individual and personalised characteristic. Certain tastes are desirable and attainable – everyone ought to have it, and everyone could have it – yet at the same time it is a scarce and costly resource, so not everyone does have it. Scholars therefore acknowledge that cultural signifiers do not work in isolation from economic capital or money. As sociologist Steph Lawler (2005b) notes, working-class people are not marked as lacking, immoral, or disgusting by poverty but through their assumed lack of taste and knowledge which is intimately connected to money or forms of capital, such as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

Picking out ideas of middle-class disgust specifically, Lawler (2005a) argues that disgust is just one manifestation of a bourgeois project of resentment to distinguish the middle class from its others. Disgust in the frame of class struggle is deeply rooted in ideologies of dirt, hygiene, and sanitation; the working-class were pathologised as inherently dirty and polluting. Hygiene was one of the earliest discourses around class and morals (Skeggs, 2004). Early categorisations of social class were developed through geographical mapping of

disease which spread rapidly in working-class areas because of dense populations and poor sanitation (Lawler, 2005a). Class practices that minimised exposure to dirt and the unequal resources available to remove dirt embedded hygiene as a site of class distinction. Further, dirt and hygiene became embodied distinctions of class in the 19th century. Class and hygiene became intimately mapped onto and read through the body. Sociologists Lucy Pickering and Phillipa Wiseman (2019, p. 751) note that ideas of ‘dirt interwove between that which marred your clothes and skin and the practices that put them there (manual labour, outdoor work) together with the failure of practices to remove them’. Hygiene (or the lack of it) was therefore articulated as a moral problem with discourses relying on the marketisation of sanitation as a solution to the threat of the ‘unhygienic working classes’. Colonial practice further distinguished between the working and upper classes with the availability of soap from colonial trade, as well as intersecting racist ideologies of white people as clean and the non-white other as dirty (McClintock, 2013; Pickering and Wiseman, 2019).

Sociologist Valerie Walkerdine (2015) argued that historical discourses of the pauper have shaped responses to and lived experiences of working-class people: the deserving and undeserving poor is inscribed upon working-class bodies who do not have access to the symbolic resources needed to become valued in society. Hygiene-related narratives served to put distance between social classes and meant that dirt, waste, contagion, disorder, and danger became moral evaluations by which the working classes were coded and to become known as (Lawler, 2005a; Skeggs, 2005; Pickering and Wiseman, 2019). Deconstructing ideas from this historical discourse, some scholars have therefore argued that the body is the most obvious and ubiquitous signifier of class (Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, 2003; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Walkerdine, 2015; Skeggs, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Pickering and Wiseman, 2019).

2.2.3. Class, Bodies, Women, and Respectability

The body is a key vessel through which class is lived, felt, and perceived. Value is read onto certain bodies and subsequently certain bodies are associated with certain practices. In this section, I narrow my focus to explore literature on working-class women’s bodies as directly relevant to my PhD topic and analysis.

In a wider feminist context, women’s bodies have always been and continue to be read as reproductive and are given value accordingly (Grosz, 1994; Longhurst, 1996; Longhurst, 2001; Skeggs, 2004). Intersecting this with class, Walkerdine (2003) argues that women have always been positioned ambivalently in relation to class identity. Working-class femininity was developed in a masculine (economic labour) context. But as discussed previously, class is no longer easily situated in economic terms. The labour market as a traditional marker of working-class masculinity has been eroded in processes of deindustrialisation (Nayak, 2006).

Alongside this, working-class femininity has been recreated and repositioned within the changing categorisations of the class system.

Sociologist Beverley Skeggs (2016) argued that working-class women are positioned at the limit of British national morality. Using the hen party as an example, Skeggs (2016) demonstrates how the white-working class woman is representative of historical classed obsessions with morality and respect. The 'hen' is depicted as drunk, vulgar, excessive, and loud; an epitome of the working-class in direct opposition to the respectable, contained, and educated middle-class woman. The 'hen' is the embodiment of working-class women: excessive, contagious, uncontrollable. Associations of working-class women with the 'hen' present the white working-class woman as irresponsible and incapable of looking after herself and her family. This moral outrage of the excessive working-class woman serves to displace desire and respect with disgust and disassociation.

Through this metaphor of the hen party and the 'distasteful hen', Skeggs (1997; 2012; 2016) demonstrates how white working-class women are read and interpreted through historically negative systems of symbolic value. The urgency to 'other' the immoral working-class woman works in favour of moral boundary drawing that keeps the middle-class as favourable, respectable, and worthy. Being respected and respectable is an increasingly central concept in cultural understandings of contemporary class struggle.

Skeggs (1997) was first to identify respectability as a signifier of class. Skeggs highlighted that respectability is often the concern of those who are perceived not to have it, rather than those who do. Drawing on the lived experiences of 83 working-class women in the care sector in North-West England from a 12-year ethnography, Skeggs explores how working-class women work to feel and be perceived as respectable. Hygiene is identified as a key concept and motivator for the working-class women in her research to position themselves as being and feeling clean, and thus respectable. Skeggs develops the concept of respectability as embodying moral authority, a sense of self-worth and social value. In this sense, to not be respectable is to not have social value or legitimacy.

Defining class as a structure of feeling, Skeggs (1997) engages with Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital to examine how white working-class women work in many ways (through employment, caring, femininity, heterosexuality) to be respectable rather than rough (Nayak, 2006). Using Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capitals as active in social ordering and constructing class feeling is valuable in understanding how access, resources, and (social/self) legitimation contribute to the formation of class and ideologies of taste and respectability (Bourdieu, 1983; 2021; Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 1997).

Further, Skeggs notes that capitals are context specific, and people are distributed across social space (which can be mapped out onto geographical space with affluent and

underserved communities) according to the composition and volume of capital they possess. Analysing how the working-class women in her study made investments in respectability, Skeggs argues that women are positioned by historical legacies but also the resources and opportunities (capital) available to them. Such resources and opportunities are influenced by socioeconomic position, geographical location, and wider structural political forces. This means certain routes to capital are already restricted and the composition and volume of different capitals impact working-class women's trajectories in social space.

Finally, I want to highlight that as part of these debates and ideas around working-class women and social class, it is important to recognise that women's bodies (regardless of class) are historically and socioculturally positioned in opposition to men's bodies. Many feminist thinkers have provided a critical interrogation into the subordination of women's bodies as defined as inferior in a patriarchal society (Walby, 1990; Rose, 1993; Witz, 2000; Longhurst, 2001; Shilling, 2005; hooks, 2015).

Patriarchal society deemed women as inferior because of the differences in their bodies (Grosz, 1994). Seen as both a limitation (unable to do what men could do in the social and political world) and advantage (able to do more than men biologically, for example childbirth), women's bodies were perceived as biologically and socio-medically complex, out-of-control, and women were socially, politically, economically, and medically Othered because of this (Longhurst, 2001; Chrisler, 2011). Women's bodies were seen as 'leaky', abject, and gendered through women's experiences of childbirth, lactation, and menstruation; experiences men do not have (Kristeva, 1982; Longhurst, 2001). Through this 'leaky' process of Othering, women were an uncertainty in society and needed controlling and socio-medical intervention. Because of this, it was the female body that was defined as the problem and patriarchal action (both physical and symbolic) was taken to marginalise and police women (Chrisler, 2011; Johnson, 2022).

Expanding beyond the patriarchal idea of the body as biologically limiting, social constructionist feminist thinkers identified how it is the way social systems organise and give meanings to the body that is seen as oppressive to women (Grosz, 1994; Butler, 2006; Evans, 2012). Belief systems, values, and attitudes of society are what require change rather than the body itself. Critiquing these patriarchal belief systems deconstruct the idea of a passive, unconscious biological body, and replace symbolic theories with the idea of the social body – the body as a discursive and social object bound up in desire, signification and power (Beauvoir, 1949). The body is a key site of contestation, as discussed above in the intersections of class and the body. For feminist theorisations of the body, it is a site of sexual, political, economic, and intellectual struggle which constantly challenges inequality in the agency, mobility, activity, and social space afforded to women. The body cannot be

perceived as a blank canvas upon which sociocultural forces (such as perceptions of 'leaky' uncontrollable women's bodies) are applied because the body itself is a cultural intermeshing and production of nature (Grosz, 1994; Trappes, 2019). These theorisations reveal the ways in which women and women's bodies have been oppressed and marginalised in society through social, cultural, and medical discourses.

Understanding how women's bodies and working-class bodies have been marginalised separately and then intersect is particularly significant and, as I go on to demonstrate, complicated further in this thesis when focussing on the central topic: menstruation. Remembering this patriarchal history when exploring the intersection of the menstruating body and working-class body keenly reveals a deep two-fold stigma and patriarchal desire for control of women's bodies from external symbolic forces.

I move the next section of this chapter to review debates and research within the field of menstruation studies which further explores how women's bodies have been perceived, controlled, and constructed through the lens of menstruation. Narrowing down my review even further for the significant relevance of this thesis, I introduce menstruation literature to further build the foundation for methodological considerations and analysis of women's lived experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice.

2.3. Setting The Scene: Periods

Women's bodies are significant in menstruation research as menstruation is inherently a physiological and embodied experience. I have mapped out class and historical legacies of women's bodies, so now move into a review of literature on the menstruating body. In this section I explore menstrual taboo, stigma, theories of the menstruating woman, and how menstruation is experienced and embodied in different ways depending on different circumstances.

The first thing to note is that menstruation is a broad term encompassing many things (periods, the menstrual cycle, ovulation, menarche, menopause etc). The debates, research and narratives around menstruation are diverse and transdisciplinary. This is what makes menstruation research so exciting. Menstruation researchers have carried out ground-breaking research, menstrual activism, policy change, and raise greater public awareness of how menstruation can impact women's lives in varied ways.

In this section I present an overview of menstruation research, pinpointing particularly relevant and revelatory research topics, methodological, and theoretical choices. I critically engage with recent research and academic literature, as well as scholarship from the past four decades. Menstruation has been researched for the past 40 years but has really gained traction in the past 4 years, seeing a huge expansion of menstruation related topics and

disciplines engaging with menstruation research. Research from the 1980s is important to examine because the theorisations about the menstruating woman and menstruation itself (which I discuss in the next two sections) are still in circulation in public discourse today and the calls for change made 40 years ago are still being fought.

Before delving into these literatures, I make a final significant note that the literatures I review and examine in this section focus on Western historical and contemporary meanings of menstruation. Due to the geographical and demographic scope of my research and empirical findings I have chosen to contextualise the literatures I explore within this lens, placing a particular concern on empirical research with menstruating people in Britain. It is important to note that much of the literature I review lacks a critical engagement with race and by default concentrates on white women and girls. I recognise this as therefore situating my literature review within a Western historical and contemporary contextualisation.

2.3.1. Taboo: Constructing the Dangerous Menstruating Woman

The most prominent and transcendent themes in menstruation research are taboo and stigma. Menstrual taboo and stigma feature in most of the social research on menstruation in some way, whether the direct focus of the research, a significant sub-theme, or the scaffold upon which academic debates are built. In the next two sections I discuss the construction of menstrual taboo and stigma, highlighting research that focusses on the impact they have on menstruating women.

Broadly speaking, taboo refers to social traditions around etiquette within society (Douglas, 2002; BurrIDGE, 2010). A taboo inhibits behaviour and shames open discussion of socially-ascribed 'bad' things (Grandey *et al.*, 2020). Scholars have revealed how menstruation is one such example of a 'bad thing'. In the menstrual context, taboo can be conceptualised as an effort to protect 'forbidden' or 'dangerous' menstruating individuals from themselves and society from them (Delaney *et al.* 1988). As a taboo, menstruation is viewed as a polluting, dirty, disgusting, and dangerous uncontrollable feature of a woman, and it has a very long sociocultural, medical, and patriarchal history.

There is a large body of academic literature which focusses on menstrual taboo. Folklore and anthropology scholar Victoria Newton (2016) illustrates how historic folklore and myths about menstruation have been carried through to contemporary everyday language and knowledge about periods in the UK. For example, she explores how menstruation was associated with sin when understood as punishment for Eve's 'Original Sin' in the Anglican Bible. Researching 16-18th century English historical literature, Sara Read (2013) highlights how historical medical theories focus on the idea of menstrual blood as filth and as woman's bodies polluted by this physiology. Similarly, feminist scholar Louise Lander (1988) identified

how 19th century Gynaecology and Obstetrics paradigms firmly rooted menstruation in ideologies of reproduction and used this as objective medical knowledge to position women as inferior to men in western society. In more recent research, medical historian Bettina Bildhauer (2021) notes that historical medical and literary texts were created by men to marginalise women as the other, privileging men to write from a Cartesian dichotomy of the rational, controlled male mind against the irrational, uncontrollable leaky female body. Bildhauer identifies that such 'us' and 'them' narratives are at play in present-day discourse, and Bildhauer argues that even when menstruating women are discussing menstruation (both in public and private spaces) the personal experience of menstruation is denied rather than valued. In other words, menstruation is not talked about from a personal perspective because it is a taboo.

Taboo research is significant in understanding how (negative) sociocultural perceptions of the female body and its functions were developed over time and legitimised, often in medical discourse through scientific rationale (Bildhauer, 2021). Positioning the female body firmly into the distrust of biomedical and sociocultural expectations of women, the menstruating body in particular was perceived as abject: loose, unstable, and with highly uncontrollable corporeal boundaries (Kristeva, 1982; Britton, 1996; Shildrick, 1997; Ussher, 2006). Menstruating women thus needed social, cultural, and medical restricting, which took shape in the form of myths and marginalisation.

Despite scholars identifying how the personal and often messy, literally bloody experiences of menstruation are taboo, most academic debate around menstrual taboo is discursive. Literature focuses on language, myth, text, and folklore which have longevity in perceiving menstruation as dirty and the menstruating woman in need of control. Taboo is symbolically powerful in its pejorative discourse and is inherently a biological and bodily phenomenon. Despite being read on, in, and through the body, historical literature and associated academic debate does not appreciate the everyday impact of menstrual taboo on women and their bodies. As menstruation entered the interests of social research, scholars began to direct their focus on the discursive and symbolic influence of menstrual taboo through the physical and corporeal impact of stigmatisation.

2.3.2. Stigma: Hiding the Menstruating Woman

We can think of the difference between taboo and stigma as symbolic and material. Taboo works within the symbolic realm – to conceal through words. Stigma works on a more corporeal, embodied and material level – to conceal through actions. Menstruation is a female-specific physiological occurrence thus the impact of menstrual taboo is disproportionately felt by women. Women and women's bodies are stigmatised because they experience menstruation. Although primarily invisible, menstruation and its associated

stigma is used to discredit and physically control the menstruating woman (Kowalski and Chapple, 2000; Patterson, 2014).

I have found research about menstrual taboo primarily focuses on adult women but a large portion of menstrual stigma research begins with a study of menarche. This is because menarche (the first period) and early experiences of menstruation have a considerable impact on girls' experiences of menstruation as an adult (Clarke and Ruble, 1978; Brooks-Gunn and Ruble, 1982; Moore, 1995; Britton, 1996; Koff and Rierdan, 1996; Charlesworth, 2001; Burrows and Johnson, 2005; Young, 2005; Chrisler, 2011; Donmall, 2013; Patterson, 2014; Newton, 2016). Western education (both formal, via schools, and informal, via mothers and sisters) about menstruation prioritises a cultural narrative that situates periods as taboo and highly secretive (Beausang and Razor, 2000; Charlesworth, 2001). Young girls are conditioned to believe that periods are something to be ashamed of (Laws, 1990; Houppert, 2000; Burrows and Johnson, 2005; Newton, 2016). In girls' early years, sociohistorical menstrual taboo transcends the discursive realm to be played out on the female body as a stigmatic condition. The practical expectation to control and conceal the menstruating body is deeply embedded in girls at menarche and continues throughout a woman's lifecourse.

The pressures of concealment are known in Britain as 'menstrual etiquette'. The concept of menstrual etiquette, coined by social researcher Sophie Laws (1990), refers to a set of rules centred around the premise of keeping menstruation hidden. This entails embodied work: to conceal menstrual blood, conceal the materials of concealment (such as hiding tampons up one's sleeve when walking to the toilet), and verbally conceal one's menstruating status by not talking about it (Laws, 1990; Patterson, 2014; Moffat and Pickering, 2019). Menstrual etiquette is enforced both by taboo (do not talk about periods) and fear of stigmatisation (do not show periods), working on symbolic and material levels. Laws' concept of menstrual etiquette highlights the role of the physical menstrual product in negotiating menstrual taboo, as well as silencing experiences of periods.

Menstrual etiquette is therefore also a tangible concept. It is taught at menarche, where girls learn to perform strict hygiene rituals to cleanse their bodies and keep their menstrual status a secret (Charlesworth, 2001; Burrows and Johnson, 2005; Stein and Kim, 2009; Kumar and Srivastava, 2011; Jackson and Falmagne, 2013). A plethora of research analyses feminine hygiene advertisements to illustrate how modern advertising reflects historical myths and reinforces taboo of the menstruating woman and the menstruating body (Merskin, 1999; Stein and Kim, 2009; Chrisler, 2011; Spadaro *et al.*, 2018). 'Feminine hygiene' product advertisements emphasised the privacy of menstruation and drew public attention to the female body through an inherent connection with cleanliness (Vostral, 2005). Stein and Kim (2009) emphasise how language in advertising for menstrual products

– hygiene and sanitary pads – reinforce the idea that menstruation is fundamentally wrong and dirty. This positions the menstruating body as abnormal and in need of controlling (Charlesworth, 2001; Chrisler, 2013; Bobel, 2019).

The need for social control is embedded through the long sociomedical and cultural taboo of the polluted female body. Scholars argue that hygienic rituals of cleansing the menstruating body (regular showers, menstrual products, frequent toilet trips, specific sanitary bins etc) illustrates the desire to contain the female body and maintain social order (Stein and Kim, 2009; Bobel, 2010; Chrisler, 2011; Jackson and Falmagne, 2013; Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2013; Bobel, 2019). Linking to sociohistorical theories of the ideal body, failing to uphold these hygiene rituals risks public outcry at the disorder and disembodiment of the idealised, clean, passive, civilised woman. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (2002) argues that pollution beliefs carry a negative symbolic load that can be related to social life. For example, beliefs about menstrual pollution carry a symbolic capacity to control and limit the menstruating woman (Houppert, 2000; Ussher, 2006; Newton, 2016). Without strict hygienic practices acting to conceal the menstrual status, menstruating women cannot be seen as good citizens in society's moral values and social order. This perception carries a hierarchical status, valuing non-menstruating men over menstruating women.

Academic debates on menstrual taboo and stigma are important foundations for much of the more recent research on menstruation. The take-home points from these debates are how menstruation was constructed as polluting and dirty, embedding ideologies of the dangerous menstruating woman in need of sanitising and control. Taboo was embedded in western society and served to stigmatise menstruating girls and women. This is significant in my PhD which connects these understandings of menstruation taboo, hygiene, social class, and being a woman together. These are critical foundations upon which I build my analysis with participant lived experience in the discussion chapters (chapters 4-8).

However, the research discussed thus far fails to account for menstruation as an individual, subjective experience. I move now to explore more recent research specifically on period poverty. This research provides deeper insights into the embodied experiences of menstruation in conjunction with the impact of menstrual taboo and stigma. This work is crucial in establishing the importance of menstruation and associated experiences for academic study and from which this PhD thesis develops.

2.3.3. Taboo, Stigma, and Period Poverty

The first piece of research on period poverty in the UK was a report by Plan UK (2017). They reported on data from a survey of 1000 girls revealing that 27% of girls used a menstrual product for longer than intended use because they could not afford a clean one, 42% of girls

had to improvise menstrual wear, and 1 in 10 girls in the UK were not able to afford menstrual products at all. Another report by Plan UK used focus groups in England and Wales to examine girls' lived experiences of menstrual stigma and taboo. It explored popular myths including that you cannot swim when on your period, you cannot be a virgin if you use tampons, and that periods are dirty, and the impact of these myths and taboo on young women's everyday lives at school and at home (Plan UK, 2018).

Another notable piece of research was the 'Period Poverty' Project which was a seed-fund research project led by sociology and communications scholar Sara De Benedictis at Brunel University (2019-2020). The project sought to explore the role of print media in constructing and disseminating ideas around period poverty. It examined the representation of period poverty in the media, exploring links between austerity measures and period poverty. This project has no publications but I attended De Benedictis' 'Menstruation and Inequality' conference in January 2020 where she discussed the findings. De Benedictis (2020) indicated how at first 'period poverty' coverage in UK news (from 2016) was highly political through links to structural causes of poverty and the tampon tax, but over time the focus shifted to the product, or lack of product. This shift depoliticised 'period poverty' by removing coverage from the structural issues of how those experiencing period poverty may also be experiencing other forms of structural disadvantage. De Benedictis argued that the focus on access to menstrual products depoliticises how austerity measures influences and further disadvantages those experiencing period poverty. Through interviews with menstrual activists, De Benedictis (2020) highlighted how activists are picking up work that the state should be doing, including giving menstrual products to those who cannot afford them and providing menstrual education to those who cannot access it as easily. In that way, activists are taking on structural inequality in very individual ways. De Benedictis (2020) further noted how the schoolgirl was centred in print media coverage of period poverty but received little attention in UK-context academic research. She argued that schoolgirls are not the only narrative of period poverty, and research needs to make it more complex to show the intricacies of those affected by it.

Partly responding to this call, geographer Alison Briggs (2020) was one of the first researchers to examine period poverty experience beyond schoolgirls in the UK. As part of her Masters research interviewing women and school staff in Stoke-on-Trent, Briggs' (2020) research found three interwoven themes to highlight how period poverty impacts girls and women's lives. Firstly, she illustrates how women go to great lengths to maintain menstrual care and feeling clean on their periods. Secondly, she details the ways period poverty impacted everyday lives and how 'when money is scarce, the capacity for keeping menstrual blood hidden from public scrutiny is severely compromised' (Briggs, 2020, p. 95). This links to ideas of respectability, though Briggs did not use this conceptual frame. Finally, the paper highlighted how period poverty is felt and explored how anxiety and unhappiness were

central feelings when girls and women were on their period and unable to manage it in ways they wanted. This Masters study is one of the first to demonstrate how girls and women's daily lives are affected by period poverty. It also engages how girls and women are living in austerity which, along with gender and class, impact experiences of period poverty.

More recently, health researchers Gemma Williams, Emma Craddock and Annalise Weckesser took action in response to De Benedictis' (2020) call for attention of period poverty beyond the schoolgirl. Williams *et al.* (2022) conducted research about menstruation and 'period poverty' in the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers used a qualitative survey to gather 240 experiences of 'period poverty' and 17 semi-structured interviews with those delivering menstrual provision services during the pandemic in the UK. The research indicated how the pandemic has plunged more women and girls into period poverty, including those in work. The lockdown and public panic buying left participants unable to access menstrual products due to shortages, and there were increased access barriers for menstrual health care and changes to GP provision (mainly due to services moving online and an effect of digital poverty). Williams *et al.*'s (2022) study presents significant insights into experiences of 'period poverty', but also the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on menstruation more generally, with access issues and the impact on menstrual health care services being central themes to the report.

There is also a notable recent and growing body of research on homeless women's experiences of periods and period poverty. In a UK-based study, Shailini Vora (2020) interviewed 40 women accessing vulnerable and precarious housing support services. Vora engages a phenomenological approach to explore 'bodies on the borderline' and understand the embodied intersections of homelessness and menstruation. Being a body on the border encompasses both the bleeding body (the abnormal body) and the body in public space as deviant and seeping beyond the boundaries of private or 'acceptable' social life (Kristeva, 1982; Longhurst, 1996). Menstruating within the public sphere heightened participants' sense of shame and self-abjection in emotional response to both their own and others' perceptions of their bodies. The juxtaposition between privacy and mobility emphasised the extreme visibility of homelessness starkly contrasted with menstrual etiquette and the secrecy required of periods. Across this literature, there is a lack of suitable menstrual products as well as barriers to washing and sanitation facilities. A large part of this, particularly for homeless women, is the lack of access to support organisations, or where there is support, it is stigmatised or inadequate for individual needs (Sommer *et al.*, 2020; Vora, 2020; Boden *et al.*, 2021; Maroko *et al.*, 2021). Gruer *et al.* (2021) explored how women could not rely on homeless shelters as a primary source of menstrual products because the supply was either inconsistent or strictly monitored by staff. When there was a supply of menstrual products, they were often inadequate for women's individual menstrual needs.

Building on this research are explorations of public space for menstruating homeless women. Public toilets are often thought of as valuable spaces, particularly for homeless women but also women generally, to navigate their periods in private. In a US-based mixed method study, Maroko *et al.* (2021) examined the public toilets in New York City, investigating their accessibility and use by homeless women on their periods. The consensus is that public toilets should be places for menstrual management, however talking with 22 homeless women and 15 staff at homeless support organisations revealed that they are frequently inadequate, poorly maintained, and unhygienic. Using the same dataset, Sommer *et al.* (2020) found that inadequate stocking of bathroom supplies, including toilet paper, created barriers to the accessibility and usefulness of public toilets in New York City. Menstruating when homeless compounded to specific forms of gendered, infrastructural, and personal feelings of importance around cleanliness.

Finally, drawing all the evidence from these pieces of research together, I introduce an important definition created by menstrual scholars Hennegan *et al.* (2021) which develops the idea of menstrual health. I introduce this because period poverty, stigma, and taboo all impact women's good menstrual health. The above studies have illustrated intersections of economic, social, and spatial experiences of period poverty, but only Williams *et al.* (2022) present a wider case for understanding this within a specific health framework. I explore this health angle in more detail through the Hennegan *et al.* (2021) definition.

Hennegan *et al.* (2021) state that good menstrual health encompasses access to timely and accurate education; access to bodily care based on individual preferences, including access to menstrual products of choice; access to timely treatment and diagnosis of menstrual health conditions; being able to negotiate menstruation in a positive and respectful stigma-free environment; and finally being able to decide whether and how to participate in their everyday lives, free from restriction, discrimination, and violence. Access and facilitation of these factors are required throughout a menstruator's lifecourse to achieve a holistic sense of good menstrual health. I connect ideas of good menstrual health to developing the intellectual term of menstrual (in)justice, as a definition for menstrual health connects the physical, mental, and social health factors involved with menstruating. Whilst I do not work explicitly within a health framework, it is significant in a holistic understanding of the complexity and nuance of women's experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice.

I further add that menstrual health is also a gendered issue. Yet this does not mean it is a woman's issue. One of the most significant progressions made in menstruation research is that not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women (Laws, 1990; Bobel, 2010). We have been socialised to directly assume reproductive health, including menstruation, with a person's gender. As such, menstruation has long been perceived centrally and solely a part of women's health. However contemporary society is changing,

recognising gender fluidity and constructionism. This is recognised within the definition of menstrual health by Hennegan *et al.* (2021). With the rise of research and activism around trans-rights and gender non-conformity, there comes a growing recognition that transgender men and non-binary/conforming people also menstruate and are deserving of inclusion in menstrual health support and access (Chrisler *et al.*, 2016; Frank, 2020; Frank and Dellaria, 2020; Rydström, 2020). I come back to this point in chapter 9, as my research focusses on cis-women and is limited in this sense.

As I have illustrated, research on period poverty in the UK is empirically grounded and draws together experiences of stigma and taboo into women's lives to demonstrate the varied experiences of girls and women suffering from period poverty. There is not much research available on the topic, however, and what is available is from very recent years. Nonetheless, the research I have discussed above serves as valuable groundwork for building my analysis and promoting the urgency of 'period poverty' as a complex gender, social, economic, cultural, political, and health issue within academic research.

2.4. Conceptualising Period Poverty and Menstrual Injustice

In the previous section I illustrated the ways in which period poverty has been researched. De Benedictis' (2020) called for more research about period poverty with adult women, Briggs (2020) analysed period poverty's relationship with austerity, and Williams *et al.* (2022) reported on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on period poverty. I build and develop these pieces of research by intersecting a gender, class, and experiential analysis using the concepts of respectability, menstrual crankiness, and the lifecourse. I explore each concept and their value in conceptualising period poverty and menstrual injustice in the rest of this chapter.

2.4.1. Menstrual Respectability

I have discussed respectability in the context of class in section 2.2.3 of this chapter and I return to it now in the context of menstruation. In this section I focus in on one theoretical paper in menstruation research and draw on Skeggs' theories of respectability to open an understanding of the concept in this thesis.

Respectability has only been engaged with in menstrual research recently; in one theoretically based research paper seeking to tackle menstrual stigma. US-based menstrual scholars Chris Bobel and Breanne Fahs' (2020) take a radical feminist approach to tackling menstrual stigma in their paper. Critiquing the politics of respectability in menstrual activism, the authors argue that menstrual activism is too focussed on the menstrual product (a similar argument posed by De Benedictis (2020) in relation to UK newspaper coverage). They state this focus effectively reinforces the gendered social requirement of

menstrual etiquette in Western society (Laws, 1990). This form of menstrual activism – coined ‘bloodless politics’ – is accommodationist, strives for social acceptability, female respectability, and incremental change. Such bloodless activism reinvents itself as a neoliberal enterprise that engages with the market to ‘solve the problem of menstrual stigma’ (p.956). At its core, the paper argues that the global menstrual movement values respectability over radicalism. As such, Bobel and Fahs (2020, p. 973) call upon a radical feminist agenda to challenge ‘assumptions about the body’ and ‘rip out the (diseased) root of menstrual stigma’.

Bobel and Fahs (2020) critique the concept of respectability as a tool in reinforcing menstrual stigma. Yet there are contradictions to the argument in this paper. Bobel and Fahs write that ‘while menstrual activism *is* about bleeding—unapologetically so—it is also not *only* about bleeding’ (p.976). This is a valid point but questions the entirety of the argument that comes before it. If menstrual activism is not only about bleeding, why centre so much energy on dismissing the menstrual product? In the UK context much is being done at both grassroots and policy levels to change the way we think about menstruation, including improving education, access to products (for schoolgirls in England and girls and women in Scotland and Northern Ireland) and healthcare services (Bildhauer, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022). The authors cite British youth activist Amika George’s Free Periods campaign as focussing solely on product provision (Oppenheim, 2020). Practically speaking it does, but the wider political and social agenda is to provide equal opportunities for girls to access an education, which had previously been disrupted by a lack of economic and material capital to obtain menstrual products. The shame, embarrassment, and stigma felt around not being able to attend school due to a lack of menstrual products was a far greater everyday detriment than wider patriarchal symbolism of concealing menstruation.

Further contradictions are made apparent in Bobel and Fahs’ (2020) own footnote on page 958. The authors write:

‘We remain mindful that respectability politics as related to menstrual activism can operate differently for white, middle-class, cisgender, and able-bodied women than for those who are marked as abject. For those who occupy precarious social locations, the “outing” of menstruation carries potent risks. Therefore, what might be regarded as playing by the rules through a privileged lens may more accurately be described as strategic survival. [...] taking on the menstrual taboo can render the activist “gross,” “nasty,” and “improper,” the work may be less safe for those with less social capital. That said, radical menstrual activism can also open up space for links between, for example, poverty and menstrual stigma. And because radical menstrual activism is

intersectional and sensitive to privilege, it operates with a keen awareness of how various kinds of stigma have similar root structures'

This long, thoughtful footnote is a very small acknowledgment of how Bobel and Fahs' paper has limitations. As a footnote (and effectively out of sight) other experiences are marginalised. It is not valuable enough to be in the main body of text. Indeed, this footnote reinforces the radical nature of the paper for radical feminism is limited in its inability to accept intersectionality or subjectivity in women's experience (Campbell and Wasco, 2000; Code, 2018).

As the footnote suggests, many women do not have the symbolic or cultural capital to participate in such a radical approach to menstrual activism (Briggs, 2020). My research illustrates this in the context of working-class women who do not have the privilege to uproot menstrual stigma through experimenting with ideologies of respectability. Furthermore, this footnote dismisses the good work of organisations and activists in helping those in underserved communities. As I analyse and explore in the discussion chapters of this thesis, women need products to be able to feel like they can participate in everyday life. Menstrual activism that provides material capital for women in underserved communities is incredibly important. The paper's statement of reimagining 'menstruation as fiercely and defiantly in public, with menstrual product access as only one of many different facets of a bold new movement' (p.977) are actions already in play in Western activist and academic spheres (Williams *et al.*, 2022).

My thesis contests the argument that the presence of and access to menstrual products reinforces menstrual stigma. The issue is not of a bloodless respectability but the wider structural, social, economic, and political forms of inequality constructing injustice against working-class women who menstruate. Incremental changes are still changes and can be powerful at an everyday scale; beginning with word-of-mouth, moving into policy and practice changes, and recognising the difficulties women on low incomes face when they do not have material menstrual resources (Greed, 2019; Briggs, 2020; Sommer *et al.*, 2020; Boden *et al.*, 2021; The Big Issue, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022; Wilson, 2022).

Bobel and Fahs' critique about how menstrual activism tackling period poverty places single-use products 'into the hands of unhoused, poor, and incarcerated menstruators without making explicit a structural analysis of why people lack access in the first place' (2020, p. 962) is a valid theoretical point. When taking experience into account or looking at the lived reality – as this thesis does – this will not be fixed by taking away such provision. Too much credit is given to the control of menstrual etiquette over women's lives and does not appreciate menstrual management in personalised social, cultural, and economic contexts. The symbolic power given to menstrual etiquette in this proposed radical feminist approach hides the lived reality for women experiencing menstrual injustice.

Bobel and Fahs (2020) do not lay out explicitly the role of respectability politics through a class, race, or age analysis. The paper comes from a position of those who already have respectability, meaning they do not have to work for it nor is respectability deemed a concern in their own lives (Skeggs, 1997). They already 'fit in' and have economic, cultural and symbolic capital to be culturally and socially secure in their sense of social value and worth (Lawler, 2005a; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). This is problematic in that Bobel and Fahs (2020) have access to circuits of knowledge and symbolic distribution of (middle-class) power. The imperative of an intersectional feminist approach is highlighted in the experience factor Bobel and Fahs omit (Crenshaw, 1991).

Highlighting the limitations of this theorisation, I point back to sociologist Beverly Skeggs' (1997) work on respectability in the context of white working-class women in the UK to engage the idea that respectability (through menstrual products and menstrual management) is valuable and significant in women's everyday lives. Critically engaging Skeggs' (1997) empirical study and development of a class and gender-conscious respectability politics for this thesis and in the context of menstruation; it is significant to understand that working-class women's capitals are already restricted.

As I signpost in the discussion chapters of this thesis (chapters 4-8), menstruating working-class women work to be respectable by embodying a sense of cleanliness and hygiene. This is disrupted when they do not have access to appropriate means of managing their periods. As Skeggs (1997) argues, access to capitals impact upon working-class women's respectability, in this context the ability to feel clean when on their periods. A lack of capital (economic, social, material) disrupts women's respectability work on a (micro) geographical level: the everyday. Without economic capital (money) or social capital to trade for material capital (in this case, menstrual products), working-class women's cultural capital is impacted, in turn negatively impacting upon their bodies and ability to participate in social life.

Some (Bobel and Fahs, 2020, included) might critique this sense of policing the body in line with menstrual etiquette (Laws, 1990). However, it is more complex for working-class women. As Bourdieu (1986) and Skeggs (1997) highlight, the body is a key vessel in which class is marked. The body is a form of cultural capital and working-class women regulate their bodies so they cannot be seen as not caring, unhygienic or dirty. Acknowledging taboo and stigma, hygiene is important in the context of menstruation, gender, *and* class. As the body is a carrier of class and gender signals, working-class women use menstrual products to be a respectable woman (if she is not leaking it shows she cares). To be clean and feel hygienic, menstrual products are key objects of material capital for working-class women to invest in their respectability.

Fundamentally respectability is a pernicious concept. Working-class women are individually taking on the responsibility of upholding class and gender expectations for social value. This does not change structural issues of menstrual stigma (as Bobel and Fahs (2020) argue) or class and gender discrimination (as Skeggs (1997) points to). However, practices of respectability are very real in everyday life and there are some valuable parts to it, identified through this thesis' empirical data. Discourses of the working-class and menstruating women as dirty, dangerous, and in need of containing and controlling are similar yet never seem to meet in academic research or scholarship. Intimately mapping these discourses out through working-class women's experiences shows how intimately important and valued respectability is at an everyday scale. Menstrual products are investments in cultural and corporeal capital: a 'bloodless respectability' would mean working-class women would be making disinvestments that could exacerbate their disadvantage. White-working class women have limited capital which cannot be traded on a market in which symbolic delegitimization has occurred. In other words, they do not have the capital not to form a so-called 'bloodless respectability'. The idea of taste comes into play here, with lack of capital becoming synonymous with lack of taste (Lawler, 2005a; Friedman and Laurison, 2019). In seeking respectability with menstrual products, to Bobel and Fahs (2020), the women are not seeking respectability in the 'right' way.

Skeggs' (1997) theory of respectability is therefore significant because it brings class into cultural and feminist theory for an intersectional approach to analysing gender and experiences of period poverty. Feminist standpoint theory centres participant experience as a way of knowing and is a powerful analytical tool for Skeggs to explore the ways working-class women have been positioned and limited by society, and how they work in different (sometimes contradictory) ways to be perceived by themselves and others as respectable (Brooks, 2007; Ramdas, 2016). This work resonates strongly with my call for menstrual justice. Challenging Bobel and Fahs' (2020) actions to dismantle a category of middle-class women as pure and proper femininity by engaging with Skeggs' (1997) work, I have illustrated how a radical feminist approach to menstrual activism and scholarships does not account for black and white working-class women whose bodies are ascribed with negative social expectations. As Skeggs (1997, p. 141) powerfully notes,

'The more theoretically sophisticated feminist analysis becomes in the academy, the less likely it is able to speak to women outside of it'.

I find that Bobel and Fahs (2020) present a theoretical paper of this ilk and in this section I have highlighted the role of respectability for the working-class women in this study, whose experiences are detailed and developed in the upcoming discussion chapters (4-8). Of course, menstrual stigma plays a significant yet often subtle role in all menstruating women's lives. This is revealed in how the working-class women in this study often thought

about themselves on their periods (unhygienic, embarrassed) and how they position themselves against non-menstruating men. Nonetheless, respectability was unveiled as a way working-class women can enact menstrual justice. Intersecting discourse and experience of menstruation, gender and class, working-class menstruating women must work in intimate ways to gain social value, moral authority, and a sense of worth through concealing their menstrual, class, and gendered status. The intersection of (immoral) working-class, (irrational) woman and a (dirty) menstruator result in the engagement in a politics of respectability.

2.4.2. Menstrual Crankiness

Respectability is an inherently embodied concept and practice for working-class women. The work of respectability is heightened through the body when accounting for menstruation. However the body is not critically examined or appreciated in Bobel and Fahs' (2020) theoretical critique of respectability. Despite being published in the midst of growing empirical research on menstruation as a lived experience, Bobel and Fahs present an abstract and symbolic approach to tackling menstrual stigma. The fleshy, messy, bloody reality cannot be ignored in the experience of the menstruating woman. It is a fundamental part of the lived experience with and in the bleeding body.

Research on the lived experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice is well positioned to examine and analyse the subjectivity and diversity of menstruation and menstrual management. Subjectivity is key and a recognition of the positive and negative experiences and symptoms of menstruation is vitally important to holistically understand women's needs. Particularly within stigma-focussed menstrual research, there is a tendency to gloss over more difficult menstrual symptoms in the direction of empowering menstruators symbolically, rather than experientially. For some, menstruation is not troublesome, but there are also common physiological experiences that can make menstruation a painful experience (Kelland *et al.*, 2017). Stomach cramps, nausea, heavy bleeding, and bodily aches are physical experiences that can create both a negative *experience* and *perception* of menstruation. As sociologist Laura Fingerson (2005) argues, menstruation creates an agency *of* the body through the unpredictability of bleeding and symptoms. With this comes the significance of agency *over* the body in which women and girls can act to take control and power over their periods in ways they see fit (using menstrual products, for example). Neglecting the physiological symptoms of menstruation brushes over the fact that women are capable of creating their own meanings about menstruating, specifically embodied and personal to the individual. These meanings are at both a symbolic and material level: symbolically choosing to dis/like their periods for a range of reasons, and materially choosing to manage them in a suitable way for their bodies.

This leads me on to the next concept I will be engaging with in this thesis: menstrual crankiness. I draw on menstruation scholars Ela Przybylo and Breanne Fahs (2020) who developed an approach to studying periods 'that creates space for the difficult aspects of bleeding and fosters a "cranky" approach to menstruation' (Przybylo and Fahs, 2020, p. 388). The researchers established 'menstrual crankiness' as an analytical frame out of a study into the often misleading, exclusionary, and idealistic advertisements used to market menstrual products within a feminist and body/menstruation positive rhetoric (Stein and Kim, 2009). 'Menstrual crankiness' questions narratives focusing solely on menstrual positivity, arguing that the 'cranky menstruator is cranky about menstrual pain, menstruatory exclusion, menstrual capitalism, and uneven access to menstrual products' (p.388). 'Menstrual crankiness' recognises the 'more difficult and troubling aspects of bleeding' (p.389), which strongly resonates with the experiences of the women in my study who do have past and present experiences of troublesome bleeding and difficulties in managing their periods. Translating this "cranky" approach within the context of my research to understanding menstruation as a lived experience opens an intersectional space for recognising all forms of periods, including the more difficult ones in terms of both physical experience of menstrual bleeding and period pain, and the socioeconomic material struggles women face in accessing and affording menstrual products that leaves them in period poverty.

I note that this concept is co-created by the same scholar (Breanne Fahs) who critiqued the so-called 'bloodless respectability'. Bobel and Fahs (2020) talk about the body in their paper but do not give much appreciation to the hardship some women face when on their periods, both physiologically and socioeconomically. Although menstrual stigma is marked in, on, and outside of the female body, Bobel and Fahs (2020) write about the body as if it is a passive receiver of external stigmatic forces and a blank canvas upon which the meaning of menstruation is written (Butler, 2006). There is a brief acknowledgement of understanding periods as difficult for some, but not in a holistic, messy, or fleshy way. Their focus is constructionist and symbolic, which misses out on the importance of lived experience and intersectionality in menstruation (Crenshaw, 1991; Skeggs, 1997).

How a woman chooses to manage her menstruating body is crucially important in her ability to continue with everyday life. This is particularly poignant in relation to the respectability that the working-class women in this study work towards. If a working-class woman cannot continue with everyday life because she feels like she is not respectable with menstrual blood and associated symptoms, it is not solely a symbolic bloodless respectability that limits her. It is a structural lack of economic, material, and cultural capital. There is a significant challenge of avoiding essentialising the idea of the working-class as dirty and menstruating women as polluting whilst bridging the lived experience of women actually

feeling dirty without economic or social capital to manage their period. This is something I explore with participant insight in the discussion chapters (particularly chapter 5).

Menstrual crankiness provides a way of incorporating the intimately embodied messy materiality and sometimes painful menstrual experiences into intersecting understandings of period poverty and menstrual injustice as a classed experience where women want to manage their periods to gain respectability. Without acknowledging the lived realities of menstruation on the female body – the sometimes-painful physiological symptoms, the normality of bleeding, the diversity of periods, the importance of menstrual management agency – and the working-class body (socio-historically positioned as contagious and unclean), a discussion cannot be opened to understand how menstruation impacts (or not) working-class women’s participation in society across different levels of social and physiological experience. Menstrual crankiness is a valuable concept to open this intimate avenue of knowledge.

2.4.3. Menstruation over the Lifecourse

Finally, for most women menstruation is a lifelong experience. On average a woman in the UK will menstruate for 40 years of her life (NHS, 2019a). Menarche, menstruation, and the menopause are all influencers of and influenced by a woman’s specific circumstances at specific times. The lifecourse is a valuable overarching concept to frame the arguments of this thesis and becomes the main focus of chapter 6.

A lifecourse approach recognises that we live dynamic and temporally varied lives. This means an individual’s lifecourse has different and situated meanings, rather than following fixed and predictable life stages (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). The lifecourse addresses the individual and collective trajectories of lived experience through time in relation to place and space (Worth and Hardill, 2015). In this way, the lifecourse engages a view of an individual’s life through a fluidity of transitions, age as a relational category, and intergenerational experience. Feminist geographers Cindi Katz and Janice Monk (1993) argue that the lifecourse appreciates the differences between women of the same age, intersecting with race, ethnicity, class, and geographical location. This highlights how age is a relational category and not one where women will experience the same things at the same age. This is fitting when exploring women’s experiences of period poverty over the lifecourse. Engaging the lifecourse with an embodied approach illustrates the individual evolution of menstruation over time, the different lived experiences of transitioning in and out of period poverty, and the urgency in which period poverty as a recent sociohistorical issue must be addressed (Brantelid *et al.*, 2014).

The lifecourse approach is well-suited to work alongside feminist standpoint theory as analytical scaffolds (see chapter 3 for discussion of feminist standpoint theory). They build a

better picture of period poverty both generally and specifically using knowledge and lived experience from the women in this study. Starting from the lives of women, we can pull out the longstanding and deeply socioeconomically embedded reality of period poverty in the UK with a lifecourse lens. In many ways it is surprising that the lifecourse has not been used greatly in menstruation research (Brantelid et al. 2014 as an exception), as menstrual experience is commonly discussed along the passage of one's life. As a way of developing a working relationship with my participants and to ease into the more sensitive issues of period poverty and menstrual injustice, I invited women to talk about their experiences of menstruation generally. With no prompt from myself, this always started with a discussion of menarche, followed by a natural chronology of a women's period, any changes from childbirth, contraception, wider health issues and so on. The lifecourse was naturally pulled out of the interviews. By engaging with the lifecourse as a concept and temporal experience, I make another original contribution to the field of menstruation.

Three concepts prevail in contemporary research engaging with the lifecourse – age, generation, and transition (Hopkins and Pain, 2007; Worth and Hardill, 2015). I do not use these concepts, rather I engage with the lifecourse as an overarching frame to illustrate how period poverty and menstrual injustice is, firstly, experienced on a continuum of which women fall in and out of at various points in their lives. Secondly, I use the lifecourse as a critical lens through which to illuminate how period poverty has been a hidden social issue for decades. Importantly, the lifecourse allows us to see how women have experienced menstrual injustice and period poverty throughout their lives.

2.5. Chapter Conclusion: The Working-Class Menstruating Woman

In this chapter I have presented an overview of a range of interdisciplinary literature to situate my PhD research and thesis. I illustrated the context of my research through a discussion of academic debates on austerity, lived experience, social class, menstruation, and the distinct ideologies of hygiene and pollution across class, menstrual, and feminist literatures. Presenting the concepts I will engage with – respectability, menstrual crankiness and the lifecourse – I highlight the original contribution to academic discourse this research makes. Significantly, I seek to draw together separate but intimately connected bodies of literature that have yet to be critically engaged.

Working-class menstruating women are grappling with three stigmatised identities and experiences: being a woman, being working-class, and being a menstruator. Through a feminist class analysis, we see the symbolic intersections of menstruation *and* working-class as embodiments of ideas of dirt. Being a working-class woman who menstruates manifests two overlapping, corporeally ascribed and historically embedded ideologies of pollution in the social context. Further, being a woman signifies a long patriarchal oppression in society where women's bodies represent reproduction, but a working-class women must be

controlled to limit her reproduction to limit 'social disease'. Strong arguments exist in feminist menstrual literature around the ideas of patriarchal socio-historical and cultural forces demarcating the menstruating body as dirty, polluted, disgusting and thus in need of concealment, control, and containment. These run alongside perceptions of working-class women as embodying dirt, vulgarity, and disorder. I bridge these ideas and debates together through a critical analysis of embodying and negotiating period poverty in contemporary British society using the concepts of respectability, menstrual crankiness and the lifecourse.

The next chapter examines the methodology and methods I used to gather empirical data on the lived experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter outlines, explains and reflects on the methods and approaches I took in this research project seeking to address period poverty and menstrual injustice in the UK. My research problem set out to explore the lived experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice of women living in Newcastle upon Tyne. This was in response to a severe lack of research and attention to adult women's experiences of struggling to afford or access menstrual products.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of my methodological framework. As a feminist piece of research, I engage with feminist epistemologies and methodologies to best listen to and communicate the voices, stories, and experiences of my participants. As a feminist researcher I am committed to its methodological and ethical praxis, so I present this before going into detail about my research methods because it lays the foundation for my approach to gathering qualitative data. Closely following this section, I reflect on my ethical choices, practice, and the considerations I took when setting out to do this research on a sensitive topic. I reflect on my positionality, engagement with 'ethical mindfulness', and the importance of 'situated ethics' for my research. Ethics are important throughout the whole research process, so I position this discussion before detailing the research methods because they are intertwined with decisions on methods and the processes in conducting them.

The feminist methodological scaffold upon which this research sits work alongside the research questions introduced in chapter 1. Of course, as I discussed in chapter 1, this PhD was completed during a global health pandemic, which impacted the research questions, research direction, ethical considerations, and the data collection methods. Therefore, I move this chapter on with a reflection on what my PhD initially set out to do – work with school-aged girls and young women. I use this context to ground my explanation of why my research changed to focus on adult women and the methods I adopted to be able to access the field and interview research participants. This background context is important because it sets up my research design: ethnographic participant observation and telephone interviews.

Following this background, I present a critical discussion of my research methods and a practical perspective of doing research in a global health pandemic. I explore and explain the value of doing ethnographic participant observation first, followed by an introduction of my participants and how they were recruited in an ethical and informed way, and then provide a discussion of my interviewing method. The order of these sections reflects how I designed my fieldwork; the ethnographic participant observation opening up better ways to deliver the interview method to fit with participant's lives and supporting access to talk to a

wide range of women who may suffer with period poverty and menstrual injustice. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a reflection on my analysis strategy, which was an iterative and fluid process, as I discuss.

3.1. Methodological Foundations: Feminist Research

This research project is inherently feminist in that it begins with women's lives. Feminist research is woman-centred, capturing the lives and voices of girls and women to legitimate their experiences (Campbell and Wasco, 2000). This is key for my research seeking to explicitly explore and disseminate the experiences of women living with menstrual injustice and in period poverty. Feminist scholar Sharlene Hesse-Biber (2014b, p. 8) asks what research frameworks serve to empower women and promote social change. Considering this, a feminist methodological frame is appropriate and valuable for this PhD research.

Situating this question in the localised context of my research, I call on the feminist analytical tools of standpoint theory and intersectionality to explore the plurality of menstrual experience and diversity of women's experiences in navigating period poverty and menstrual injustice in Newcastle upon Tyne. Combining two analytical approaches creates a system of knowledge production that appreciates and accounts for the most diverse set of experiences (Naples and Gurr, 2014). As I discuss below, intersectionality provides a tool to critically examine the intersections of menstrual experience, the gendered nature of menstruation, being a working-class woman, cultural influences on the use of various menstrual products, and decisions in respectability practices. Feminist standpoint theory is a valuable theoretical frame for my project to prioritise and legitimise the voices of menstruating women. Importantly, it situates knowledge in women's experiences (Harding, 1986).

3.1.1. Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory argues that feminist methodology requires a closer examination of women's own personal experiences (Walby, 1990). It argues that the clearest perspective of (patriarchal) social relations comes directly from that of oppressed women. Cultivating the idea that the personal is political, feminist standpoint theory is rooted in the idea that a woman's material and lived experience structures her comprehension of her social environment (Walby, 1990; Hesse-Biber, 2014b). Standpoint theory argues that an oppressed group or individual has a fuller perspective of the world than that of the dominant social group. Feminist standpoint theory therefore asserts that a woman's understanding of the world is more developed and acute than a man's because a woman has to navigate both her own and the dominant man's social world (Hesse-Biber, 2014b).

As a feminist research project, my PhD research, analysis, and discussion begins with women's lives and how they negotiate menstrual injustice. I therefore engage feminist standpoint theory as a theoretical praxis throughout my thesis, especially in the discussion chapters (4-8). I highlight here that it is a particularly useful theoretical frame in chapter 6 which solely focusses on two participants. The focus on only two women assisted in an intimate analytical exploration of how period poverty and menstrual injustice is experienced over the lifecourse and has been for decades, and this came directly out of their experiences from their standpoint (see chapter 6 for more detail). Feminist standpoint theory therefore serves as a valuable analytical tool in my research to focus on the silenced and repressed voices of those experiencing period poverty and menstruators in general under the socio-historical and cultural context of menstrual taboo and stigma.

Feminist standpoint theory has been critiqued in that it is seen to collapse all women's experience into one single experience, neglecting the variety of women's lives, and has the potential to create or reproduce forms of 'otherness'. Sharlene Hesse-Biber (2014b, p. 6) questions "if knowledge begins with the oppressed, how does one ascertain who is the most oppressed?". An unintentional side-effect of focusing on one group or voice, this reinforces the elements of traditional objective scientific research feminist epistemologies seek to counter (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004). In this research, feminist standpoint theory to empower the voices of menstruating women is powerful but runs the risk of essentialising womanhood and menstruation, reinforcing the ideology of menstruation making a woman. Whilst there is immense value in empowering the voices of menstruating women, as I pointed out in the literature review it is crucial to recognise that not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women (Laws, 1990; Bobel, 2010).

Adding nuance to this critique with perhaps more relevance to my thesis which focuses on cis women, feminist researchers have critiqued the idea that there is one essential 'woman's experience' (Hesse-Biber, 2014b). As this thesis goes on to show in the analysis chapters, women have a wide range of unjust experiences which intersect physiological, financial, social, material, and cultural struggle around menstrual management. Menstruation might be a common biological process for many women, but experiencing menstruation is a highly complex, diverse, and socioculturally influenced phenomenon, as I explore in more detail in chapter 4. Recognising plurality through an understanding of multiple standpoints and intersections of other forms of social identity (race, class, ethnicity, religion, geographical location etc) serves to empower a menstruator's experience from their standpoint without essentialising "menstruation" as a "woman's problem". Intersectionality is therefore a key Black feminist concept to frame and highlight the diversity of menstrual experience, menstrual injustice, and period poverty for the women in this study.

3.1.2. Intersectionality

Black feminist thought is highly significant in conceptualising women's experiences as diverse and different based on other social identities besides gender. Black feminist theorists strongly critiqued (white) feminist theorists' grouping together of women as it overlooked the importance of race as an identity category (Collins, 2009; Frost and Frauke, 2014).

Law scholar and Black feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) called for the adoption of intersectionality as both a theoretical frame and empirical research approach to focus on identity intersections. Intersectional theory examines the complexity of women's lived experience through the dynamic relations between intersecting axes of identity (Frost and Frauke, 2014). Crenshaw (2018) observes that it is a metaphor for understanding the ways in which multiple forms of disadvantage interact and create obstacles for women of colour that are not understood in conventional ways of thinking about feminism.

The theory of intersectionality develops feminist standpoint theory for a more nuanced appreciation that does not solely privilege gender as a key identity. Crenshaw (1991) illustrates how intersectionality is a critical prism for understanding problems that arise within multiple axes of identity. It does not privilege one axis of difference over another, rather it respects that axes are likely to interact and overlap in dynamic ways (Frost and Frauke, 2014; Crenshaw, 2018). Intersectionality foregrounds the complications of multiple identities and the sociocultural contexts in which these identities are experienced (Naples and Gurr, 2014). As Patricia Hill Collins (2009) asserts, it is only by delving deeper into the intricate matrix of difference that we can wholly understand an individual's lived experience.

As a theoretical approach, intersectionality is crucial to highlight the differences amongst women along many varied categories and experiences of identity. I discuss in chapter 4 that the diversity of menstrual experience between women is vital to explore how approaches to supporting women in period poverty need to take an intersectional approach. This is in terms of menstrual product choice, but also sociocultural implications for accessing support and the impact of gender, race, class, and age in negotiating and understanding period poverty and menstrual injustice for women in Newcastle. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991) conception of intersectionality was a paradigmatic turning point for feminist researchers seeking to engage more critically and inclusively in their work. Whilst my research does not focus on the intersections of race and gender as first laid out by intersectional theory, intersectionality provides a valuable approach to exploring the intersections of gender, class, age, and other more locally specific and contextually important forms of identity for women experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice in my thesis.

It is significant to bring intersectionality and feminist standpoint theory together in this thesis. Combined, the theories recognise difference to avoid essentialism but stand firm in the wider feminist goal of bringing women's voices and experiences to the forefront and standing in unity from the common menstrual experience (having a period) to support women and their rights. As part of this, it is also significant to consider the philosophical and practical questions of ethics that arise when engaging with women's lived experience and placing them centrally in research. As such, I explore my feminist ethical praxis in the next section.

3.2. Ethical Foundations of the Research

Ethical praxis is a critical part of any research project. Qualitative research and its inquiries into intimate information of a participant's life creates considerable scope for ethical risk (Morse, 2007; Duncan *et al.*, 2009). However, ethics in social research is a complex grey area: there is no obvious right or wrong answer. The need for a critical awareness of morally valid and rigorous research from the individual researcher and broader institutional ethics committees is fundamental (see appendices F and G for Newcastle University Ethics approval for this research).

Working within a feminist epistemology, I find feminist interpretation of ethical practice a useful understanding of ethics being a continuous process of reflecting and questioning participant and researchers' best interests. Rather than a set of prescribed actions, Tisdall *et al.* (2009) consider ethics to be a 'practical wisdom' shaped in the process of critical reflection. Through ethical practice, ethics becomes a process required in and through all stages of the research project (Hopkins and Bell, 2008).

My research on a sensitive topic makes ethics both philosophically and practically crucial to consider from the very beginning when setting out on fieldwork. In this section, I explore my ethical practice which engaged the concepts of ethical mindfulness, situated ethics, and the considerations I took when thinking about my positionality and reflexivity to negotiate an ethically sound research space. It is important to note, however, that ethics does not stop in one section, and I continue to engage in reflections throughout this chapter when discussing my research methods.

Firstly, I draw on Marily Guillemain and Lynn Gillam's (2006) concept of 'ethical mindfulness'. This concept gives weight to recognising ethically significant moments, giving thought to discomfort during a particular event, and being able to articulate and reflect upon something as an ethical issue (Duncan *et al.*, 2009). I used ethical mindfulness as a practical tool to negotiate moments in the fieldwork where I was uncertain of the right thing to do.

One example of this is when a participant had talked with me for an interview and I had immediately emailed them a supermarket voucher as a thank you (see section 3.5.1 for incentive voucher details). A few days after the interview, I received a text message from the participant saying she had tried to use the voucher at the supermarket but it had not gone through, so she had to pay for her shopping with her own money. I was concerned (and embarrassed) that this had happened to her and needed to decide what to do. On the one hand, from a research and fieldwork perspective, I only had a limited number of vouchers to hand out to participants after the interviews. On the other hand, from a personal and caring perspective, this participant had faced a very real financial barrier to getting her shopping in an already crisis-fuelled time of the pandemic and her living on a low Universal Credit income. Taking an ethically mindful approach, I recognised this as an ethically significant moment with discomfort for both the participant and for myself. In response, I sent this participant a second voucher via email and asked her to check in with me again to make sure it worked. I also told her to keep hold of the first voucher in case it worked in a different supermarket. By sending her a second voucher and encouraging her to keep the original voucher, I mitigated both of our discomfort in the situation and allowed a practical response to an ethically grey area.

This example brings me to reflect secondly on Teresa Perez's (2019, pp. 148-149) compelling case for the idea of 'situated ethics'. She defined situated ethics as an 'encapsula[ting] conduct where researchers are governed by what feels appropriate in a specific setting'. It places the feelings of the participants and the researcher at the forefront of fieldwork, meaning that the research has more ethical fluidity and sensitivity than is the case when following the more technical ethical codes. The research must, of course, conform to practical codes of ethical conduct, particularly on paper and in ethical approvals. This does not mean that in-the-field ethical judgements and negotiations will not be important. If anything, it solidifies the importance of ethical reflexivity from a researcher about the everyday, intimate, and personal navigation of ethics in the field (Calvey, 2008; Perez, 2019).

Situated ethics assisted me in navigating the anxiety of fieldwork in a pandemic and moments like I described above. In particular, when reflecting on my time volunteering as part of my ethnographic participant observation (discussed in detail in the upcoming section 3.4), I encountered fieldwork in a global health pandemic as more than just a method. It is a dynamic interaction with participants who are also foodbank recipients relying on the weekly delivery of food in a time of crisis. With this comes an ethics of care and active practice of 'ethical mindfulness' during my fieldwork (Guillemin and Gillam, 2006), and a dimension of emotional labour which manifests both mentally through a moral duty to support (making sure the incentive voucher worked for them) and in an embodied sense (feeling anxious about research encounters, physically volunteering at the foodbank, and so on). I found both the ideas of ethical mindfulness and situated ethics useful in developing

my values and practice as a researcher. It also complemented my feminist values and methodological approach, cultivating a more ethically sensitive, situated, compassionate, and empowering (both for me and my participants) research experience.

Thirdly, the reflexive nature of feminist research is a notable ethical quality for research on a sensitive topic. Feminist scholars have highlighted the significance of positionality, which is an awareness of the researcher's own subjective experience in relation to that of research participants (Rose, 1993; Deutsch, 2004). Positionality as a process of reflection is crucial to recognise and acknowledge the limits of objectivity in social research. My positionality as a researcher is fluid, taking many shapes and forms throughout the process of research.

Undeniably I am in a privileged position as a white, middle class, educated young woman. I have been supported throughout my life, privileged to be raised in an affluent household in the South of England and had an array of opportunities I was able to do, or not do, as my choice. I have not experienced racism or felt my culture is unwelcome in society. Further – and crucially in this project – I have never been in period poverty. This sets me apart from most of my participants, and taking time to be reflexive before, during, and after the data collection phase (for example, engaging in ethical mindfulness by writing in a personal research journal) strongly encouraged me to consider how to negotiate our differences but still engage in a reciprocal, trusting research encounter. I learned so much from my participants, about both an experience I had no personal connection with (period poverty) and experiences that I believed to be very knowledgeable about (for example, until these conversations, I genuinely thought every adult woman's period was the same as my own period, and with this, that every woman used tampons).

In writing a research journal, and reflecting on it now in this chapter, I engaged in a revolutionary process of unlearning deep-rooted beliefs, practices, and knowledge that fundamentally I did not realise I had until I spoke to others. This is not to say that I was anti-period poverty or exerted an overt menstrual stigma, but I found an ignorance within myself. This is partly growing up in the systems of menstrual silence but also in not knowing or *thinking* to know about the diversity of menstrual experience. I engaged with a process of unknowing what I thought I knew to shift these embedded and ignorant ideas that do not serve the wider agenda of this research or make positive change for menstruating people. I used the ongoing reflections I made in my research journal to mitigate differences and attempt to balance the uneven power dynamics always prevalent in research. A feminist research praxis encourages me to recognise my privileged position and the power imbalance this creates (Hesse-Biber, 2014b). Actions to mitigate difference and provide more balance included offering a research incentive voucher after participating, dressing 'down' in plain clothing when conducting my ethnographic participant observations, and finding commonalities we had yet being clear I had not experienced the same injustices as

them in relation to my period. I discuss these in more detail in the upcoming sections of this chapter.

Establishing a feminist epistemology and ethical practice is critical to illustrate how I chose my qualitative data collection methods. This research did not come together in a vacuum and as I have highlighted already, I completed my PhD in a global health pandemic. The pandemic threw up a lot of challenges, obstacles, and barriers to doing research on a sensitive topic. It also provided a strong new research direction, engagement with advantageous research methods, and intimate reflexivity for ethical consideration. I discuss how I navigated fieldwork in the COVID-19 pandemic, and how the pandemic influenced my research, methods, and success in data collection in the following sections.

3.3. Finding My Way: Navigating Qualitative Research Methods in a Pandemic

In 2019, when beginning my PhD study, I had initially proposed to work with girls and young women in schools in response to the intense media focus on schoolgirls as the primary sufferers of period poverty. Halfway through my first year of the project I had completed a long and detailed research design of focus groups, interactive creative methods, and qualitative interviews with school-aged young people in Newcastle. When the pandemic hit in March 2020, I was prompted to reorientate my fieldwork within the digital and remote realm because of school closures in the lockdown and University ethics restrictions requiring all fieldwork to be conducted remotely. As many emerging scholars likely felt, I was thrown into a period of disorientation and confusion (Couceiro, 2020). Consequently, I spent the next several months (April – August 2020) exploring alternative methods that could achieve my research aims either online, with secondary data, or with remote means of delivering qualitative methods.

When September 2020 came, working with schools, teachers, and schoolchildren became impractical within the timeframe of completing a funded PhD. Schools and teachers were under a lot of pressure from ‘catching up’ missed school time and had placed restrictions on people other than staff and schoolchildren entering the buildings. Whilst in the middle months of 2020 I had redesigned a flexible research plan with both online and in-person delivery of the proposed research methods, it became clear that working with schools and teachers was going to be difficult and could create additional pressures and challenges for already overworked staff.

It was in mid-September 2020 that I decided to significantly redirect my PhD research to work with adult women. Over the following months of planning my fieldwork and gaining ethical approval, the experiences of adult women in period poverty were becoming increasingly prevalent in mainstream media. This situated my new research direction firmly in the public, activist, and policy-making eye. It also, as I discuss in this thesis, revealed new

ways of conceptualising period poverty which more deeply understands the severity and extent of period poverty as a social justice issue women and girls face in the UK. Research with schoolchildren and young women about their periods existed, but a focus of adult women's experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice had yet to be developed. The changes made to my project unveiled a deeply meaningful, invaluable, and immediately important new PhD focus.

The next challenge was to decide on and design my data collection methods. Searching for a COVID-friendly yet locally appropriate method was a lengthy process of engaging with methodological literature, negotiating physical accessibility considerations, and gaining ethical approval from the Newcastle University Ethics Committee (see appendices F and G). The search for appropriate methods was assisted by some volunteering I was doing during the autumn of 2020. During this period, I was spending a lot of my spare time volunteering at a foodbank in east Newcastle. The foodbank (that will remain anonymous for ethical reasons) was part of a local women's organisation, created during the pandemic because many of the women who had previously used the organisation's services (which included therapeutic and skills sessions for unemployed women in the local area) needed support with feeding themselves and their families when the pandemic hit. The women's organisation saw an opportunity to help through providing food as a service and created their foodbank.

At the height of the pandemic, the foodbank ran on donations from the general public to provide food parcels to up to 200 recipients. In autumn 2020 I began by volunteering in the foodbank, stacking shelves, making up food parcels, and organising the toiletries. After a few weeks they were running low on volunteer drivers, so I offered my services to deliver food parcels around the local area. With support and encouragement from the staff at the women's organisation and formal ethical approval, I was able to engage in these activities as part of my participant observation for seven months from November 2020 to May 2021. From a COVID-19 perspective, my ethnographic fieldwork incorporated volunteering activities working in response to the pandemic that continued through national and local lockdowns to provide relief for those in need. Volunteering was still permitted where it could not be achieved at home, which aligned with both government and University ethics guidance at the time, enabling me to work as a volunteer and researcher at this time.

At the same time, I was re-designing my fieldwork to figure out how to talk with local women. I assumed an interview via the videoconferencing platform Zoom was my best option for interview data collection. It was an appropriate method for my research aims in the context of social distancing, national and local lockdowns, and covid security. It also had the potential to provide a comfortable and safe space for participants to take part in the comfort of their homes. However, through my volunteering work it became clear that Zoom

interviews were an entirely inappropriate and inaccessible method for the women I was seeking to speak to. A deep digital divide, despite being an affluent and technologically advanced country, became apparent (Nchafack and Ikhile, 2020). I use an extract from my reflective journal within my fieldnotes to illustrate how ethnographic participant observation was a valuable methodological tool to create a more accessible research experience for the women I was seeking to speak to:

26th January 2021 - Methodological Lessons Through Doing, Fieldnotes Extract;

It wasn't until I began understanding the donations from the foodbank and lives of the recipients that I realised that the methods I had chosen as a pragmatic response to COVID-19 (video call interviews) were inappropriate for the women I would be aiming to talk to for my research. These women were struggling to put food on the table for their families, and after paying the gas and electric bill, rent, water bill, and ensuring their children had everything they needed. Even if they had laptops, computers and WiFi, their children would be prioritised to use them for their pandemic home-schooling.

The women receiving food parcels all had phones, however. A lifeline to their friends, families, children's school and such. A phone call interview was decided to be the most suitable - and successful - in both accessibility and the context of covid.

This extract illustrates some of the thinking behind choosing telephone interviews as my main method of data collection. Online no longer being a feasible or appropriate communication platform for my interviews, I had to reassess my data collection methods to align with my participant's capabilities and feminist epistemology (Hall, 2020a; Kara and Khoo, 2020; Marzi, 2021). During my participant observation, a member of staff at the foodbank told me that they generally communicate with the women they work with via text message or phone call. In the increasingly technology-facing social world we live in pre- and post-pandemic, mobile phones are a deeply embedded part of the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society (Kelly *et al.*, 2010; Schwarz, 2011; Hall, 2020a). The ability to talk with women over the phone also aligned with my feminist epistemology to centre their voices and experiences.

In summary, I designed my data collection as a seven-month ethnographic participant observation in a local foodbank (referred to as 'the foodbank' throughout my thesis) alongside 38 individual interviews (of which 37 were on the telephone and 1 was on the video conferencing platform Zoom). I discuss each method in detail in the upcoming sections. Each method proved valuable in data collection and recruiting participants. However, I do engage more with the telephone interview data in the analysis chapters of

this thesis. This is because the interviews spoke directly to women to hear their lived experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice. The ethnographic participant observation gave overall context and insights into how organisations are supporting women through menstrual injustices, but it did not offer the depth of experience offered by women in the interviews. One significant benefit of the ethnographic participant observations, however, was the ability to recruit participants with the assistance of the foodbank and women's organisations, which I discuss in section 3.5.1.

Over the next sections in this chapter, I discuss how I used ethnographic participant observation as a form of data collection, research contextualisation and a source for informed method choices. I then introduce my participants. After this discussion, I move to evaluate telephone interviews as a feminist research method.

3.4. Ethnography and Participant Observation

Ethnography can be understood as a method and a methodology (Harrison, 2018). It has been described by scholars in a range of ways, but I identify two notable ways of thinking about ethnography for my research. John Van Maanen (1988, p. 155) explained ethnography to be 'the study and representation of culture as used by particular people, in particular places, at particular times', and Laura Nader (2011) defined it as 'the textual rendering of social worlds'. Van Maanen's (1988) definition situates research in social, economic, temporal, and geographical realms, which complements my research choices in terms of participant scope (menstruating women) and the specific geographical location of Newcastle. I find Nader's definition is particularly relevant for my feminist research aims – to raise awareness and give voice to women who are experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice, but whose experiences are forgotten and ignored in written communication, mainstream media, and policy development.

An anthropological methodology, ethnography recognises the full context of people's lives to provide a more holistic and less isolated, less individualised approach to the research topic (Okely, 2012). Especially relevant for my interdisciplinary research, ethnography as practised through a mixed anthropological and sociological epistemological framework incorporates rich description and socio-cultural analysis to understand people's lived experiences and their own perceptions of the world (Harrison, 2018). This aligns with my feminist epistemology and critical engagement with feminist standpoint theory and intersectionality.

While ethnography itself can be understood as a method for studying social life, there are other key methods within ethnography which act as means for more detailed and rich insights into people's everyday lives. Participant observation is a method of ethnography in which researchers take part in the everyday activities, routines, and interactions of a group

to learn about their culture and social life (DeWalt, 2011). Anthropologist Russell Bernard (2017, p. 273) sees participant observation as a 'strategic method' in that it is a pragmatic method combining several data collection methods that can be chosen to align with the research questions and research aims. Bernard argues that participant observation 'gets you in the door so you can collect life histories [and] talk to people about sensitive topics' (Bernard, 2017, pp. 273-274). It opens up 'the field' and allows the collection of all kinds of data, which scholar Judith Okely (2012, p. 80) describes as a method of 'participating in order to observe and understand'. Participant observation was a valuable ethnographic method that allowed me to engage with and understand the wider context of my participant's lives. It created scope for me to work on the ground as a volunteer in the foodbank to begin to understand experiences of period poverty from both sides: as a volunteer through participant observation, and through participant stories in interviews. It positioned me in the local context to understand the sense of place my participants would be talking about and opened a window into the neighbourliness of the local communities I would be engaging with in interview and on their doorsteps through foodbank deliveries.

In ethnographic terms, being in the local area of what I am studying is referred to as 'the field'. What 'the field' constitutes is thoroughly debated amongst ethnographers. I draw attention to Virginia Caputo (2000, p. 26) who discusses her PhD fieldwork experience as 'not marked solely 'by leaving the field' for an extended period of time. [It] was the experience of continually coming and going to and from the field'. Caputo writes how she was connected to 'the field' even when out of 'the field', for example being able to telephone key informants and vice versa. Caputo (2000) describes her experience as an unconventional ethnographic journey, where the concept of journeying to 'the field' was there but in a different and untraditional way.

Whilst there are many debates concerning 'the field' (Okely, 2012; Garthwaite, 2016c; Orchard and Dewey, 2016; Harrison, 2018; Perez, 2019; Stodulka *et al.*, 2019), I point to Caputo's (2000) reflection in particular because it resonated with my own experience of 'the field' in my ethnographic participant observation. I was not living in the field or with my participants, and my observations were restricted to one or two days a week. The nature of my research and the context in which I conducted it (in a pandemic) meant I was never wholly or truly (in a traditional anthropological sense) in 'the field', nor did I ever completely leave 'the field' during my months of data collection and continued volunteering.

Further, as a method, ethnographic participant observation is inherently embodied. Judith Okely (2012, p. 1) powerfully described ethnography as exploring 'knowledge [that] comes through the skin and all the senses'. I experienced this embodiment of the field and my fieldwork in several overlapping and interconnecting ways.

During my volunteering, I experienced a physical bodily interaction with the spaces, streets, yards, houses, and neighbourhoods. Over time I came to know the physical geography of the local area, knowing where certain streets were and the most efficient routes to drive from one house to the next. My body in this space allowed me to learn to geographically negotiate the area, local streets, the foodbank, and other bodies in these spaces. I also 'felt the field' in an intimately embodied sense. The foodbank site as an area of the field created a deeply embodied fieldwork practice, stacking tins of food and carrying food parcels around. I used my body in a more labour-intensive way than I had done for fieldwork before. Using my body to learn the everyday spaces and activities around me was an eye-opening and physically tiring but emotionally satisfying research experience.

Further, through this embodied practice and ethical reflection of my positionality, I went through a process of deconstructing and relearning my embodiment and presentation of self in the field. With no evidence (just a feeling) I gathered a sense of my position as a volunteer and 'do-gooder' as a safe one. I never felt at risk from the recipients, their neighbours, or local people which I felt was because of my role as a volunteer. Certainly, my role as a volunteer was a motivating factor for several of my interview participants to take part in an interview.

As a middle-class woman, however, I did feel like an outsider. My embodied positionality was highlighted to me in the field and acted as a conscious exercise of reflexivity for what I had and what my participants did not. The idea of entering 'the field' made me think about what I was wearing and how this might be perceived or constructed by other foodbank volunteers and recipients. I felt comforted by my Skoda instead of the Audi and Tesla I saw other volunteers had, feeling like it made me fit in more to the local area. Nonetheless, having a car no matter the manufacturer was a clear marker of my privilege. Upon reflection, I tried to minimise this visibly stark difference in life circumstance through my plain, unbranded clothing choice, unlearning my embodied everyday self to more consciously and (appear to) effortlessly embody the field I was in.

In the context of doing fieldwork in a pandemic, there was also a sense of my body being at risk. This was heightened by strict health and safety regulations, wearing face coverings, regularly sanitising hands, and being socially distanced with recipients (taking several steps back from their front door). The coronavirus presented itself as the biggest risk to my body during my fieldwork. I consciously and actively abided by the COVID-19 safety precautions in place, and my front line COVID-19 volunteering efforts exacerbated the sense of risk with being told to avoid physical contact with people whilst also needing to be in some way near people to help.

Fieldnotes played a key role for this kind of reflexivity in my fieldwork, and are a central tool in ethnographic research (Emerson *et al.*, 2007). Being able to write fieldnotes about my

participant observation in a reflective research journal also assisted in my practice of ethical mindfulness and the development of an ethically considerate and sensitive research project. Fieldnotes facilitated a process of interpretation of my participant's everyday lives and once I began interviewing, a deeper form of sense-making about the compounding impact of coronavirus, the foodbank support, and experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice for women in Newcastle.

Fieldnotes were written as close after my volunteering as possible. Usually this was immediately after my volunteering shift, but occasionally it was later in the day or the morning of the next day. I focused my fieldnotes on the 'feel' of the area, encounters with other volunteers, recipients and their neighbours, and my wider reflections on the research. In the field, I carried with me a small notebook to jot down encounters, ideas, and words to prompt my memory when writing up more descriptive fieldnotes later (Emerson *et al.*, 1995). Within my fieldnote diary, I incorporated a reflexive research journal to document my emotions and experiences of the research interviews, ethnographic encounters, and embodied experience of volunteering/researching in a foodbank. In some ways this presented an autobiographical element to ethnography which effectively assisted my reflexivity and positionality (Okely, 1996; Amit, 2000). On a practical point, all fieldnotes and reflections were kept digitally in a secure password-protected OneNote book.

Leaving 'the field' takes as much thought and consideration as preparing to enter 'the field'. In the end, leaving the field was a hard but necessary decision. Firstly, it is impossible to remain uninvolved and neutral as a researcher. The process of being in the field whilst volunteering and interacting directly with some of my participants was a very emotive and affective experience. I came to a point in the research process where I, as a researcher, felt the need to step away from the field to be able to reflect on the findings. Physical distance between myself, my participants, and volunteering allowed me to have a critical perspective on the data and reflective approach to writing about both my participant's and my own experiences (Garthwaite, 2016b; Garthwaite, 2016a; Abrahams, 2017). Secondly, there are significant time and funding constraints at play when completing a PhD. I thoroughly enjoyed my time volunteering, but with limited time, pressures of writing a thesis, and several part-time jobs, I found it pragmatically difficult to continue my volunteering whilst also doing my PhD research. The sense of relief that came with having more time for my PhD work was coupled with a sense of guilt that I would no longer be helping the foodbank.

3.5. Introducing the Participants

Thus far I have mentioned my participants, but not detailed who they are or contextualised them within the study. Between January 2021 and April 2021, I interviewed 38 women about their experiences of periods and period poverty. 35 women were White British, 1 was Black British, 1 was from the Philippines and another participant identified as European-

Asian. The women I spoke to ranged from 24 years of age to 60 years of age. Some of the older women were post-menopausal but reflected on past experiences. I found that perimenopausal and menopausal women provided unique insights into the topic that have otherwise been ignored.

Participants lived across East End (Byker, Walker, Wallsend), West End (Elswick, Benwell, Westgate) and Central Newcastle. The foodbank operates in East End Newcastle and as a large part of my recruitment efforts were assisted by the foodbank, most participants lived in East End Newcastle. Many participants reflected on experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice from earlier in their lives, which was not necessarily in Newcastle, but this does not affect the argument this thesis makes.

East End, West End and Central Newcastle are largely white ethnic areas. Byker and Walker, for example, has over 90% of residents of white ethnicity (ONS, 2011). In light of this, and only 3 participants not identifying as white, I do not detail each woman's individual ethnicity because it is a strong identifying factor for the women of colour in a largely white ethnic area. Further, for the purposes of anonymity, I asked all my participants if they would like to choose a pseudonym. Many women wanted to be anonymous and chose their pseudonyms but also many were happy to use their real names. A few women requested I choose a pseudonym on their behalf. I use only first names in this thesis, with the exception of Sarah A and Sarah B, which was a mistake on my part by not realising until it was too late that I already had a Sarah (A) when another participant also chose Sarah (B) as their pseudonym.

Finally, a note on social class. The menstrual injustices and inequalities my participants experienced, how they valued different menstrual management strategies, and how they navigated menstrual injustice and period poverty describes a social inequality. Identifying social class plays an important role in recognising and understanding the inequalities and injustices experienced by my participants in finding self-worth and social value in relation to their menstruating bodies (Skeggs, 1997; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Tyler, 2015). In listening to and understanding their experiences of inequality and menstrual injustice, I identified most of my participants as working-class. The middle-class women identified themselves as such.

3.5.1. Interview Recruitment

In this section I detail the practicalities of recruiting participants to interview. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, volunteering at the foodbank assisted in my recruitment strategy.

Recruitment Strategies

I recruited participants in several different ways. My first round of recruitment was with the foodbank's service users. I worked with a member of staff as a gatekeeper who sent a text message and email to all the women they worked with (over 150 women). The text and email provided a brief explanation of the research (the topic and that it required a 30-60 minute conversation, see appendix B for email information) and incentive voucher for participating. Over 30 women replied to this initial email and text message, information which the gatekeeper provided me with, with participant consent. I texted or emailed each respondent to introduce myself. Working in order down the list of those who wanted to participate, I began organising interviews with the first few, then sent a holding text to those further down the list to acknowledge their desire for participation and that I would get back in touch with them. A few responded to this initial text message, but some did not.

I also recruited through social media and leafletting (see appendix A for research recruitment poster). Two participants reached out to me via Facebook, where my research was shared by a friend to a local menstrual activism page. Eight participants contacted me through Instagram, where I created a research profile (The Everyday Period) and where the foodbank also shared my call for recruitment. Further, 50 leaflets were printed out and given out by volunteers at a local soup kitchen just outside of Newcastle City Centre. This was assisted by the treasurer of the soup kitchen who acted as a gatekeeper in allowing leaflets to be distributed amongst soup kitchen attendees. Leaflets were also distributed during my time volunteering at the foodbank. I received permission from the foodbank staff to print research leaflets and put them in the food parcels I was delivering to when volunteering. On these leaflets, I hand-wrote an introductory message and information about myself as a local student looking to speak to women in their local area. I did this to show I was a real person, foodbank volunteer, and add an element of trust to the otherwise random leaflet.

Overall, I recruited 38 interviews. These were 20 from the initial text/email message, 8 from posting a leaflet with the food parcel, 3 from leaflets handed out at the soup kitchen, 5 from Instagram, and 2 from Facebook.

Informed Consent, Audio Recording and Taking Notes

All participants were required to sign an informed consent form (via either email, WhatsApp, or in some cases in person on my foodbank delivery rounds). I sent this, along with a more detailed information sheet, in advance of the interview (see appendices C and D). All participants were able to sign the informed consent form and given opportunity to ask questions for clarification about the research and their role in it. Participants were given a copy of the informed consent form.

I requested permission from all participants to audio record the interview, and all participants agreed. I placed the research phone on speakerphone and placed a Dictaphone nearby to record the conversation. Due to occasional poor-quality signal or a low-quality line, a few audio recordings were of low quality which impacted upon the transcription. For example, the phone line with my interview with Frankie was crackly and difficult to pick up a few words, therefore the occasional word is missing from the transcript. I found that this did not affect the overall narrative of the transcript, however.

I took notes of key experiences, themes to return to later in the conversation, and the way the participant spoke (i.e. tone, pace, pauses etc). All notes were kept in a secure notebook and location in between interviews and during the data analysis. Any identifying information was redacted from the notebook, including real name and email or postal address taken down for incentive voucher purposes (discussed below). As I discussed in section 3.5 (meeting the participants), anonymity and the confidentiality of the data and information received was highlighted in every stage of the recruitment, fieldwork, analysis, and writing up stages of the research.

Incentives and Debriefs

All participants were offered a £10 supermarket voucher to thank them for their time participating in the research (Hanson *et al.*, 2012). Incentives were primarily used to express my gratitude for their participation and be able to give something back to the women, especially in a time of hardship (Grady, 2005; Hanson *et al.*, 2012). They also likely assisted in a higher recruitment rate, with women being incentivised to participate if they received a voucher at the end (Gelinis *et al.*, 2018). Respecting participant's agency, they were given the choice to take the voucher and all but one participant accepted the incentive voucher (Grant, 2015; Afkinich and Blachman-Demner, 2020). Participants were offered a £10 voucher from a choice of four large local supermarkets. These were either sent via email or posted to participants along with a debrief information sheet (see appendix E). The debrief sheet provided a reminder of the research, their role in it, and my contact details.

Research Phone

I am privileged to be an Economic and Social Research Council funded PhD student and was able to receive funding for a research specific android smartphone and a SIM-only contract. This enabled me to have a separate mobile number for the research (to protect my identity) as well as a password protected smartphone for research use (to protect participant identity). I began with a pay-as-you-go SIM-only contract but in one early interview the phone cut out because I had run out of credit, leaving me frantically buying more credit. After this I moved to a £6 monthly contract to mitigate this problem. I conducted the

interviews alone in my home so no one could overhear and was able to use the WiFi connection for the text messaging app, WhatsApp.

The women I spoke to play a crucial role in the production of knowledge for this research project. Without them, this project would not exist or be of any real value. The main vessel through which I engaged with and learned about my participants' experiences was the telephone and I move on to detail the value of this method for feminist research on a sensitive topic in the next section.

3.6. Telephone Interviews

In this section I discuss my approach to interviewing. I evaluate the advantages and challenges of telephone interviews, finding value in this communication platform as an accessible and sensitive method for interview conversation. I briefly detail the practicalities of telephone interviews, including the ethical practices required in research. Following this discussion, I move to a final reflection on my ethical practice which continued into my analytical approach and into the writing of this thesis itself.

3.6.1. Relational Interviewing: The Method

Researcher-led one-to-one interviews facilitate intensely focused data collection on a research topic. They give participants an opportunity to individually share their account of the world, the meanings they associate with it and the issues that are central to their lives (Magnusson, 2015). Interviews can access deep understandings, prioritise individual experience, and offer the opportunity to reflect on the research as a whole (Hanna and Mwale, 2017). It is understood that individual interviews give the research data a stronger emotional element by presenting the participants as emotional human beings, which is important for my feminist research and use of feminist standpoint and intersectional theories (Brinkmann, 2013; Crenshaw, 2018).

I chose relational interviews as the primary data collection method for this research. Understood as a social interaction, relational interview styles complement feminist research aims in understanding women's lives, understanding the real-world experiences of social issues, reflecting upon the researcher-researched relationship, and recognising the power imbalance and authority perceived in the researcher's role (Hesse-Biber, 2014a). They are semi-structured in practice, emulating more organic and flexible conversations with the aim of giving the participant more control of the discussion with the researcher taking the position as a listener (Hollway, 2000; Tracy, 2013). As an emic approach to data gathering, relational interviews cultivated space for emergent understandings and unscripted participant voice, in keeping with the feminist theoretical and methodological agenda of my PhD research project.

Relational interviews take an interpretivist methodological approach which help to make sense of the world through learning from participants as experts in their own lives. Scholar Lee Ann Fujii (2018) provides a detailed and thoughtful discussion of relational interviewing in her book *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*. Fujii explores relational interviewing as a valuable method to understand how people create meaning about their lives, express their experiences in ways they find appropriate, and deepen a researcher's understanding about a particular phenomenon. Relational interviewing 'orients the researcher toward the process of interviewing, rather than its results' which positions the researcher as a 'learner' and the participant as the 'teacher' (Fujii, 2018, p. 111). The experiences and voices of participants are centred in the relational interview method (Trier-Bieniek, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2014a; Fujii, 2018). Undoubtedly, I learned more than I ever thought I would in the interviews for this research. In part, this was because I focused the interview design around a conversation that created a working relationship, sharing my own experiences alongside theirs and offering an active listening ear to my participants.

Rather than the conventional ideas of building rapport with a participant, Fujii (2018) notes the value of a working relationship between researcher and participant in relational interviewing is more than an act of emotional understanding or rapport-building. She argues that the purpose of a working relationship within a research interview setting is to find ways to communicate rather than necessarily finding agreement. I experienced this with two interviews with participants (Frankie and Eva) who felt strongly in ways which contrasted with my own views and the lived experiences of other women I had talked to. Frankie and Eva both felt that menstruation was such a common experience for women and that women should know their period will come every month, therefore all women should be prepared for it with menstrual products. There was no appreciation from either participant that women might struggle with managing their menstruation in various ways that are out of their control.

In a rush of frustration, I initially deemed these interviews to be valueless to my research aims. However, adopting a reflexive and relational process of learning about the meanings women attribute to their lives and menstrual experience, I found the interviews and knowledge from Eva and Frankie deepened my understanding of how period poverty is perceived and how it is experienced. Through this lens, the concept of a working relationship in the research interview developed my feminist methodological practice of 'treating people with dignity and respect means not viewing others in purely instrumental terms' (Fujii, 2018, p. 111). By viewing these interviews as worthless and irrelevant to my research aims, I realised I was perpetuating a view of participants as instruments for the research rather than humans willing to share their lived experiences and me to learn from. Once I recognised this, I found myself more emotionally and ethically mindful about my interview practice and found an increased passion and strength in conducting the interviews

as 'conversations with purpose' to learn and unlearn knowledge, expertise, and experience from my participants.

Gender-based violence scholar, Hilary Abrahams (2017, p. 257), reflects on qualitative interviews as a space where 'we can learn to respect the honesty with which all of them [participants] speak to us, the courage with which they try to wrestle with the difficulties they face and, perhaps, feel humbled by the trust placed in us to reflect their voices'. Working from a position of 'trust placed in us', doing fieldwork and hearing the experiences of my participants made this research incredibly real. More than just a research topic, period poverty is lived and experienced by many women and in-depth relational interviewing on the phone revealed the severity of the issue for women in Newcastle.

Within the more ethically sensitive relational interview method, it is also important to recognise that the research, and thus the methods, have an agenda: to gain insights into the everyday experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice for women in Newcastle. As scholar Svend Brinkmann (2013) argues, the interviewer will always have more of an idea of the interview aim and purpose than the interviewee. In this way, qualitative research interviews are always a staged form of interpersonal interaction and can be understood themselves as a social practice (Brinkmann, 2016). Brinkmann (2013) notes that it may not be desirable, or even possible, to avoid interview structure entirely. Through a relational approach to interviewing, it is possible to provide flexibility and enable the participant to lead the discussion with their own stories, however.

With this in mind, I approached relational interviewing as a conversation with purpose. When designing the interview plan – consisting of several broad open questions, which acted more as prompts to follow the main themes covering the research aims – I conceptualised the interview as a 'journey' or 'path' to learning about a participant's experience. The pathway metaphor provided a way to shape the interview questions to build up to the more sensitive discussion of experiences of struggling to afford or get hold of menstrual products. Along this path, the interviews were broadly structured within the theme of period poverty and menstrual injustice. With guidance from the foodbank volunteers and staff who had first-hand experience of women requesting menstrual products (or 'sanitary items' as they would say), I ensured the questions were worded with the everyday language of my participants (Tracy, 2013). This meant taking a situated ethical approach to using terms that myself, menstrual scholars, and activists are working to change, such as 'sanitary' and 'feminine hygiene'. These are the terms used by the women I spoke to, and indeed they were the terms I learned at menarche and that exist in pharmacies and supermarkets still.

As I discussed in section 3.5, participants were, of course, aware of the topic when they signed up to take part in the research as they had been given information about it prior to

deciding to participate (appendix C). I encouraged the flow of the conversation to be led by the participants, to have the freedom to talk about their personal everyday experience within the broader theme of period poverty and menstrual injustice. In practice, some interviews followed this liberal unstructured interview style well, others required a more focused semi-structured flow lead by prompts and the interview questions. I envisioned the interview questions as more of a map of the interview path, taking us on a journey that passed through key themes and areas of interest to the research aims, rather than a rigid structure (Hanna and Mwale, 2017). For a handful of interviews, however, the questions became a more rigid avenue to keep the conversation moving and assist participants in knowing what to say about their experiences.

The primary aim of in-depth relational interviewing for my PhD research was to collect rich data from the perspective and lived experience of women who have struggled with different forms of menstrual injustice. By talking with women, an understanding of their world through their eyes is gained (Brooks, 2007). With participants foregrounded in the research in this way, larger methodological debates of power dynamics, researcher-researched hierarchies, and positivist aims of objective research can be challenged (Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1987; Hesse-Biber, 2014a). Specifically for my research, telephone interviews are a valuable method of data collection when working within a feminist standpoint epistemology because they place the voices, lives, and experiences of participants in the middle of the research (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). I have discussed the role of relational interviewing as my approach to interviewing, and I move now to provide a short explanation of the practicalities and logistics of doing the interviews.

3.6.2. Doing the Method: Advantages of Telephone Interviews

Throughout the interviewing stages of fieldwork, I wondered about the role of the telephone as a mediator for in-depth discussion and open conversation about sensitive and personal experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice. Much research and literature on the telephone interview method focuses on it as a quantitative and positivist-driven method (Shuy, 2002; Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Telephone interviews as a method are often praised as time-efficient, having copious recruitment potential, and useful in obtaining large sample sizes (Shuy, 2002). In response, many qualitative researchers suggest that telephone interviews are a less-effective interview method for qualitative and sensitive research (Shuy, 2002) or that qualitative research is methodologically compromised by the telephone (Novick, 2008; Irvine, 2011).

There is an emerging body of literature which provides comparisons of face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews (Shuy, 2002; Sweet, 2002; Shuy, 2003; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Novick, 2008; Stephens, 2010; Irvine *et al.*, 2013). It is critical to note that these peer-reviewed journal articles were published pre-pandemic and since 2020 the views

of remote methods have significantly changed. Nonetheless, I argue that centring on a comparison of methods of delivery perpetuates the idea of face-to-face interviewing as a gold standard in qualitative research. Looking beyond the pandemic appears to have an ideal to go back to face-to-face research methods and glosses over the value found in remote methodologies. This effectively devalues telephone interviews for conducting sensitive qualitative research before being given a chance to express their advantages. I draw on this comparative literature to inform the advantages and challenges of telephone interviewing, but I do not explicitly provide discussion on the differences of telephone and face-to-face interviewing. My task here is to critically explore the methods I chose for my research, which are telephone interviews and that is where my sole focus remains.

Working within a feminist methodology encourages me to reframe and highlight the value and advantages of telephone interviews for sensitive research topics. Fundamentally, the assumption that face-to-face encounters for gathering data on sensitive topics are better needs to be challenged (Novick, 2008; Holt, 2010; Self, 2021). Studies I have engaged with in this methodology all agree that whilst there may be some challenges with telephone interviews (and it might be added that challenges present themselves in all data collection methods) there are many advantages to telephone interviews. A significant theme across all the literature states that there is no noticeable difference between the quality of data received over telephone interviews (Sweet, 2002; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Holt, 2010).

I now discuss the value of telephone interviewing as a method for gathering rich experiential data on the topic of period poverty and menstrual injustice. I engage with pre-pandemic literature, during-pandemic rapid-response literature, and personal reflections on telephone interviewing for my PhD research and fieldwork. Suitability of telephone interviews is contextual, depending on the state of the world (in this case, a global health pandemic) but also the research aims and appropriateness of the method for research participants (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Irvine, 2011; Irvine *et al.*, 2013). I provide a reflexive account of practising relational interviewing over the phone and highlight the significance of a feminist methodological approach to remote methods (Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). To begin, there are several distinct practical and ethical advantages, as well as a few challenges, to telephone interviewing which I discuss below.

Anonymity

Firstly, talking over the phone provides an element of anonymity and not being so directly confronted by a stranger (Sweet, 2002; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Trier-Bieniek, 2012; Lord *et al.*, 2016). Although there is debate that some people are more willing to share their stories with a stranger, being geographically and technologically separated from the researcher can help the participant to feel comfortable and empowered as they are in their own emotional and physical space sharing their experiences (Davis *et al.*, 2010; Holt, 2010;

Trier-Bieniek, 2012). This perceived anonymity is also argued to benefit participants in feeling safer about disclosing sensitive and personal information more openly because there can be more privacy, particularly being physically distanced from the researcher (Carr and Worth, 2001; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Self, 2021).

Of course, as researchers Judith Sturges and Kathleen Hanrahan (2004) comment, the nature of the sensitivity of topics will play a role in the suitability of telephone interviews. Topics perceived as embarrassing may create greater data quality through telephone anonymity, whereas emotionally distressing topics may render telephone interviews inappropriate (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). Experiences of period poverty could be both embarrassing and distressing to recall, which is a consideration I took into account when choosing the relational interview approach to gathering data. As a way of building a working relationship to cultivate a safe and enjoyable research space, I provided a photograph of myself on the information sheet (appendix B). Whilst this meant I was still a stranger to participants, it also showed I was a human and more so a woman. I discuss this in more detail later in this chapter.

Flexibility

Telephone interviews provide flexibility, benefitting the opportunity for participants to continue with their daily lives whilst talking on the phone with me (James and Busher, 2009; Holt, 2010; Kelly *et al.*, 2010; Schwarz, 2011; Trier-Bieniek, 2012; Williams *et al.*, 2015). Many of the interviews had background noise of small children, the television, traffic noise, and one interviewee, Tracy, even told me she was cleaning the house with her headphones plugged into her phone to talk with me. In this way, telephone interviews are a valuable tool in feminist research to explore everyday lives without significantly disrupting the everyday lives of participants.

Scholar Amanda Holt (2010) further argues that telephone interviews with her participants – mainly single mothers with multiple social and economic disadvantages – presented a less intrusive form of interviewing for her participants, many of whom would have previous experience of being interviewed by social workers, educational officers and so on in their own homes. Drawing on Valerie Walkerdine's (1990, p. 194) feminist epistemological work of 'the surveillant other', Holt (2010, p. 115) argues that to some extent telephone interviews reduce the gaze from others and 'avoids reproducing such 'gazing' practices' as the researcher is not in the participant's home or local spaces.

Another benefit of telephone interviewing was being able to reschedule at ease (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). Telephone interviewing gave the participant control over the time and place of the interview (Novick, 2008; Self, 2021). There were occasions during my fieldwork when an interview had to be rescheduled. For example, when I rang Lucy at the agreed time of

interview, she was on a bus. I suggested I ring her back when she was at home due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Being a telephone interview, this was easy to do. Equally there were a few times when a participant would text me asking to ring them 10 minutes later than planned or later in the day. This method revealed how the telephone can act as an empowering tool for research with women to be in control of being interviewed when it most suited them and their day. Adding to this, I took a keenly flexible and relaxed approach to interviews being rescheduled. This comes with the privilege of a full-time PhD giving me time and space to solely conduct research interviews as well as my feminist epistemology of centring participant experience. I was keen to respect the time and information participants gave me, and I found being flexible myself was one important way I could do this.

Widened Participation

Conducting interviews over the phone also provided a space for women who would not otherwise be able to participate for various financial, personal, or mobility reasons (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Trier-Bieniek, 2012). This is important also in the context of the pandemic where any meeting in-person would have to be outside at that time. There are many reasons this would be inappropriate, the first being the chill of winter during my fieldwork as a very poor idea to sit outside for a prolonged time. For the other reasons I think of Lily, who had £5 left in her purse to last her 3 weeks before her next Universal Credit payment when we talked. Where would Lily and I meet to ensure private conversation? Would she have to pay for a bus fare with money she cannot spare? Does she have warm enough clothing to sit outside for an hour? Are there health or mobility conditions she has that would limit her ability to participate? Outside of the pandemic context considerations of cost, time, and personal circumstance (that the participant may not disclose with the researcher) are important and highlight the value of telephone interviews for this research.

Data Quality

Reduced data quality is a common argument many researchers make against telephone interviews. There is an assumption that the duration of telephone interviews is limited, with telephone interviews generally being shorter – or requiring to be kept shorter – than face-to-face interviews and implications of ‘data lost’ that comes with shorter interviews (Shuy, 2002; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Irvine, 2011). I strongly disagree with the idea of ‘data lost’ in short interviews.

For example, my interview with Kasia was perhaps one of the most powerful interviews in terms of her experiences of period poverty and the measures she had to take to buy menstrual products for her and her daughter. This interview was only 15 minutes long. Kasia was precise yet detailed in her interview, a way she felt comfortable sharing her story and

that must be respected in the interview process. In 15 minutes, Kasia was able to convey her experiences and provide deep, meaningful insights to the research aims. The telephone was a key mediator for Kasia to share her experiences in a space, time, and manner suitable for her and it must be considered a strength for telephone interviews. In this way, Kasia was empowered by controlling the duration of the interview and did not feel it necessary to drag out the conversation despite my attempts in prompts. I regard the short interview with Kasia a valuable and significant success in terms of data quality (see chapter 8 for these lived experiences in discussion).

Advantageous Practicalities

Finally, a few practical perspectives of doing research with telephone interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in my home over the telephone except for one, which was a video-call via Zoom. As a PhD student I chose the cheapest internet option from my provider and it came to light that in important calls, cheaper internet does not work well. It turns out that the phone signal is much more reliable in my home, so for the coronavirus-enforced working-from-home situation, telephone interviews were a more practically appropriate option.

Almost all my participants were available to talk at the time and day we had organised for me to call them on. This is in part, I believe, due to the text message communication before the call took place, organising an exact time and day I could ring them to talk. In this way the telephone call was more likely to be perceived as an appointment as there was written confirmation of the interview in text. It could also be a factor of personal circumstance, the lockdown restrictions, and employment status that allowed my participants to be more flexible with their time. Telephone interviews also proved a useful and valuable method in the wider context of interpersonal interactions increasingly shifting to remote means and participants being used to talking about their lives on the phone (Sweet, 2002; Self, 2021).

3.6.3. Doing the Method: Challenges of Telephone Interviews

Like all research methods, practical and ethical challenges are also present with telephone interviews. Interviewing remotely throws up several challenges to approaching the in-depth relational interview method in a feminist scaffold, which I discuss below.

Lack of Non-Verbal Cues

Most prominently, the lack of visual cues that an in-person face-to-face interview can provide are lost in telephone-mediated research (Shuy, 2003; Novick, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2014a). Non-verbal cues are valuable in assessing the emotional climate of the interviews including the ability to build rapport, break down researcher-researched hierarchies, and

determine whether to probe a point further (Hesse-Biber, 2014a). Such non-verbal communication is evidently lost over the phone which impacts active listening to varying degrees. Not being able to see the person can present a barrier to empathetic listening and being able to appropriately respond to some of the more sensitive topics of discussion or personal experiences.

Body language, facial expression and gesticulations are common, natural, and useful non-visual cues in traditional face-to-face interviewing methods. They are useful for the researcher to see if the participant is thinking and then consider if to wait or reframe the question (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). On the phone, of course, the only indication is silence. Adrienne Trier-Bieniek (2012, p. 636) writes in a reflection of using telephone interviews with women in her research that 'I would often ask her to clarify a statement and expect that there will be long silences while she considers her answer. (In general, long silences over the telephone are one of the most socially awkward positions to be in.)'. I draw on Trier-Beiniek's (2012) reflection of telephone silences because I had a few of these experiences. I will be honest in saying that a small handful of interviews were like trying to get water out of a stone. On these occasions the interviews would last 20 minutes at best and participants would often give me one-word responses to open questions. Over the phone I found it difficult to judge why or if participants might be less engaged (Sweet, 2002).

I build on this point, though, calling for the first consideration to be: are they *actually* less engaged? Are there other people in the room where the participant is, which might affect the sort of answers the participant is willing to give? Are they feeling awkward about the very personal nature of the questions? Do they feel like I don't want or need to hear the more intimate (read: bloody) details of their periods? Are they doing the interview mainly for the incentive voucher and want it to be quick? Do they fully understand the question? Is there an unexplained element of participant anxiety at play, where my positive interjections are not enough to show I am there, listening, and interested in what they have to say?

Without face-to-face interaction it was, at times, more difficult to tell or 'read' the participant, their comfort in the interview setting and how far I should probe or question their experiences. In the few significantly one-word response interviews, even with probing open questions to try to entice more detail from the participant, I ended up simply going through the interview questions in turn and thanked them for their time.

All the interviews were of value, some participants were just more articulate about their experiences than others. The role of the telephone is interesting to consider in these situations, as is the impact of lack of visual cues from a participant's perspective. As Shuy (2003) points out, visual signs of encouragement from the researcher for a participant to elaborate on their experience can go a long way to gather rich and detailed experiential data. As I was not with my participants in person, I could not use this corporeal research

tool or know if non-verbal cues from myself would have encouraged greater conversation between myself and the participant.

Along a similar line of thought, scholar Amanda Holt (2010) provides a reflection on her participant's experiences of telephone interviews. Holt presents a discussion of how the uncertainty felt by a participant (are they saying the 'right' thing or is the researcher still listening?) produces anxiety which can create an awkward, or a 'strange' research encounter (Holt, 2010, p. 119). Perhaps the occasional feeling of awkwardness in my own telephone interviews was a compounding of participant anxiety ('am I saying the right thing?'), my own anxiety as a researcher ('do they want me to ask more about this delicate situation?'), the more fluid and unstructured approach of relational interviewing, and of course the role of the telephone in not being able to judge or gauge the interview situation as it is a remote research encounter. Being reflexive about these feelings, experiences and discussing this with participants is crucial for understanding how to improve telephone interviewing within a feminist methodological practice.

Disrupted Auditability

Positive interjections and verbal gestures ('mmm', 'yes', 'uh huh') can go a long way in reassuring the participant that you are listening and that what they are saying is valuable, encouraging them to continue and feel comfortable sharing (Holt, 2010; Abrahams, 2017). The difficulty with positive interjections over the phone is that sometimes what the participant is saying can get lost during the conversation, in the audio recording of the interview and consequently the interview transcript. This matter of auditability has subtle but occasionally significant impacts on the research interview (Stephens, 2010; Irvine *et al.*, 2013; Williams *et al.*, 2015).

For example, when speaking to Nichola, I missed her saying she was recently recovered from an overdose because I was using verbal gestures to show I was actively listening. At the time I was actively listening, but it was only when transcribing Nichola's interview that I realised I had not actually heard what she had told me and I appeared to move on very quickly from it. In hindsight this did not hinder the conversation Nichola and I had, nor did I miss an important and directly research-relevant experience. However, it highlighted the importance of active listening and active hearing in building a working relationship with a participant. My own positive interjections did occasionally mean I missed something a participant said, or only picked up on it when it was too late to turn back fluidly in the conversation. In this sense it was sometimes more difficult to hear and actively listen to every minute detail over the phone because when I interjected it blocked the sound of the participant talking on the phone.

Building on this point of auditability, I turn to the challenge of phone signal. Whilst the phone signal in my home is reliable as mentioned earlier, the same cannot be guaranteed for my participants (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). This occurred during my interview with Kasia who was describing a very sensitive situation, but her signal dropped out temporarily. I had to ask her to repeat herself, which unfortunately was a story of how she coped with a recent experience of period poverty. In this moment I felt awkward and insensitive, worrying that she had thought I was not listening.

Another experience of poor phone signal was with Brenda, whose phone signal dropped out in the middle of her telling me about her experiences of two gynaecological cancers. I rang her back to continue her story and she answered the phone explaining to me that she hadn't noticed the phone cutting out so kept chatting away. Brenda's experiences were incredibly moving and powerful and I wanted to hear what she had said. I (feeling somewhat awkward) directed her back to where she had dropped out and she gave me a very short and to-the-point conclusion of the story.

These were very sensitive experiences for both Brenda and Kasia to talk about, and while they were generous and comfortable sharing these experiences over the phone, the phone itself as an interview tool presented an ethical conundrum of potentially causing harm to them by directly asking them to repeat themselves. Further, with signal drops, my own interjections and long silences, the flow of the participant's narrative was occasionally disrupted.

Voices Lost

As with a lot of social research, there is always the question of who you will be unable to access and whose stories will be lost (Self, 2021). Due to unfortunate timing, I missed an opportunity for an interview with a foodbank recipient who called me to take part and wanted to speak immediately (Lord *et al.*, 2016). I explained that I could not talk with her at that moment as I was expecting another interview but I would call her back when it suited her. She said to ring back later, which I did, but she was then not able to take my call. I tried to call her again several times but with no luck at getting through to her.

I agonised over this for weeks, primarily because I did not want her to miss out on the £10 supermarket voucher incentive for taking part. I had encountered her on the street when volunteering within the time of my ethnographic participant observation and had overheard her talking about struggling in her Universal Credit income. In the end, there was nothing I could do and had to put it behind me as trying my best and her changing her mind about wanting to take part. This is a specific example, but there will be women in the local area who will not have been given the opportunity to participate by not being foodbank recipients or not having a mobile phone or credit to initially get in touch with me. This leads

on to considerations of the financial cost of telephone interviews. I view this next consideration as less of a challenge and more of an ethically and practically important consideration when evaluating the opportunity of telephone interviews in research.

The Cost of Participation

Telephone interviews are frequently cited as cost efficient (Shuy, 2002; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). This comes with an unspoken privilege of whose cost. I am privileged in having ESRC funding for the telephone contract, but I am aware that not all research will have this funding available. The cost of the call or text message for the participant is completely ignored in telephone interview methods literature.

I always ensured I was the one to ring participants, so the cost was on my end. There were occasions where the participant had missed my call and I would leave a message saying I would try again in 10 minutes or to text me a better time to ring them. On some of these occasions, participants would call me back. As early as possible in the call I would offer to ring them back on my credit, but many refused. Two participants living in homeless hostels at the time of interview were able to text me but did not have credit to call me. In my interview with Amy, for example, the phone cut out and I was waiting a few minutes before calling her back when Amy texted me to ask me to call her back. I called her back immediately and she explained to me that she had no credit to call me but could send text messages. These considerations are completely disregarded in methods literature discussing the telephone interview, but they are incredibly significant and must be discussed in line with considerations of the digital divide.

3.6.4. Ethical Considerations in Telephone Interviews

Reflexivity as a central feminist ethical practice encouraged me to return to and question my positionality as a researcher. Remote research in a pandemic begs the question: does positionality matter if a participant cannot see you? The simple answer is yes.

Scholars have noted how the telephone can act to silence identity factors of both participant and researcher (Holt, 2010). I made a conscious effort to deanonymize myself as a researcher to show I am a human. I put my photograph on the information sheets provided, the same as my WhatsApp profile picture, and created a research Instagram account with my picture on it (along with other research-related content). I did not want to be a 'faceless researcher' when working within a sensitive research topic (Self, 2021). I wanted potential participants to know that I was young woman (who they could assume menstruates) as I believe this played a role in participants feeling comfortable to talk to me, a young woman (and student) on the phone. Research suggests that women are more likely to talk on the phone, and more likely to talk to other women on the phone for longer

(compared with talking to men on the phone) (Smoreda and Licoppe, 2000). I sought to use this to my advantage, as well as an understanding of menstrual taboo which embeds distrust and embarrassment in talking to men about menstruation. I wanted to make it clear that I was a young woman and a student. I have no evidence that my role as a white woman played a role in encouraging participant recruitment, but I cannot be certain it did not discourage some women, perhaps women of colour or different cultural experiences, from talking with me.

It is further noted that embodied differences can play a role in shaping the interview dynamic (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Stephens, 2010). Aside from my photograph, participants could not see me, but they could hear my accent over the phone. I provided a short paragraph of information about me in the information sheet to give context about myself as a researcher. In this, I stated I was from London. Reflecting on this, I used this to indicate to participants that I would not sound like them. I am perhaps overly conscious of my generic London accent which is often deemed 'posh'. Certainly, northern and southern accents are ascribed with various place-based, classed, and culture symbolism and identities (Skeggs, 2004; Hall, 2020b) and I am made acutely aware of my 'posh' southern accent living in Newcastle. I do not consider my accent to be posh in comparison with other Southern accents, but accents, dialects and voices are shaped in and by places and social worlds which are tied to intersections of class, age, race, and gender (Kanngieser, 2012). My accent increasingly makes me aware of my privilege and positionality in this research. Not that I think it would make much difference in the end but listening back to myself talking in the transcripts, I noticed myself dropping t's and loosening up my pronunciation of words to 'fit in' with the way my participants talked. Reflecting on my conscious effort to seem 'less middle-class' during my ethnographic participant observation was a similar act of 'fitting in'. My embodied positionality, including my voice, played a central role in my ongoing reflexivity and ethical praxis to balance power dynamics (though it should be mentioned that my power and privilege remained as a middle-class woman, I just became more aware of it and thus acted in different ways from an ethical perspective to keep my participants safe and comfortable in the research space).

Using interviews as a 'conversation with purpose' also plays a powerful role for interviews to cultivate a safe, comfortable, and engaged space for women to talk about their experiences for research. The role of the conversation is critical: a reciprocal, knowledge exchanging social act that I (as a researcher) played as much a part in as my participants. Of course, as the researcher I was always more aware of the conversation direction in the sense of it being purposeful for research and data collection (Brinkmann, 2013). I was conscious of this and so as a way of dismantling the power dynamics and researcher-researched hierarchy, I engaged in conversation with my participants. I never ignored questions posed to me from my participants nor did I hide my menstrual experiences from

them. I have never experienced period poverty, but I have over 10 years' experience of negotiating and managing a heavy period and I am not afraid to share my embarrassing stories.

As a conversation, we shared and laughed about our experiences of periods. I always let my participants speak in depth and followed their lead and pace. Recognising the divergences as well as the similarities between myself and the participants allowed for more effective interviewing through working relationships and an understanding of some of the things my participants experienced (Stephens, 2010; Fujii, 2018). Period poverty is an experience unknown to me, as is being a mother and living on a Universal Credit income. In this way, my participants and I diverged along significantly different life histories and futures. When they talked about how they found their period a bit gross, frightening, hard to manage, painful, and in some ways an inconvenience, I could relate. Being a woman with menstrual experience (and a personal 'cranky' opinion of not enjoying my period or menstrual cramps) and an intimate experience of some of the corporeal and felt things my participants spoke about resonated in some similarities. It was in these moments where my feminist philosophy was in its rawest form as we empowered each other to have open and honest conversations.

3.7. Phases of Analysis: Learning What Works

I close this chapter with a discussion of my mindful approach to most appropriately and sensitively analysing the data gathered through these methods. Ethical practice does not exist only within fieldwork. Treating people with dignity and respect through ethical practice in fieldwork equally translates and is important when representing their stories, experiences and lives (Fujii, 2018).

My analysis of the interview and ethnographic data took place over several phases. At the time, these phases came organically and as a natural progression to getting to know my data. Upon reflection, I can identify the more systematic approach I took to analysing and exploring the data, which I explain below.

Phase One: Note-taking

As previously discussed in this chapter, during my fieldwork I took notes in the interviews and wrote descriptive fieldnotes during my ethnographic participant observation. Whilst I was writing these, I was beginning to see themes in terms of community, localised support networks, and a local sense of place. My interview notes picked up on the way the participant was talking, noting down occasions where they were struggling to find the words or where the conversation and experience flowed freely.

In the process of this notetaking, I was beginning to form a picture of what the data was saying, drawing connections between experience and highlighting themes of further interest for the research. This informal fieldwork-based form of analysis was key in formulating the bigger picture and highlighting potential areas of interest that could take shape more deeply in the analysis and writing up of the data.

Phase Two: Listening and Transcribing

Once I had completed the interviews and ethnography, I began 'formally' analysing by listening back to the audio recordings and transcribing them. This was a lengthy but invaluable process for analysis. Transcription took about three months to complete to a high quality. During this time, I was able to get the first deep insights into my participant's experiences for the purpose of analysis and interpretation. Each transcript was transcribed anonymously in an individual Word document and their names and names of friends and family they mentioned were written with pseudonyms.

Choosing where to place punctuation in each transcript was an ongoing process to determine the meaning behind what was said and how to put that into words. I would often go back and change where a comma or hyphen was to explore whether the meaning was more clearly conveyed with a change in punctuation. Further, I made a strong effort to convey the style of each participant's voice, accent, and way of speaking. I embedded 'Geordie-isms' (Newcastle dialect) such as 'mam' and 'ee' within the transcripts to present an authentic account of what Geordie participants said. Not all participants were from Newcastle, but a vast majority were. For those not from Newcastle, I tried to convey their accents and dialect through the transcripts in the same way as embedding the 'Geordie-isms' just particular to their style of speaking. In some quotations in this thesis, I have added an explanatory or connecting word in square brackets for ease of reading and understanding.

Phase Three: Using the 'Wrong' Approach for My Data – NVivo

Following transcription, I began using the analysis software NVivo to 'properly' analyse my data. During the process of transcribing my interviews I could see broad themes and ideas emerging from the data and I had jotted these down in the form of a narrative-style initial findings paper but felt a more formal approach was necessary to be a 'proper researcher'. NVivo was frequently quoted by research papers as a useful qualitative strategy for analysis and having received basic training in the programme I decided to thematically code my interview data with the programme.

I struggled with NVivo and subsequently struggled to work out how to analyse my data in a way that felt 'right'. I had already seen some significant overarching themes emerging out of

transcription and found that thematic coding with the tools in NVivo was tearing apart my participants' experiences. I spent weeks wondering how I could argue that menstruation was a personal and individual experience but then be ripping apart the interconnectivity of periods through trying to group 'menstrual flow', 'period pain', 'period poverty', 'no period poverty' and so on through thematic codes. Women's lived experiences, whilst having the commonality of menstruating and struggling to afford menstrual products, are diverse and valuable in their holistic self-representation. I found that coding through NVivo was too positivist an approach to finding objectivity in the data and it refused a holistic, encompassing, and fundamentally feminist approach to analysing the data, which is after all actual lived experience.

Phase Four: Finding the 'Right' Approach for My Data – Free Writing/Vignettes

I shared my concerns about NVivo for my analysis with my supervisors and they suggested I try free writing. I had been writing narrative-style finding papers whilst transcribing as big themes emerged but until my supervisors suggested I continue this style of analysis I had not considered it to be the 'right' way to do analysis. This begs the question, is there a 'right way' to do analysis?

Fundamentally, what style of analysis researchers choose to use is heavily influenced by the methodological approach to the research. Grounding my analysis in my feminist epistemology, I began free writing findings papers which were data-focused and grew out of centring participant's lived experiences. I engaged with vignettes as a form of feminist analysis (Langer, 2016). Beginning with participants' experiences, I centred their voices in these vignettes through the embeddedness of direct quotes from the transcripts and organising the themes and sub-themes around the experiences participants presented to me.

I revisited the transcripts, fieldnotes, interview notes and occasionally the audio recordings to find experiences, quotes, connections, and anomalies within the data to cultivate a deep understanding of the data, and thus my participants' lived experiences. After four months of this process, I had created four thematic data-heavy papers that illuminated my findings. It was from these four vignette papers that my thesis outline was created and my thesis began to take shape.

I argue that this feminist approach to free writing as analysis is a practice of ethical mindfulness. It recognises the intimately interconnected nature of lived experience and highlights the importance of a holistic approach to exploring menstrual experience and period poverty. Free writing out of the data is a skill that praises attention to detail, precision, critical thinking, and a holistic yet intimate approach to analysis. It felt 'right' for my research and my data. It helped me see the bigger picture of participant experience

within the menstrual research landscape whilst still centring on their voices and lived experience.

Of course, there may be potential losses in free writing as an analytical method. There is no systematic analysis document containing raw data, therefore the results of analysis are not that accessible to others, including future researchers. There is no formally structured document or framework to identify the stages of analysis or how themes came to be grouped together. Rather, the analysis exists in vignette papers (drafted and redrafted several times) and the phases of analysis are documented in the thesis. A clearer framework and document outlining the thematic analysis alongside the free-writing papers would benefit cross-checking and future research outputs seeking the data which could not be included in this thesis.

Further, free writing as analysis will have impacted the shape of the findings to focus more on experience rather than overarching social or cultural themes. This is perhaps not so much of a loss, more of a different style of data presentation and research narrative. With this, there is a risk of getting lost within the analysis process if a researcher has no structure and loses sight of initial aims of data collection. However, I regularly returned to my research questions to assist in this challenge.

3.8. Chapter Conclusion

This concludes my methodology chapter which explored my theoretical, methodological, and practical approach to data collection for this PhD.

It was widely and immediately recognised that the coronavirus pandemic shook the academic and research community in early 2020 (Kara and Khoo, 2020; Marzi, 2020; Self, 2021). In hindsight, and aside from the complications and stresses of researching in a pandemic, my PhD research is a significantly improved project than my proposed PhD. I aim for this thesis to show this by shedding light on the importance of this topic through the lived experiences of women in Newcastle. My PhD felt like it became 'real' when I began talking with women who had experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice. I found a sense of purpose in this new research direction and was positively overwhelmed by the generosity of my participants to share their lives with me. They saw value in this research as much as I did, and for that I am grateful.

The next five chapters move to exploring my participant's lived experiences, the data analysis, and findings to answer the research questions introduced in chapter one.

Chapter 4. The Diversity of Menstruation

This chapter lays the analytical groundwork to understand menstruation as a subjective and diverse experience. I draw on data to illustrate how the women in my study have individual menstrual experiences and how, because of this, women manage their periods differently in terms of menstrual needs and choices in their menstrual products. I explore how menstrual management can be expensive, which makes women's position even more vulnerable when navigating menstrual justice.

4.1. Introducing the Diversity of Women's Menstrual Experience

I define menstrual diversity in my research as the individuality of how periods are physiologically experienced both between women but also within women's own experiences. I note that menstruation scholars have argued that biomedical literature positions menstruation as unidimensional and solely biological (Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs, 2013; Hennegan *et al.*, 2021). This ignores how menstruation is situated within social, cultural, and economic life, which has impacts upon how it is experienced (Johnston-Robledo and Stubbs, 2013). However, I highlight the physiological experience of menstruation in this chapter to develop my argument of how women experience menstrual injustice differently, require different products, and different support when navigating menstrual (in)justice. I argue that you need an understanding of how periods are diverse to understand how they are both physiologically and socioculturally experienced and how this interacts with menstrual injustice.

According to the NHS (2019a), periods vary in terms of temporal regularity (on average 28 days between each period); menstrual flow (losing between 5 to 12 teaspoons of blood, with different thicknesses of the blood and a variation of colours including red, brown and black); and menstrual pain (some women will experience abdominal cramps, vomiting, lower back and leg pain, whilst others will not). These physiological menstrual experiences can vary for one woman from month to month for a range of reasons, including menstrual health conditions, perimenopause, stress, and the use of hormonal contraceptives (Critchley *et al.*, 2020; NHS, 2021).

Throughout this thesis, a range of menstrual experience is described. The diversity of menstruation and individual experiences of periods must be held in mind throughout the reading of this thesis. Periods, like women, are not homogenous. They are diverse, individual and in a continuous process of evolution and shift. This shifting takes place within social, cultural, and economic life which also impacts women's experience of menstruation. Importantly: no one menstrual experience is the same. As periods are individual and subjective, so is how they are managed. I used the term 'managed' to indicate the material, psychological, physical, and social ways in which women absorb their menstrual flow, deal

with their menstrual pain, and negotiate their periods at home and in public. Menstrual diversity influences how women choose to manage their periods. This will vary based on the physiology of their periods, what menstrual products they prefer, sociocultural beliefs, and the influence of mothers, sisters, and any formal education they might have received.

Central to this thesis is an understanding that how women can manage their periods is also disrupted and/or enabled by their access to capital. It is vital to understand that because women manage and experience their periods differently, women will navigate menstrual injustice and period poverty differently. I focus mainly on the role of menstrual products because it was menstrual products that women spoke most about when struggling to manage their periods. Notably, menstrual pads and tampons were the only type of product discussed by participants. This chapter therefore provides context for the diverse corporeal experiences which frames the experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice in the rest of this thesis.

4.2. Tampax or Tesco? Individual Choice in Menstrual Management

In this section I introduce the theme of individual preference in menstrual product and explore the importance for women to have a choice in the products they use. Existing research has identified several factors in how and why women choose their menstrual products. Familiarity with the type and brand of menstrual product is significant. Using a particular product is embedded in girls' experiences of managing menstruation at menarche and ingrained over the lifecourse (Medina-Perucha *et al.*, 2022). Familiarity is also about gaining a sense of product reliability for women's personal needs. Once product reliability has been established, women are often reluctant to change (Peberdy *et al.*, 2019). Familiarity and product reliability are particularly significant for women on low incomes as there is increased risk if a new product or brand is not as effective in managing their menstrual flow because they do not have extra income to buy more.

Maternal opinion is another significant factor in the choice of women's menstrual management. At menarche, mothers have a strong stake in what products and what brand of products girls use as they are usually the ones buying them (Rubinsky *et al.*, 2020, also see chapter 8). Once established with a type of product and brand by their mother, women often stay loyal to their choices throughout their lives. Further, availability is another part of why women use certain products (Peberdy *et al.*, 2019). It was noted in interviews that branded menstrual products are more likely to be stocked in smaller stores and corner shops, whereas cheaper non-branded products are more likely stocked in larger supermarkets which might be geographically inaccessible.

Finally, marketing plays a significant role, particularly in why women choose (often more expensive) branded menstrual products. Branded menstrual products have more

advertisements and are more frequently in the consumer eye (Cha and Park, 2019; Krithika and Alex, 2019). Throughout the interviews of this study, it was clear that brands played a big role in how women think about their menstrual management. Keeping in mind the other factors in menstrual product preference, I move to explore the theme of branded products, security, and safety in participant's lived experience of menstrual management.

The preference of using branded products was frequently framed within a discourse of safety and security by participants. Helen (28) expressed brand loyalty in feeling "safer" with *Tampax* tampons. She explained,

"I think because it's the most well-known brands you kinda feel a bit safer with them, don't you? Even though it might not be true but I always feel like you feel a bit safer with them."

It is well documented that the claim that branded products are 'better' comes from a brand's marketing strategies aimed at persuading consumers to buy their products (Stein and Kim, 2009; Jackson and Falmagne, 2013; Spadaro *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, brand loyalty through familiarity is important for Helen's period management and plays a key role in her feeling secure. Whilst Helen feels comfortable with *Tampax*, in an almost contradictory way to her claim of feeling safer with well-known brands, she dislikes the brand *Bodyform's* pads for corporeal reasons. Finding them physically uncomfortable on her body, she said:

"I think it's called *Bodyform*, the pads, I always find them like, they are quite like... like rub on your legs I find. If you know what I mean. [...] I mean I only use pads every so often and usually when I'm sleeping but I find *Bodyform* like uncomfortable me."

Despite a contradiction to feeling safer with well-known brands, Helen highlights that *Bodyform* pads do not work for her body. Helen therefore feels more comfortable using *Tampax*. The point here is not to compare brands but to raise awareness of the diversity of women's choices and preferences in terms of branding, familiarity, and product reliability when it comes to managing their period which, as I introduced in the previous section, are diverse in themselves.

Building on the theme of comfort, Lilet Queen (33, referred to as Queen in the rest of the thesis from here) explained she has a smaller physique, so she only likes to use a particular brand of tampon (*Lilets*) because they are the most comfortable and suitable for her body. A particular struggle for Queen is that the tampons she prefers are only stocked "in me local Sainsbury's, so that means I've got to go drive out of me way to just go and get some tampons". Mobility, time, and the extra costs of fuel are impacted here, with Queen

needing to go out of her way to get the right tampons for her body and individual sense of security. Like Helen's choices, comfort is intertwined with Queen's sense of security in choosing to use branded tampons.

The theme of security and feeling safe with certain brands of menstrual products is significant in understanding the role of familiarity and product reliability for women, but it is more complex than a discussion of branded or non-branded products. Choice in the *type* of menstrual product is intimately connected to the body and feelings of familiarity and reliability. It is also influenced by menstrual taboo. For example, Lucy (43) explained that,

“Sometimes I have had a period that has been extra heavy where I've had to use a tampon and a sanitary pad. But I do prefer to have a pad. I feel more safe wearing a pad you know, instead of having a tampon and thinking ‘am I going to leak through this tampon?’ you know. So yeah I feel more secure having a sanitary towel on.”

The fear of leaking for Lucy comes from an insecurity she feels with using tampons and the expectations of menstrual etiquette concealing her period. Lucy experiences a psychological sense of discomfort with different types of products and methods of period management which is intimately informed by her physiological experience of menstruation and broader background of menstrual taboo. Using a pad therefore allows Lucy to feel a more embodied security in her everyday life and removes the concern of leaking, which is an important choice for her to make.

Drawing out the connections with menstrual taboo, what type of product women choose is based on personal preferences which are intimately linked to ideas of cleanliness. Classed and menstrual discourses of hygiene were introduced in the literature review, and I develop the influence of them here. Participants constructed their own embodied sense of hygiene and feeling clean when on their period, which can be framed within menstrual crankiness to validate their feelings and desires to feel clean when menstruating. Drawing on socioculturally embedded discourses of hygiene and the dirty menstruating woman, Abby (31) raised the issue of having to use toilet paper as a makeshift pad when she was experiencing period poverty at university and that it made her feel “gross” (see chapter 5 for more detail on these circumstances). Abby spoke about feeling aware of her period and feeling “just like... quite unclean”. Explaining herself further, she:

“...always felt like I just needed to shower or something. And ‘cos I think as well, ‘cos your body temperature is a bit higher, so I felt like I was a bit sweatier or something [...and] I think some of that was like erm... like if I used to just have to use a sanitary towel, or if I had to use like, like loads of tissue paper, I'd always feel like I was just sat in it [menstrual blood]. Erm and that made me feel like

gross. Whereas like 'cos I usually use tampons as well as pads I kind of feel a bit more secure now.”

Emphasising how using just a pad or toilet paper to absorb her menstrual flow made her feel gross, as well as other symptoms including higher body temperatures and perspiration, the personal importance of hygiene by using two types of menstrual products comes into intense focus. The idea of menstrual crankiness allows us to recognise how periods have corporeal impacts which encourage women to take action to ensure they feel clean and safe in their bodies. Abby's experience highlights that the social and emotional impacts of menstruation on women are not always positive or easy, but the ability to have a choice to manage their menstrual flow in personalised ways is central.

The corporeal experiences of menstruation are key in recognising the value of respectability through an embodied lens of hygiene. Menstrual crankiness in conjunction with respectability moves away from ideologies essentialising menstruation with being 'gross' or inherently dirty. Instead, it recognises that women can and do feel physically and mentally unclean and insecure in their menstruating bodies. Of course, part of this is linked to menstrual etiquette and social expectations to keep menstruation hidden. However, in my data I found that a large part is also the corporeality and physical experience of feeling menstrual blood seeping out of the vagina, perspiration, pain, and other symptoms. The bodily and emotional sensations of *feeling* clean (rather than *being* clean) are emphasised. Abby discussed feeling unclean when “sat in” her menstrual blood, which is a big contributing factor in her decision to use tampons with pads.

In the same way that physical experience is centred in women's choice to use certain types and brands of menstrual products, it is also intimately a part of why women choose not to use certain types of menstrual products. Again, menstrual crankiness assists in acknowledging the diversity of menstrual experience and the individual responses to menstrual management. I now discuss several women who expressed a physical sense of discomfort with particular menstrual products, which influenced feelings of dignity, cleanliness, and agency in menstrual management.

Clara (33) discussed her journey of finding the right menstrual products for her body and expressed how tampons did not work for her with her menstrual health condition, Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). Clara told me her period was “very painful and heavy [and] sometimes early, sometimes late. [...] I last roughly 4-5 days now, but the first two to three days are like... it's just like turning on a tap.” Because of her PCOS, Clara finds that she needs to do more to manage her period. Likening her menstrual flow to “turning on a tap”, Clara needs very absorbent menstrual products to ensure she feels confident that her period will not leak and she can go about her daily life. She finds,

“...if you use tampons as well it's kind of difficult when you get a rather large clot as well. It can push out if it's very big. It could push it [the tampon] further down, make it uncomfortable for wearing it.”

This distrust in tampons not being effective with large blood clots means Clara uses pads or adult incontinence pads to manage the heaviness of her menstrual flow. This is an important preference influencing Clara's choice when buying period products to ensure she feels confident and comfortable going about her everyday life during her period.

Kerrie was another participant who disliked tampons, explaining:

“I just cannot get away with them [they're] uncomfortable [it's] like me body knows that there's like a foreign body in us and it's, it's just weird. You know it's like me body pushes them out kind of thing.”

Kerrie described an intimately visceral sensation of having a “foreign body in us” to emphasise the physical and psychological discomfort she feels when using a tampon. In a similar vein to Clara's description of her blood clots pushing a tampon out, Kerrie finds that her body too pushes tampons out. The physical discomfort of not having a tampon far enough in the vagina is both physically and emotionally disruptive. Physically feeling the tampon being pushed out and psychologically fearing the tampon exiting the body leads both Clara and Kerrie to use other means of period provision. Preferring then to use period pads, Kerrie explained:

“I like to use like a certain brand, like I like to use like *Always* and stuff like that but with the wings I prefer.”

To feel secure in her menstrual management and safe that her menstrual blood will not leak, Kerrie brings us back to the theme of branded products. Linking to cultural capital, brand loyalty, and the extra protection of having a winged pad creates a sense of comfort and security for Kerrie to manage her period. Being able to choose the menstrual products she prefers is significant in how Kerrie can participate in everyday life while menstruating. However, as I discuss in the next section, Kerrie's choice of branded products can mean she has to spend more money on her period, which can disrupt her agency in product choice when money is limited (also see chapter 5).

4.3. Different Financial Costs of Menstruation

Menstruation is an everyday experience that generally requires the purchase of menstrual products. This was a key theme that emerged in the data, but so were the material differences in what women need to manage their menstruation. Some women needed to

buy multiple products for their periods which meant spending more money. This is a central concern in understanding period poverty because in every single interview my participants talked about the expense of periods. Compounding necessity with the financial cost of menstrual products puts some women in more vulnerable positions, particularly if their income is restricted.

Alexandra (49) talked about the price of menstrual products saying her menstrual flow was neither particularly heavy nor light, but for comfort she tended to use both pads and tampons when on her period. Because she chose to use two types of product, Alexandra found it “an expense because that's so expensive to buy you know.” Needing to buy both pads and tampons for each period is an expense also felt by Clara who told me:

“The price of sanitary products is ridiculous. I mean toilet rolls, a pound for two rolls, that's not too bad but then when you... when it comes to [your] period you've got to buy more toilet roll, as well as like sanitary towels. Or *Tampax* or both.”

Clara makes a powerful point that “£6 it's quite a lot for 12 little things [tampons] that are gonna go in the bin”, indicating the disposable nature of the menstrual products she (and all the women in my research) chose to use. Sarah A (29) was another participant who used two types of products to manage her “very heavy, very painful” periods. Physiological symptoms of period pain and a heavy menstrual flow were contributing factors in why Sarah A chose to use two types of menstrual product to manage her period.

I draw on these examples to highlight how needing to use two types of menstrual products (or lots of one type of product) evidently means spending more money. There is much debate and no solid evidence or serious research concerning how much a woman might spend on her period each month (Moss, 2015; Lee, 2018; Hampson, 2019). There are different statistics and results wherever you look, but they do indicate that a period costs more than just buying pads and tampons. Take Sarah A, for example, whose periods were not only heavy but also “very painful”, so she required paracetamol and ibuprofen to continue her daily life pain-free. Further, I argue that periods are so personal that there could never be an accurate amount to suggest how much the ‘average’ woman spends on her period monthly or annually. Jade (25) is a good example, as she negotiated the expense of menstruation by *not* buying menstrual products. Jade could do this because her periods have “always been quite light” and the menstrual blood is “kind of only on the loo roll when I wipe. It's so light you know” (rather than menstrual blood saturating a menstrual pad, for example). Jade chooses to bleed on cheap underwear when on her period rather than buying menstrual products.

As I have discussed, menstrual experience is incredibly diverse for the women in this study. With this knowledge it is important to understand the difference in menstrual management regarding menstrual products for individual women. Some women may use menstrual pads, others tampons, some women may use both, and others neither. Within this there is variation on quantities of products a woman needs per period depending on how light or heavy her menstrual flow is.

Additionally, the material management of menstruation is temporally influenced. Periods can vary for individual women every month. This can be due to physical symptoms including stress impacting the period, but also menstrual-specific variations from menstrual health conditions, perimenopause, menopause, and menarche creating temporal fluctuations in the physiological experience of menstruation. Some months may also require more products than others or vice versa for a range of social and cultural reasons. These include the pressures of menstrual etiquette and individual feelings of being more comfortable changing products regularly when out in public.

This diversity in cultural and corporal menstrual management is important to understand alongside not all women having the same socioeconomic resources to manage their period. Applying an intersectional frame to this understanding illuminates how women are placed differently in the UK's social structure, which influences their economic, material, and social resources. The working-class women in my study are more likely to struggle with the expense of menstrual products and suffer from period poverty (see chapter 5). For example, Sarah B (33) indicated that "it's not cheap for like tampons or like the pads" and as Lindsay (39) bluntly puts it, "they're all crucifyingly expensive."

Participants spoke about coping strategies they put in place to negotiate the expense of managing periods when money is tight. Frankie (42) explained that she "go[es] for the deals otherwise they're actually expensive", so shopping around and stocking up on products when there are financial deals on the menstrual products. As a micro-financial strategy, Margaret (60) always went to *Aldi* for her menstrual products. She said,

"The other supermarkets just tried to take the mickey out of it. They think that we'd spend that money. 'Cos you know a lot of people haven't got that much money."

And many participants did not have "that much money" to spend on their period products. This came up in my interview with Polly (47) who explained to me that:

"Some of the sanitary towels, I mean 3, 4 pound for a pack of sanitary towels? I just don't understand why they're so expensive. And like you say to someone like me, I'll go to supermarket and I'll go right they're 25 pence or they're 75

pence, I'll get them over spending 3 pound. 'Cos I haven't got 3 pound to spend on them."

Here Polly highlights the expense of periods as well as the variation in how much different menstrual products cost (which depends on the type and brand of product). Polly describes herself as lucky because she received working tax credits when she knows that many women struggle with the cost of menstrual products. This narrative of luck hides the structured issues of the cracks in the welfare state but also illustrates the very real issue that period poverty is for women on low (or no) incomes. As Polly said: "there is a poverty. There is a period poverty." I explore lived experiences of period poverty in more detail in the next two chapters.

4.4. Chapter Conclusion

Several themes emerge in this chapter. Firstly, the diverse and individual experiences of menstruation. This leads us onto two intertwined themes of security and safety in the type and brand of menstrual products and the importance of choice. Finally, we see that menstruation is expensive. Individual women have different periods therefore require different products and materials to manage their periods. Individuals having a choice in menstrual products to manage menstruation in line with their corporeal experiences is critical.

Keenly brought to the forefront of discussion is how women's bodies are different and how all women experience menstruation differently. As such, how women cope with and navigate period poverty is intensely personal and individual. Assuming all women manage their periods the same ignores the individuality of corporeal, emotional, and sociocultural experiences of menstruating women. This is particularly important in my analytical discussion in chapter 8, which examines the grassroots support for menstruating women. The diversity of menstruation is a theme that must be remembered as threaded throughout the findings and analysis chapters of this thesis. Henceforth, in the following chapters I explore experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice in more detail through participant stories.

Chapter 5. Money and Mess: Experiences of Period Poverty

This chapter uses empirical data to highlight and explore several issues identified with women's experiences of period poverty. As I argued in chapter 1, period poverty because of a lack of money may seem like an obvious argument, however no one is making it in academic debate. Scholarly calls for expanding the UK definition of period poverty to be more than money (Williams *et al.*, 2022) and focussing on tackling stigma (Bobel and Fahs, 2020) are important, but for the women in my research money was the biggest barrier and therefore must receive central attention.

Firstly, this chapter introduces how period poverty is about access to money. Money was identified as the biggest barrier for working-class women's ability to afford and access materials for their periods. Women's access to money is closely associated with their employment status, and I explore how participants on Universal Credit income felt an intense financial stretching when menstruating.

Secondly – and an overarching theme throughout the analysis chapters – I conceptualise period poverty as a socioeconomic experience on a spectrum. By this I mean that women can fall in and out of period poverty over their lives depending on their financial circumstance and menstrual experiences. Understanding period poverty as a spectrum highlights how the temporal and contextual shifting of capitals create different experiences of period poverty. This also begins to inform our understanding of menstrual injustice. It is unjust that women experience temporally episodic struggles in affording menstrual products, and such experiences intersect with other factors, not just money. As a temporal and capital-based spectrum, period poverty can be seen to be a part of the wider issue of menstrual injustice because there are different experiences of it.

I thirdly examine how restricted money leads to a messy materiality for women to navigate their periods without adequate materials. I explore some of the socio-material coping strategies women took to negotiate this messy materiality to maintain respectability. Within this theme, the embodiment of menstrual crankiness is key to understanding women's actions in becoming respectable menstruating women.

Finally, I present a case study of two middle-class participants' one-off experiences of period poverty. I say one-off, because of the important spectrum of period poverty identified. The working-class women in this research fell in and out of period poverty over their lifecourse. The middle-class participants, however, only experienced period poverty on one occasion. Exploring this, I provide a consideration of the symbolic inequalities of period poverty, brought close attention to by middle-class culture and these two participants' stories.

5.1. A Lack of Money

Money, or specifically a lack of money, was identified as the biggest barrier for the women in my study to get hold of menstrual products. For most of the women I interviewed, they found themselves in period poverty because they could not afford to buy menstrual products out of their own income. This was intimately connected to being out of work and therefore being on Universal Credit (which has a standard monthly income of £334: DWP, 2022). However, this lack of money for menstrual products is not continuous. It is an episodic experience women drift in and out of depending on their financial and employment circumstances. For example, Marie (29) reflected on her experience of period poverty as occurring,

“whenever I’m out of work... see even going back about 8 year or so now. And when you’re not working you’re trying to manage on benefits. It’s really hard [...] I get paid and then by the end the next week, by the time I’ve paid bills and bought enough food in and things like that you’re struggling again. And then having to factor in buying [menstrual] products like that... its... it doesn’t seem enough.”

For Marie, experiencing period poverty fluctuates with unemployment, thus limiting money for menstrual products along with her other essential expenses on a Universal Credit income. Episodes of period poverty over 8 years reveals a temporal and contextually specific financial stretching related to the cyclical occurrence of menstruation.

Similarly, Samantha (36) discussed that she’s “had times like all through since when I started me periods [that] I haven’t been able to get any pads because I haven’t had the money.” Linking to the argument made in the previous chapter about the expense of menstruation, Samantha said the biggest barrier was a lack of money and that menstrual products are:

“Too expensive. ‘Cos you buy the cheap ones and they are rubbish and it feels like I’m wearing a nappy. [...] And they’re not very good neither. They’re not very absorbent. See, I have to go for the more expensive ones which ... I mean what is it 3, 4 pound for a pack of 10... when you go through 10 in a day maybes, do you know what I mean like ... if I’m heavy it’s more. So it’s quite expensive.”

Bringing an embodied lens to the theme of menstrual diversity and the importance of choice from the previous chapter, Samantha prefers to use pads to manage her period and finds that the cheaper (often non-branded) menstrual pads are not as effective at absorbing her menstrual flow. They also make Samantha very aware of her period and self-conscious about the fact that she is wearing a pad. She feels like she’s “wearing a nappy” – which is a familiar feeling amongst many of the participants, creating a sense of paranoia about others

knowing they're on their period. Samantha notes that she goes through more of the cheaper pads than she would the more expensive, better-quality pads she would prefer to use but cannot afford to buy. The struggle to adequately manage her period because of the expense of menstrual products is made more difficult when Samantha's period is heavy which she says happens "now and again. I might get it where it's really really heavy, but it's not normally like that". The uncertainty of whether Samantha's period will be heavy that month, along with a limited Universal Credit income, and a deeply ingrained embarrassment about the type of menstrual pads she can afford on a low income means that it is emotionally and physically difficult to plan and prepare for a heavier period in which she would need more menstrual pads.

I use Samantha and Marie's experiences to demonstrate how period poverty is on a spectrum of experience. We see the combination of limited money and menstrual experience creating circumstances of struggle which ebb and flow over their lifecourse. This powerfully illuminates the spectrum of period poverty experience, especially the role money plays in creating intermittent struggle when being out of work. Understanding menstruation as an extra but essential expense in women's lives highlights an intensified gendered financial precarity and stretching at play when women are in period poverty because of monetary restrictions.

In addition, a clear emerging theme in Marie and Samantha's experience is how Universal Credit does not provide enough money to cover the extra essentials of menstrual products. Particularly relevant for my research is the COVID-19 health pandemic, which saw a huge increase in Universal Credit claimants and people falling into vulnerable situations (DWP, 2022a). Kaylee (25) was one participant whose experiences of period poverty were intensified during the pandemic because of the impact it had on her finding work. Kaylee explained that without work she struggles to afford menstrual products because she has limited money:

"I'm currently looking for work [and] obviously the circumstances at the moment are a bit difficult 'cos my daughter's out of school and things like that so [...] yeh [I] claim Universal Credit. [And] there has been quite a lot of times [in period poverty] and I think that's one of the reasons why I had to get in touch with the foodbank as well, because I didn't have any [tampons]."

Kaylee is one of many foodbank recipients I spoke to for the research. However, she is the *only* woman who explicitly noted that one of the main reasons she contacted the foodbank was because of period poverty. Kaylee experienced period poverty because of a lack of money from the compounding circumstances of the pandemic, being on Universal Credit, and increased childcare responsibilities limiting her ability to work. These limitations restricted Kaylee's ability to participate in everyday life because she does not have access to

menstrual products to feel secure in her menstruating body. I note that even before the pandemic, Kaylee expressed how:

“There have been a few times I haven’t had any [menstrual products] and it’s a nightmare [...] a couple of times I’ve had to use toilet roll until I’ve got some y’know, things like that. And it’s not nice [...] And it’s just anything that you can try and get hold of at that time so it’s, yeh it’s really awkward and uncomfortable.”

Describing period poverty as a “nightmare” indicates a strong emotional response to being in period poverty because of a lack of money. Feeling “awkward and uncomfortable” in using toilet paper because she did not have the money for menstrual products suggests an embodied reaction to the intermingling emotions of shame and embarrassment manifest through experiences of being in poverty and having her period. Kaylee’s feelings are linked to ideologies of respectability and feeling able to participate in everyday life. Without menstrual products, Kaylee cannot access a level of respectability where she feels comfortable enough to participate in her normal everyday life, like taking her daughter to the park or visiting her friend’s house. Menstrual products are important for respectability and to mitigate emotional responses to periods as a nightmare.

Universal Credit incomes are already intensely stretched and meticulously managed by people living in austere conditions, but there is a limited academic and public understanding of how menstrual products are essential items putting already low incomes under further strain. Sarah A (29) described how everyday essentials including rent, energy bills, food, and clothing for her young sons are just about covered by her Universal Credit income. When talking about affording menstrual products she explained that:

“Having to fend for myself, it has been a bit of a struggle yeh. Even just affording like day-to-day things. Do you know what I mean? The gas and the electric and food and stuff like that. But [I have struggled with] affording [menstrual products], definitely. It gets quite expensive [...] Then when you have to use two products it’s a bit of a pain in the backside. Yeah there’s been a few times where I’ve come on and I’ve not had any in the house, and then I’ve not really had any money to get any so. I’m sure we’ve all done it, like the tissue erm, there’s been times where I’ve had to use tissue to try and get some money together to be able to get some and... there’s been times like that unfortunately.”

As discussed in the previous chapter (chapter 4), Sarah A uses two types of menstrual products, highlighting the extra financial strain on top of an already stretched income. Sarah A also shows that with restricted money, navigating period poverty requires intimate material navigation. Not having money to buy menstrual products entails a messy

materiality of period poverty: having to use toilet paper as a makeshift menstrual pad when more suitable purpose-made absorbent products were economically unavailable. Note that Kaylee also spoke of using toilet paper as an interim measure. A combination of the cost of menstruation along with low incomes leave the working-class women in this research having to find coping strategies to manage their periods, requiring intricate skills of embodied agency, domestic management, and intimate ingenuity to get by (Patrick, 2014). This is a theme I develop in the next section.

I now move onto a discussion of the everyday socio-material navigation of period poverty. In this, I explore the messy materialities of period poverty as an intimate everyday experience for the women in this research.

5.2. Messy Materiality: Makeshift Menstrual Products

My data revealed how the impact of not being able to afford menstrual products is an everyday reality where makeshift materials were used as an interim measure to absorb women's menstrual flow. A messy materiality of the body, blood, clots, and a range of makeshift materials including toilet paper, newspaper, and jumpers, is at play in the intimately embodied lived experiences of participants. Toilet paper was by far the most cited interim material for managing menstruation when in period poverty and I pay particular attention to the socio-material role of toilet paper as a tool of negotiating respectability in period poverty in this section.

Drawing on the stories of three women, I highlight how respectability cuts across period poverty experience. This is a complex relationship between feeling the pull of menstrual etiquette to be respectable, but also recognising that periods are not always easy and can be messy, which can restrict the ability to feel respectable. This is particularly so when women do not have the money for the menstrual products to provide a sense of respectability. Revealing the messy materiality of period poverty is significant to show how women's everyday lives and socioemotional response to participating in everyday life is disrupted by access (or lack of access) to capital. It also highlights the complex relationship between respectability and menstrual etiquette: menstrual etiquette is sometimes needed for women to perceive themselves as respectable (also see chapter 8).

Interlinked with limited financial capital, Polly experienced period poverty as a young woman in London. Polly explained that:

“yeh umm when I was at university so I was 17, 18... I got a grant. I was living in London but I didn't get a bursary from [my local] council, so I only got a grand to live on. For a whole year. [...] And I [was] trying to find a job in London at the time and it was that thing of, you know, going into restaurants or going into

McDonald's and stealing the toilet roll 'cos you got nothing else to use *sigh*. And you know it's that thing, that feeling of, its being tight with money but having to rethink your whole – right mum's not here to buy them, er you know I, I, in them times you didn't have bank transfers and when I went to London I'd actually fallen out with ma parents so it wasn't like I could phone 'em and just go 'oh mum can you put some money in the bank' and... so it's that thing I haven't nothing."

With limited income, Polly had to create makeshift period pads out of toilet roll taken from public toilets in restaurants. On a material level, Polly used toilet paper to absorb her menstrual flow when she did not have money to access menstrual products. On a social level, the toilet roll Polly used was from public toilets and supposedly available to everyone. Despite taking toilet roll from public toilets which are free for anyone's use, Polly described this as "stealing", implying a sense of shame and wrongdoing in having to use toilet roll from a public space to absorb her menstrual flow. "Stealing" suggests feelings of worthlessness and disruption to a sense of self as respectable; respectable women do not steal toilet roll because respectable women have menstrual products and are clean. Polly continued to explain that,

"you know even *pause* I've never shop lifted but I've gone into a green grocers and asked for that day's vegetables that had gone [off] because I've just not had the money."

Polly paused, unsure whether to open her story up to describe how she coped on a low income, asking for rotting food that would not be sold and having to use toilet roll from McDonald's to manage her period. The conflict between Polly explaining that she had never shoplifted yet still using the word "stealing" suggests an internal battle between the sense of shame Polly feels when make-shifting a period pad (as if using public toilet roll for anything but its intended use – wiping urine and faeces – is a crime) and her moral compass.

There is a complex socio-material relationship between social stigma and material necessity which is embodied by women navigating period poverty. Polly's story highlights the lived experience of negotiating shame about her menstruation and class position alongside materially managing the 'mess' of her period blood. There is pressure from not being able to manage her period in the material ways she would like, or as expected in norms of menstrual etiquette, and socioemotional responses to ideologies of unclean working-class menstruating women. This reality has intimate impacts upon Polly's sense of worth and respectability.

One of the biggest impacts of the messy materiality of makeshift menstrual products was the impact on Polly's mental health. Polly draws attention to this subtly with her perception

of stealing toilet paper from public spaces, but also more directly to explore how period poverty creates a fragility in her mental health.

“...even in my 30s and my 40s I’ve been in the same situation. Like being on the sick, there was a time when I had er... all my benefits were stopped for 7 months [and] they didn’t care that no money was coming in and I’m, I’m nearly losing my flat from the council ‘cos there’s no housing benefit to pay. I was really bad, like, mentally. I dug myself in for a long time and I couldn’t get out. And it’s that thing that my mental health was stopping us going out the door but [...] then I was going out the door because I’m going to steal toilet roll from a pub or from a restaurant, from McDonald’s. Just going in and going to the toilet because there’s nothing... there’s no other way I could’ve had sanitary towels.”

Literature exploring how living on Universal Credit and benefit sanctions impact the poorest households in significant ways has not yet explored the gendered specifics of managing menstruation when benefits are sanctioned (see relevant literature reviewed in chapter 2). In Polly’s case, her Disability and Sickness benefits were sanctioned for 7 months, risking her losing her home. Polly did not detail the reasons why she received these specific benefits, but implies she experienced a prolonged experience of poor mental health, possibly depression, where she struggled to get out. During this time Polly still had her period and emphasises that she had to go to a pub or restaurant to steal toilet roll as a coping mechanism.

Narratives of ‘coping’ have been identified as tools in normalising socioeconomic hardship in research of the lived experiences of austerity (Chase and Walker, 2013; Shildrick and Macdonald, 2013). Here, Polly’s ability to cope with very restricted money is coupled with difficult but intimately embodied decisions of managing her period with toilet paper. Building on this literature, coping by using public toilet materials is normalised by Polly within the frame of stealing, suggesting a deeper sense of shame around her coping strategy. In achieving respectability, self-worth, and a sense of social value, Polly’s moral boundaries must change to physically be able to negotiate the messy materiality of menstruating, navigate expectations of menstrual etiquette to avoid stigmatisation, and negotiate the emotions around living in poverty. Again, the temporal elements of period poverty as a spectrum over the lifecourse are highlighted with Polly falling in and out of period poverty as a student, then in her 30s and 40s. Polly sees her actions as stealing but also recognises they are necessary acts to gain a personal sense of respectability when experiencing period poverty.

An important point raised here is how restricted money limits the ability to access the fundamental basic of toilet roll. Polly was having to go to public toilets in order to access the toilet roll she did not have in her home. This speaks to a human rights issue of access to

basic sanitation (WHO/UNICEF, 2012; Tull, 2019). Without access to basic sanitation, how could Polly manage her period in a safe space such as her own home? Polly felt stuck without menstrual products yet also pressured to leave her home to access materials for menstruation. The spatial negotiations are intertwined with compounding pressures of respectability, menstrual etiquette, and stigmatised positions of being a working-class menstruating woman. Here the pernicious side of the concept of respectability is raised through the interaction of menstrual shame and class shame. Polly felt shame in two ways – periods and poverty – which exacerbated problems she experienced with her mental health and damaged the sense of dignity in which she could cope with her situation. Respectability was dependent on the dignified, controlled materiality of menstrual products and adhering to menstrual etiquette.

Dignity is a heavily debated concept in menstruation research. Whilst some scholars find the term symbolically significant in its detriment to menstruators (a dignified period suggesting the existence of an undignified period and thus menstruation as undignified and polluting: Bobel (2019)), I find the term a useful concept in exploring the socio-material inequalities and lived experience of such inequalities in period poverty (Carneiro, 2021). More importantly perhaps, dignity was a significant theme in how participants conceptualised their position as working-class menstruating women. Dignity in terms of feeling dignified in one's ability to manage their period (using menstrual products rather than toilet paper) and in terms of cleanliness (feeling clean whilst on their period) is valuable to understand the language and meaning working-class women associate with their experiences in period poverty.

Nicola (36) highlights how the messy materiality of her experiences of period poverty felt as though her dignity had been stripped from her:

“... I had no confidence, I had no ... like I was sad. I felt... I felt dirty. I felt... it was horrible, it was really not nice. I didn't want to go out, I didn't want anyone to come inside either actually. And I just didn't want to be part of the world that day. If I could have just literally hid in a cupboard I probably would have hid in a cupboard until it was over. It wasn't nice. Takes me dignity, took me dignity and everything.”

Nichola articulated her experience in an incredibly powerful way. Having a period without menstrual products to manage it eroded both Nichola and Polly's sense of dignity, impacted their mental health, damaged how they perceived themselves and their bodies, and disrupted their everyday lives in emotional and sociospatial ways. Nichola “would have hid in a cupboard until it was over”, choosing to hide herself from the world rather than confront the shame and embarrassment that was expected, normalised, and experienced through menstrual taboo in Western society. As seen earlier, Polly spoke about how her

mental health restricted her mobility, but she was forced by period poverty and a messy materiality to leave her home to 'steal' toilet roll. Like Nichola, Polly indicates that if she could have hidden from the world she would have.

The spatial implications are made apparent for working-class women navigating period poverty with narratives of hiding from the world built around the importance of feeling clean, dignified, and respectable. Dirt-related taboo interacts with sociospatial expectations of society as ordered, clean, and controlled (Douglas, 2002). Menstrual etiquette and the legacy of the excessive, contagious working-class woman play a role in psychosocial experience of women in period poverty seeking respectability (see my argument developed from literature in chapter 2). Psychosocially, the inability to manage their menstrual flow with adequate materials impacts their mental health and sense of dignity. Limited access to money, cultural capital, and a disrupted internal sense of respectability complicates women's navigation of public and private space. As Nichola highlights, she did not want to leave her private space because she felt undignified. Her everyday mobility through social space was disrupted by the messy materiality of menstruating when capital is restricted, and respectability is unattainable.

Respectability is related to ideologies of dignity and feelings of cleanliness. Access to washing and sanitation infrastructure has a deep impact upon women's sense of self and relationship with their bodies and their bodies-in-society (Tull, 2019). As I discussed through the literature review (chapter 2), there are longstanding parallel discourses of hygiene and dirt running through menstruation and social class research. Although the stigmatised associations between 'hygiene', periods, and class have been critiqued and rejected by scholars, their combination has not been discussed. The everyday lived experience of feeling dirty and unclean came across in my interviews and is fundamentally important for my participants in making meaning about and understanding their situation of period poverty and respectability.

Kerrie (40) is another participant who identified dignity and hygiene as important embodied feelings in her lived experience of coping with period poverty. At the time of our encounter, Kerrie's Universal Credit had recently been sanctioned and she had lost her council house a year and a half prior to our interview. Kerrie contacted me after receiving a leaflet advertising my research from a local soup kitchen and explained that she receives help for both food and menstrual products from the soup kitchen. I asked Kerrie if she could reflect on not being able to get menstrual products:

"So yeah like I say when I lost the house and stuff, and like me money got stopped erm, I got sanctioned erm so erm, obviously I didn't, I didn't have money to buy stuff [period pads] ... and there's been times... I've had to use like toilet roll yeah."

Like many of the women I spoke to, money from Universal Credit was the biggest struggle for Kerrie in her ability to afford menstrual products and in response she had to use toilet roll as a makeshift measure to manage her menstrual flow. Complicating this, however, was Kerrie's sociospatial negotiations of period poverty as a homeless woman (see chapter 7 for detailed discussion of period poverty and homelessness). Kerrie had to adopt intimately embodied coping strategies, and ones she perceived as 'dirty' to work to be a respectable working-class woman. Kerrie explained that,

“...sometimes, sometimes I had to wear like pads for a little bit longer. You know, I mean erm because obviously I didn't have like, I didn't have the money you know so I had to wear a pad for a little bit longer than what I would usually wear them for now [...] when I had to wear them for a little bit longer and that it just, it made us feel like dirty, you know like ah it was hard, it's ... because I was going to the toilet and I was thinking oh God I can't, I can't change because I haven't got enough to last us you know. Erm and it made us feel like more like dirtier than it would do normal, do you know what I mean?”

Kerrie's experience here illuminates feelings of being “dirty”. The importance of feeling clean is a central concern for Kerrie (and other participants), emphasising how hygiene is a key method through which women position themselves to cope with and negotiate period poverty. When Kerrie was made homeless, she had to grapple with managing a period without access to money for menstrual products or basic sanitation facilities to feel clean. To regain a sense of self-worth and value, Kerrie seeks moral order and care for herself in feeling hygienic and clean (Douglas, 2002). I emphasise that both Kerrie and Nichola spoke about feeling “dirty” when they could not afford and did not have menstrual products to deal with their period, and that is a completely valid feeling.

This data assists in developing my argument which diverts from Bobel and Fah's (2020) claims of a bloodless respectability. Again, I emphasise that menstrual products are an important part of feelings of cleanliness and respectability for Kerrie, Nichola and all my other participants. Furthermore, I take a menstrual cranky approach to Kerrie and Nichola's feelings of dirtiness when trying to manage their periods without adequate material or money. A cranky frame is valuable in acknowledging the validity of these feelings and illuminates deeper understandings of the impact period poverty has on women's physical and mental wellbeing. Intersecting the body, gender, and class (and other axes of identity if relevant) reflects the value of conceptualising hygiene in this way as it acts to find (moral) order against narratives of the working-class as dirty and disorderly, and care through the lens of menstrual management and a sense of worth in being and feeling clean (Douglas, 2002).

For women in period poverty, keeping clean is important because they can have agency over their body at the same time that menstruation takes its own path of agency of the body (Fingerson, 2005). Pointing back to Polly's changing moral boundaries, hygiene and dignity are intimately related but complexly negotiated. Throughout my interviews, my participants described their periods as "a nightmare", "horrible", "embarrassing" and "bloody awful", language that does not scream positivity. I am not suggesting that periods are only "bloody awful", however, sugar-coating and neglecting the lived experiences of pain, blood, clots, discharge, and the general physical and psychological discomfort of periods cannot be ignored. Cleanliness and hygiene are a part of feeling comfortable when menstrual experience may be uncomfortable and messy. This is especially pertinent in the psychosocial and sociospatial context of period poverty and for the women in my study who felt they "cannae go [out] coz I would be bleeding all over" (as Nichola put it).

5.3. Circumstantial Experiences of Period Poverty

So far, this chapter has focused on working-class women's messy experiences with restricted money on Universal Credit incomes and the emergent theme of how period poverty is a spectrum of experience. Most women in this research were working-class, however a handful identified as middle-class. Of those who identified themselves as middle-class, two women had experiences of period poverty when they were younger. Abby and Lindsay chose to participate in the research because they felt their experiences were unusual and likely forgotten, or at least not expected to be similar to the majority of experiences of period poverty.

Their experiences highlight how women can fall in and out of period poverty at different times of their lives in different circumstances. As highlighted in the previous two sections, the working-class women I spoke to fell into period poverty several times over their lifecourse. Abby and Lindsay had experienced period poverty only once in their life. As I go on to discuss, these standalone experiences signify how period poverty is a class issue with nuance in negotiating stigma and taboo, which creates physical and symbolic constraints for (middle class) women who may never have expected to find themselves in such a position or know how to ask for help. A lack of money results in an intimate social and personal struggle of symbolic, cultural, and social capital as a middle-class woman experiencing period poverty in a middle-class milieu.

I focus more on the symbolic here, exploring the interaction of suddenly-restricted money with the impact of restricted symbolic cultural and social capital when dealing with the messy materiality of period poverty. Abby and Lindsay's experiences are interesting to explore here as their position as middle-class women illuminate more explicitly how social and cultural capital are related to experiences of period poverty. The significance of respectability is highlighted in Abby and Lindsay's experiences in particular, with them both

plunging from a position of 'natural' respectability to needing to work for respectability on their periods with restricted capital. Lindsay and Abby experienced a material struggle (not having menstrual products) but also a symbolic struggle of being middle-class without the capital to perform their class or manage their period in line with middle-class expectations.

An important point I develop in this section is how socioemotional invocations of (menstrual) shame and embarrassment act as evaluating judgements – as forms of emotional reasoning – for how women are treated (or think of themselves) in relation to what they value. As Sayer (2016, p. 959) powerfully argues: 'one of the most important features of class inequalities is that they present people with unequal bases for respect, not just by being objects of unwarranted respect or disdain, but as having unequal access to the practices and goods that allow them unwarranted respect or conditional recognition'. Unequal access to materials and practices results in class inequalities related to social ideas of respect. Those without access to perform normative ideologies through materials, goods, practices and the 'right' morals therefore lack social worth (Sayer, 2002; Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Sayer, 2016). I explore this in the context of a middle-class milieu through Abby and Lindsay's stories.

The following case studies of Lindsay and Abby illustrate this point in the next two sections. Lindsay's experiences speak strongly to the impact of restricted cultural capital period poverty can lead to. Abby's experiences are heavily rooted in a lack of social capital and feelings of menstrual shame. I bring through the concept of menstrual crankiness and argument made about the messy materiality of period poverty to demonstrate the embodied struggle of limited money. Through an in-depth analysis of Abby and Lindsay's experiences of period poverty we can more deeply understand the symbolic and intensified socioemotional inequalities at play for women in period poverty.

5.3.1. Lindsay: Cultural Capital and Taste

Lindsay (39) was drawn to talk to me for the research because of the specific use of the word 'poverty' and researching 'period poverty'. It was through the association of 'period poverty' and struggling to afford menstrual products that Lindsay came to identify her experience when she was younger as being in period poverty. I asked Lindsay what her periods were like, to which she explained that her periods "are still roughly, you know about four days, heavier in the middle" and that she identified as "close enough to a monthly cycle". At the time of our conversation, Lindsay said that she had been fitted with the coil and had tried a range of different oral and hormonal contraceptives to varying degrees of success. The coil allowed Lindsay to have what she thought of as a regular period without the hormonal side effects she had experienced on other forms of contraception. Just as her periods had evolved, so had her preference and choice in products Lindsay preferred to manage her menstrual flow with.

“I started with pads and then applicator [tampons] and then ... in time, it would have been partly price as well I mean I left school at 16 and then went to work away... I'm assuming my mum kind of furnished me with you know sanitary products, tampons or whatever before then and then when it was up to me... and actually because that job was so poorly paid, one of the reasons my eye caught [your] survey was because I used rolled up tissue paper as tampons and pads for quite a long time [...] because I couldn't afford [them] and actually I was earning 35 quid a week. You know I mean I had me rent paid for because they had accommodation on site but that was it.”

It was during this time in her youth that Lindsay experienced what she now recognises as period poverty. Despite having her rent paid for, the £35 a week earned was not enough for Lindsay to afford menstrual products. At the time, Lindsay experienced a key shift in the sociocultural expectations of managing her period in relation to cultural taste and social capital. For Lindsay's colleagues, £35 was described as pocket money for young people from wealthier families, but for Lindsay,

“it was like what I lived on so maybe I also got into the habit of non-applicator tampons because I was fashioning non applicator tampons out of toilet roll for a long time”.

The evolution of Lindsay's preference to using non-applicator tampons was influenced by a lack of money. There is also recognition of her middle-class peers being more economically secure which places Lindsay in a shifting sociocultural milieu where she is positioned differently from her peers. This created internal conflicts between knowing she needed tampons for her period but also wanting to be able to fit in and spend time with her colleagues and friends outside of work. Lindsay explained that “especially [being] young if you wanna... you know having so little money anyway and if you can avoid an expense you know in the same way you used to jump the Metro [or] I used to take cans out with us because I couldn't afford to be drinking all day in a pub with my friends” then she would choose social activities and participation with peers over tampons. Prioritising her social and mental wellbeing, Lindsay chose to construct her own tampons out of toilet paper to be able to participate in her own and her peers' everyday social lives.

Lindsay expressed that “100% it was money” when I asked her what she found the biggest barrier to getting the tampons she needed during this time of her life was. Even in work, Lindsay felt the financial strain of menstrual products. Reflecting on the price of menstrual products in some shops now, Lindsay told me that,

“...even though I can afford it now 10 times over it still makes me wince that rather than paying 75p for 16 tampons, of my choice, I'm paying a fiver for 12.

And I just think... and it just makes me think about how once upon a time that would have been a portion of my wage, you know an unsurmountable portion. And I... and I mean I don't know if things have gotten slightly better because there's more discount budget stores. I don't know if when I was younger because I'm quite sort of middle class, maybe I didn't realise but you didn't have to shop in *Boots*, that you didn't have to shop in *Superdrug*... erm but certainly unbranded or non-branded or own-brand kind of, you know the *Happy Shopper* equivalent or whatever, sanitary product were a massive difference. Or maybe not knowing about their existence. So if you are just thinking of brands... right what do I need? I need *Tampax* or *Lilets* and that's it. And they're all crucifyingly expensive. They're like a meal. That's the cost of a dinner for me, do you know what I mean? For a long time er... rather than actually I could probably just about scrounge 75p together for a box of tampons which might not quite last me a full period but you know a lot better. So yes it was absolutely, it was all about money.”

Identifying herself as middle-class, Lindsay explores how she would buy her tampons from the more expensive high street pharmacies frequented by middle-class women, rather than from the discount stores (Lawler, 2005a). A mixture of middle-class taste for branded products and no awareness of budget discount stores, Lindsay reflects on how a pack of tampons was a huge amount of her £35 weekly wage. The legacy of in-work (period) poverty as a young woman and her embodied negotiation of the messy materiality of menstruation with limited money shifted Lindsay's expectations of menstrual management and her cultural capital evolved to choosing cheaper non-applicator tampons rather than a more expensive type and brand of tampon.

With both the middle-class cultural expectation of having to buy branded menstrual products as well as a low income and no support from her family, Lindsay explained that “it's [a] hidden cost. That was exactly my problem. It was a hidden expense that I didn't feel I had money for” to highlight the silenced and hidden nature of menstruation and menstrual management, and the reality of in-work poverty experienced by women (Macleavy, 2011; Chrisler, 2013; Patrick, 2014; Newton, 2016; MacDonald, 2018a).

I asked Lindsay, alongside “fashioning non applicator tampons out of toilet roll”, how else she coped with her experiences of managing her period with limited resources and money for products:

“...well [I] just got used to it [...] if I was in a position to palm [steal], and I was not exactly sneaky, but I would palm because I lived with a couple of other lasses as well, erm if I was ever in a situation where they were available and you could ask somebody, you know at a friend's house and I'd go and take one but then I'd

go and take another couple as well. Erm, and it was just... just aye it's just messy [...] I mean it's effective enough but not really ideal.”

Recognising the “messy” and literally bloody materiality of navigating period poverty, the corporeal lived experience of having to deal with uncontrollable excretion of menstrual blood highlights the reality of what women must physically deal with when they do not have access to the expected materials of menstrual management. Further, a feeling of shame is inherent in this ‘mess’ and Lindsay’s explanation of her experience through her need to steal tampons from her friends. I point back to Polly’s feelings of shame when ‘stealing’ toilet roll, (section 5.1 of this chapter), Lindsay experiences a similar situation, the difference being that Lindsay had people to ask. However, asking her middle-class friends outright for more than one tampon would expose her vulnerability in period poverty and disadvantage her middle-class social position and feeling of self-worth because she would have to admit she did not have the money to afford the basics of tampons and thus was no longer perceived as respectable.

As scholar Andrew Sayer (2016) points out, like all emotions shame is *about* something. It is a response to (assumed) failure. Shame is both social and private and is often an affective response to imagined or actual views of others, as well as a deeply personal, private, and reflexive emotion involving evaluation of the self by the self (Sayer, 2016). Lindsay’s feelings of shame are cultivated through not being able to afford the necessities her middle-class friends could afford. It is a deeply classed sense of shame produced in tandem with menstrual stigma. Further, reflecting on the wider sociocultural context of her experience of period poverty and coping strategies, Lindsay reminisced:

“And I suppose at that time ... it was sort of... you know women talking about their bodies, their periods a bit in the late 90s, you know being reasonably liberated but it wouldn't have occurred to me like... it was just something else...it was something I had to deal with. You know periods, I could sort of like busk you know, sort of improvise a bit. Beg, borrow, steal [...] and I suppose definitely ... a certain amount of silence surrounding it but also, I think for me is that I might have an assumption that this is my problem and I have to deal with it. And not saying it's something I can ask for help for. Or should or whatever.”

Reflecting on a “reasonably liberated” time for women to openly talk about their bodies and periods, Lindsay still felt that her personal experience of her period was incredibly private. Like many of the other women in this study found, periods are a private experience that are not openly talked about. A consequence of sociocultural expectations of menstrual etiquette and menstrual taboo, keeping experiences of period poverty hidden limits the understanding of how widespread the issue is, how long the issue has been around for, and creates a sense of normality for women experiencing period poverty. Lindsay emphasised

that she felt “this is my problem and I have to deal with it”. The privacy of periods and assumptions that every woman experiences the same problems and struggles with affording period products leave women in situations where they feel like they cannot ask for help because there is no understanding that there is an issue or problem in the first place.

I argue that Lindsay’s position as a middle-class woman exacerbated a sociocultural classed struggle of asking for help. For the working-class women I spoke to, experiences of their mothers being unable to afford menstrual products; experiences of period poverty from a young age; experiences of consistently being on a low income with a family to feed; and struggling to afford period products for their daughters as well as themselves, are common and regular (albeit private and separate) experiences. Furthermore, there is a strong sense of family, friends, community, and neighbourhood support in being able to ask for money for menstrual products, or the products themselves (see chapter 8). Lindsay’s middle-class upbringing, however, had no exposure to such everyday lived struggle regarding periods.

Drawing on Diane Reay’s (2005a) ‘psychic economy’ of class, how we think and feel about everyday activities creates classed identities, and vice versa this class thinking generates classed practices. Lindsay constructed an ideology of classed practices through a sociocultural assumption of buying ‘middle-class’ branded menstrual products from ‘middle-class’ stores. Finding herself in a position of restricted income led to restricted access to cultural capital of middle-class menstrual management strategies, as well as restricted social capital through the blurring of the psychic economy of class. Period poverty blurred the boundaries of classed practices and intensified class-based feelings of shame and taboo in relation to the inability to manage menstruation in a middle-class way.

Navigating the psychic economy of class in our interview, Lindsay reflected on her feelings of shame and the privacy of periods exacerbating the stigma that made menstrual products so difficult to ask for.

“And I think it was only because I was away from home and had a job and it didn't occur to me that I could ask for help. I mean I'm thinking back, the position I was in, I could have probably gone to my employer [and said] I only get paid £35 a week [can] you help me out here? Because she was a woman but the, the stigma, that, not shame, but the sort of... I don't know. It's private. And also, you know because I'd left home and I was working away from home albeit only at 17 or whatever I just ... it didn't occur to me that I could ask for help or that it wasn't normal particularly what I was doing. Or if not not normal, not avoidable.”

The sense of leaving her middle-class home, having taken for granted her cultural taste for the branded menstrual products that were always available there, and the idea that she

could no longer ask her parents or anybody else for help was shrouded in the stigma and privacy around periods, despite Lindsay's middle-class recollection of the late 90s as "reasonably liberated" for women.

In some ways Lindsay hinted at knowing it was not 'normal' to be using toilet roll as a tampon, but she did not recognise at the time (due to a lack of awareness of period poverty as a social issue and the menstrual etiquette of silencing menstruation) that it was an avoidable action. Language plays a key role in cultural capital here, for it was only until the association of her experience and the language of this research project that Lindsay began a deeper process of class reimagination in the context of her circumstantial experience of period poverty. The embeddedness of menstrual etiquette and shame within Lindsay's experience is stark and made starker with period poverty causing a shift in her psychic economy and relationship to social capital, cultural capital, and money.

5.3.2. Abby: Social Capital and Shame

As we saw in Lindsay's account, the 'psychic economy' profoundly contributes to how we act, think, feel, and the ways that we are and behave in terms of classed menstrual practice (Lawler, 2005a; Reay, 2005a). I expand on this moving into a discussion of Abby's experiences of period poverty when she was an undergraduate student. Abby was subject to the compounding social forces of menstrual etiquette and class struggle through having unequal access to the symbolic capital, social capital, and money her middle-class peers had access to for menstrual management and a sense of respectability.

Exploring the impact of period poverty on social capital, Abby expressed feelings of shame and embarrassment in asking for help when she experienced period poverty during her first year of higher education. Abby (31) explained that she had come from a relatively wealthy middle-class background with some years of private education. When the economy crashed in 2008, the recession hugely impacted Abby's family, with the company her stepfather worked for going into liquidation. Abby explained that,

"...suddenly basically [we] had all these outgoings like each month. Like the mortgage was like loads and it was just like a really expensive kind of living, 'cos I also have a brother and sister too... erm because they went into liquidation it's not like he got like a redundancy pay, and then he's only entitled to like £80 from the government a week which literally did like nothing. So because of that in my first year [of University] I didn't get any financial support from my parents. But also because of the way your student loan worked, it was based on the previous tax year of your parents' earnings [so] I got like the smallest loan. No bursaries or grants. So I was kind of just in this grey area of people who didn't have enough money to kind of pay their like rent at uni from their loan and then

also weren't entitled to any funding and then couldn't rely on their parents. So that was really hard 'cos I had to like work 16 hours a week just to like afford to eat as well. And then so getting sanitary products was kind of just like it felt a bit like a luxury."

Reflecting again the expense of menstrual products discussed in chapter 4, Abby could not afford the tampons and menstrual pads of her choice, making them feel like a luxury. This was a problem for Abby, who described her periods as "start[ing] really heavy and then gradually get lighter" and "they're not really regular... they're probably every 30 to 34 days" and last between 5-6 days at a time. As mentioned in chapter 4, Abby told me her periods have "been quite horrific just with them being so heavy and I've always kind of like needed erm to use like to use a tampon and a sanitary towel", showing there are two material layers to psychosocially make Abby feel secure when menstruating. Abby's access to two types of menstrual products to manage her period became restricted, however, when she was plunged into period poverty as a result of very limited money. The impact of period poverty on Abby is materially significant because it creates a struggle to gain that sense of security and respectability she is accustomed to as a middle-class woman.

In addition, Abby's product choice was the brand *Tampax*. She explained her preference was because,

"...my mum used to just buy all the sanitary products [and] she would just buy like *Tampax* and *Always*. And yeah I've always had like the *Super* ones of the tampons. And then I had a friend who basically used like a *Lilets* one and then the string broke off and she had to like fish it out and it was like quite traumatic, so yeah basically like after that 'cos she was like 'oh God I'm never not using a *Tampax* again' so then I got into my head that you couldn't use any other brand 'cos the string would snap *laughs* so I've always just stuck with *Tampax*."

Abby's friend's experience instilled a fear of Abby's tampon string snapping and having a tampon stuck inside her – which is a fear and experience of a few of the other women in my research. Consequently, Abby felt more comfortable and protected using *Tampax*. Notably when her mum bought menstrual products for the family, the cost of *Tampax* was hidden from Abby. However, when Abby was at university with limited income, the price of *Tampax* was stark. Despite the expense, Abby could not bring herself to use other tampon brands due to the fear of having a tampon stuck in her vagina etched into her psyche (Reay, 2005a). This resonates with the importance of familiarity of menstrual products discussed in chapter 4 and I emphasise again that Abby felt a symbolic and embodied sense of security with *Tampax* and a pad for extra protection against leaking.

Restricted income for menstrual management had profound impacts upon Abby's embodied experience and access to social capital. Abby felt disjointed from her friends at university in suddenly not being able to afford a middle-class lifestyle, which included not having to worry about the price of *Tampax*. The symbolic (and material) importance of using the more expensive tampon brand heightened a sense of shame when she could no longer afford them, and created an ambivalence internally about Abby's sense of self-worth and value in relation to her middle-class peers (Walkerdine, 2003; Sayer, 2016).

Without this socio-material protection or monetary income, I asked Abby how she coped and managed her period during her time at university when she struggled with period poverty. Embodying the messy materiality, Abby described her coping strategies as,

“[using] like just layers of the toilet roll [from] the uni toilets basically when I was like going in for lectures. And then a lot of the time I would just ask my friends and just kind of like play it off as if I'd just like forgotten or something. So then I would kind of like do it that way. And then you know like as time kind of went on and like I kind of got closer to my friends and the girls I lived with, they were just kind of like, just use ours. So, so it got easier as I got close to them but when you first start you know, you don't wanna just be like ‘oh I've got no money!’ ... But it was definitely hard and it was definitely like... did feel like a bit embarrassing.”

Like many of the women in this research, Abby resorted to wadding up toilet roll from public toilets as a way of navigating the messy materiality of period poverty. Abby would also ask her friends for tampons but play it off as a one-off event and she had just forgotten to get some in or had started her period unexpectedly. This nonchalant act of asking for a tampon is significant in the psychic economy of class. It illuminates the intersecting shame of class expectations, menstruation, and poverty that Abby felt but kept secret from her middle-class peers. Expanding on why she felt an embarrassment in asking for help, Abby said:

“Even when I was able to ask them like, you know, they were all... I still felt a little bit of shame because it was like... I didn't want them like... ‘cos they were from a higher income background and I didn't want them to think like... you know I didn't want them to look down on me basically. Or feel sorry for me I guess. So, so it was harder.”

Abby continued:

“...it's really hard to like, articulate. But like even though they're probably saying the right things and doing the rights things you still just think ‘oh god do they think I'm just like some like charity case or something’ you know? So, I think a lot of it was probably in my head but also I don't... you know I don't really think

they'd come from a diverse background either [...] so there was still probably for them a bit of like newness to it and therefore a bit of a lack of understanding than I would've got from someone who came from a more diverse background. [...] So yeh it felt like an awkward topic still."

Abby felt acutely aware of the class and financial differences between herself and the other young women she was at university with. Feelings of shame and embarrassment were rooted in the sense of inability and difference in capitals from those she was surrounded by, as well as a recognition that period poverty was not recognised as an issue at the time she was at university. As noted before, shame is always *about* something (Sayer, 2016). Through her reflection, Abby recognised that it was not that her friends made her feel embarrassed, it was more the internal shame and embarrassment of not being able to afford essential items when she knew everyone else around her could. Abby admitted that she had not come from a diverse background and felt like she didn't have the tools or experience to communicate her situation with those from higher income families with a less likelihood of being exposed to poverty.

Abby was ashamed of being plunged into poverty. Psychosocially, Abby was living the stark reality of the compounding poverty stigma and menstrual stigma as a middle-class woman. Abby recognised periods as "an awkward topic" to be kept private and hidden from others in line with sociocultural expectations of menstrual etiquette but was now also dealing with the new socioeconomic position of living in poverty. The intersections of these two stigmas constructed a powerful symbolic barrier for Abby to ask for support when struggling with period poverty. Adding to this, Abby also very suddenly had to take embodied action to negotiate the messy materiality of period poverty and (re)gain respectability. This was significant for Abby to feel able to participate in everyday life with her middle-class peers and gain a sense of self-worth when menstruating.

Finally, Abby articulated her experience in period poverty as "circumstantial" to present how period poverty has unspoken potential to affect women from all walks of life.

"...it happened to me but I wouldn't have been in a group that people even thought would go through that. So I think it's not just necessarily people from like kind of low income backgrounds, it can be people who've like... circumstantial. It could be people who have usually been able to afford that stuff but then circumstances have changed and they've been caught in a situation where like they don't have access to any funding because of that [...] It can affect anyone at any point basically."

Abby highlights how she fell into period poverty because her and her family's circumstances rapidly changed. Being within middle-class circles, it was unexpected for them and others to

expect them to fall into such circumstances. Conceptualising period poverty on a spectrum of experience broadens our understanding of who can be impacted by it. Being in a “group of people” – respectable, middle-class people – who are not at risk of period poverty, Abby found herself in a sociocultural position where she was unable to ask for help. Everyday life drastically and emphatically evolved for Abby during this circumstantial change and feelings of class tension and forced lifestyle differences are evident in Abby’s reflections. Classed expectations and norms left Abby in an uncomfortable position of needing help but feeling embarrassed and struggling to ask for it.

The middle-class psychic economy symbolically cultivated an atmosphere of secrecy and silence around periods. This widespread menstrual stigma made talking about periods difficult and Abby experienced further classed sociocultural restrictions in being able to share with others what she was going through. Trying to negotiate a sense of self-worth, Abby contends this was a consequence of there being limited experiences and exposure to period poverty for middle-class women. Lines of communication were closed off because of the sense of shame surrounding period poverty when no one else was experiencing it:

“...and I think in a way it’s almost harder erm like, well I don’t wanna say harder but there’s more of a, more difficulty with the openness of it. Because especially if you’re not used to being in those circumstances and then the people who are around you and your friends are also kind of like, say from [more] middle class backgrounds and higher income backgrounds, then if your circumstances suddenly change it’s like you don’t feel like you can easily talk to people in the same way. Whereas I feel like sometimes if that’s kind of what you’ve been used to you might be more, feel more able to ask for help if you’ve had to do it before. So if it’s something that’s new to you because of a circumstantial change like, it just, it just, for me it just seemed like there was no one I could really speak to about it.”

Recognising that period poverty “can affect anyone at any point basically” is brought to the forefront in Abby and Lindsay’s experiences. I want to make it clear here that I am not offering these examples as claim for being representative of class dynamics for all women. Class can be understood as a politicised site of struggle with identity, moral worth, and a sense of the valued self, which is vital in this context of middle-class experiences of period poverty. There is an intra-class struggle experienced when Abby and Lindsay, as middle-class women circulating middle-class milieus, find their circumstances different to their peers. Their sense of value, self, moral worth, and identity is disrupted and (re)negotiated through experiences of menstrual injustice. The discussion above illuminates the intersections of class, capital, in-work poverty, and menstruation, and the nuanced impact it has for middle-class women.

5.4. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have engaged class and capital as analytical tools to explore the nuances and depth of period poverty. This chapter opens up an understanding of both material and symbolic, economic and sociocultural inequalities at play in period poverty for working-class and middle-class women.

Money (or the lack of it) was identified as the biggest barrier for women in this study. Focusing on the economic aspect of period poverty points more widely to the impact of austerity, the embeddedness of poverty in Newcastle (and across the UK), and the disproportionate impact it has on women. Without enough money on Universal Credit, women are struggling to afford the menstrual products they need and are plunged into period poverty. At a structural level, the inadequacy of Universal Credit and the failing welfare state is illuminated. At a socio-material level, the messy materiality of period poverty is evidenced as the everyday consequence for the women in this study.

The taboo surrounding menstruation is evidenced throughout this chapter, with shame associated with many aspects of periods including bleeding, a fear of leaking and the sociospatial and material measures taken to cope with period poverty. The significance of hygiene and dignity in menstrual management is raised by women to gain respectability and sociospatially and emotionally be able to participate in everyday life. As part of this, the embodied and emotional strains of life in period poverty are made clear and need to be intertwined with existing literature to better reflect a sense of people steadily being worn down by the daily pressures and insecurity of everyday life in austere times. Ignoring the importance of feelings of cleanliness and hygiene when menstruating, and ignoring the importance of menstrual products within this, acts to devalue working-class women's capital. Devaluing the material capital (menstrual products) my participants rely on for participating in everyday life has detrimental impacts upon how they can access support, how they feel about managing their periods, and how society perceives working-class women and their menstrual management. I continue to explore these ideas in the following chapters.

Finally, I point to an interwoven thread throughout this chapter which conceptualises period poverty as a spectrum of experience. Period poverty can strike women from any walk of life, and women can fall in and out of period poverty at different points in their lives dependent on different circumstances. Such experiences of period poverty are thus different for individual women. I expand on this theme in the next chapter, which engages the concept of the lifecourse to illustrate more closely how period poverty is experienced on a continuum through two participant's lived experiences of period poverty.

Chapter 6. Period Poverty Over the Lifecourse

This chapter illustrates how period poverty is woven through women's lifecourses. The purpose of this chapter is to zoom in to see that women fall in and out of period poverty at different times of their lives depending on their circumstances. This builds on my argument from the previous chapter (5) which explores how period poverty is on a spectrum of experience. In this chapter, I develop this idea using the lifecourse concept as a scaffold to build our understanding of the temporal and contextual nature of period poverty in women's lives.

This chapter is dedicated to two participants' stories, and I engage with feminist standpoint theory to map out period poverty over their lifecourse. As outlined in chapter 3, feminist standpoint theory equips me with the theoretical and ethical tools to really focus on participant voice and begin the analysis of this chapter from working-class women's experience. This has particular significance in grounding the research and thesis in the issues that matter most to participants.

In this chapter I present the stories of Lily and Daisy. These participants were chosen for the focus of this chapter because they were older women who have been menstruating for over 40 years and spoke about times of period poverty at various points in their life. I was able to draw their experiences together for an articulate illustration of period poverty over the lifecourse.

I begin each section by temporally mapping out the data to illustrate each woman's lifecourse and how period poverty has been a frequent event throughout both of their lives. Each temporal map is illustrated with direct quotes from the research interviews in chronological order. With this data-rich map, I then provide an analytical discussion to argue why a lifecourse approach is important in developing our understandings of period poverty. I connect Lily and Daisy's lifecourse experiences to wider themes and analysis of period poverty (and menstrual injustice). I argue that a lifecourse approach reveals the severity and longevity of period poverty as a social issue in the UK.

6.1. Lily

Lily (50) was one of the first interviews I carried out. She was interested in talking with me because she likes to keep busy and said she often filled out surveys to give her opinions, so was happy to help me out. She said she had never seen a survey about periods before so was particularly interested in what questions I would ask. Giving a fluent account of her lifecourse, Lily began by explaining that she went through menarche at age 11. Being a young girl without her own income, Lily depended on her mother to buy her menstrual products. This was the first time Lily experienced period poverty, as sometimes her mother

could not afford the pads Lily preferred. From this point, Lily experienced homelessness, was a single mother with six children, and struggled with a low income on Universal Credit. These life experiences are interwoven with episodes of period poverty as I elaborate in the following sections.

On the next page I present a temporal map (figure 1) of Lily's experiences of period poverty over the course of her life, which I follow with a critical analysis of period poverty over the lifecourse, grounded in Lily's experience.

6.2.1. Mapping Lily's Lifecourse: Temporal Dynamics of Period Poverty

"...I can always remember I just turned 11 when I had [my first period] coz I was in school and I didn't really know what it was... I went to the nurse [and] she give us a pad to put on and, well obviously being young when I first put it on it was really uncomfortable and [...] I felt like everybody was looking at us in school."



Figure 1: Map of Lily's Lifecourse illustrating where she experienced period poverty

6.2.2. Analysing Lily's Lifecourse

1980s: Period Poverty at Menarche

As illustrated in figure 1, Lily first experienced period poverty soon after menarche in the 1980s. Starting at school, Lily did not have the knowledge or materials to know how to deal with her newly menstruating body. Lily did not receive a formal education about menstruation or what to expect when having a period at school, which inevitably left her in shock and feeling anxious about what was going on with her body (Charlesworth, 2001; Donmall, 2013). Lily explained that her periods were very heavy and she preferred to use menstrual pads to manage her flow. The school was able to provide at first, but beyond that Lily was reliant on her mum buying period pads for her. This dependence created a struggle when Lily found her mum did not have enough income to afford the pads Lily would prefer to use.

She said "me mam couldn't afford [the] thicker" pads, and she had to layer 2 pads together and use them at the same time to avoid her menstrual flow leaking. This happened through the layered pads anyway. Even as a young girl Lily had her preferences for which menstrual products best suited her needs but without her own source of income Lily was dependent on her mother providing them. A low income for mothers evidently impacts how their daughters can manage their periods. Further, if Lily's mother was not able to afford the better products for her daughter, it is likely she would have been unable to buy her own menstrual products. As explored in a later chapter (chapter 8), the mothers I spoke to for this research would sometimes be going without menstrual products to ensure their daughters always had some. It must be considered that there are experiences of period poverty over two lifecourses here: Lily's experience at menarche without her own source of income and her mother's experience on limited income.

Adding to the monetary and material restrictions for Lily at menarche is an emotional element of these early experiences of period poverty. Lily's experience with and subsequent fear of leaking compounded with the struggle in affording period pads played a role in rooting Lily's anxiety around her period. Through the lifecourse lens over the next few pages, we can see the embedding of anxiety around menstruation, which is intimately exacerbated by experiences of period poverty. Lily's experience highlights how anxiety about periods is worsened when there is limited access to the materials with which to manage menstruation.

1990s: Homelessness

Moving on a few years, Lily's struggle shifted from financial dependence to self-reliance. Explaining how she had run away from home, Lily struggled to afford her own menstrual

pads during a time of homelessness as a teenager. The combination of restricted money, familial support, and access to sanitation infrastructure meant Lily was using newspapers to manage her menstrual flow and cope with period poverty.

As discussed in chapter 5, navigating period poverty requires a messy intimacy with the bleeding body and 'making do' with everyday materials. In chapter 5, toilet roll was the main interim material used by women, but as a homeless woman Lily had even more restricted access to everyday materials on the streets (see chapter 7 for discussion of period poverty and homelessness). Using newspaper as a makeshift menstrual pad highlights the immediacy of feeling like she must conceal her menstrual status and uses whatever means necessary as a young woman.

Lily's anxiety around her period and menstrual blood leaking is raised here again, showing the deep emotional impact period poverty can have and the significance respectability can have. The feeling of needing to manage her period using any material she can find indicates menstrual etiquette and the desire to conceal her menstruation even when that is difficult to do. She cannot just free bleed because, as discussed in the previous section, she feared her menstrual blood leaking and others knowing she was on her period.

Feeling respectable is subtly threaded in Lily's coping strategies by needing to present herself as a controlled, concealed, respectable menstruating woman. Her material coping strategies intersect with ideas of corporeal and social cleanliness, constructed from sociocultural menstrual and class taboo (Skeggs, 1997; Douglas, 2002; Moffat and Pickering, 2019). Socio-material methods in dealing with period poverty are common practice in Lily's lifecourse which illustrates how ideas of hygiene and the importance of socio-material navigation of periods are embedded at a young age and carried through to adulthood.

1990-2010s: Single Motherhood

Negotiating the messy materiality of period poverty extended through Lily's years as a single mother with 6 children. During this time, Lily was having to cut up her children's nappies to use in place of a menstrual pad. The messiness was heightened as a single mother; with 6 children, Lily had no time or money for herself or her period:

"I didn't have enough like, enough time for meself like, it's as soon as I sat down one of them was up! Aw like one needed this, one needed that, so I was constantly on the go. And it was even worse when I was having a period. Because I had to like be on the go. Because being a single parent I had to do it all meself."

Lily emphasises how mothers embody their parental care work as they are constantly on the go (Blume and Blume, 2003; Malacrida, 2007; Malacrida, 2009; Doucet, 2013). This is an important theme in sociological and health research, but little has been said about embodying care work coupled with the embodied experience of menstruation. Lily needed to be mobile and active in looking after her children whether she was on her period or not. The difficulties arose when she was menstruating but did not have the money to buy menstrual products to help her feel secure when running around after the children.

Further, Lily's period and risk of menstrual blood leaking as a source of anxiety is exacerbated through gendered responsibilities of solo childcare after her divorce. This anxiety embedded itself over her lifecourse as a form of paranoia about her period. The feeling of others knowing you are on your period and the internal fear and paranoia it creates was echoed by other women throughout the interviews (chapter 5, 7, and 8). This paranoia strengthened women's embodied work to feel respectable to counteract feelings of anxiety and paranoia when menstruating. In the same way that shame is always about something (Sayer, 2016), feelings of paranoia were always in response to a fear of others knowing they were on their period. Lily's period paranoia is rooted in sociocultural menstrual stigma and bodily experience of menstrual blood that can't be physiologically controlled. Taking a quote from figure 1 to show this:

"I was really self-conscious. I think a couple of times I leaked. But it was the feeling doubling up in ya knickers erm... like going out and like more people walking behind you, it would be like 'oh god have I leaked? Oh can they see anything?' and oh it was bloody awful."

Drawing on the theme of choice in menstrual management identified in chapter 4, and as highlighted over Lily's lifecourse, being able to adequately manage her period without leaking was (and is) an important part of Lily's everyday work to feel respectable. She told me that "me anxiety gets the best of us you see" and explicitly said how her period is a large part of where her anxiety stems from. This has impacts upon how Lily perceives her menstruating body and what everyday activities she feels she can participate in.

The fear of leaking menstrual blood is intimately connected to perceptions of being a respectable working-class menstruating woman, and as we have seen Lily engages a messy materiality of newspapers, jumpers, and cut-up nappies as mechanisms to navigate period poverty to continue with her everyday life. This was particularly important for Lily as a single mother who had to do everything by herself but also feeds into Lily's present-day everyday life, as I now go on to discuss.

2020: Universal Credit

As detailed in the previous chapter, restricted money was the biggest barrier for women in this study and is evidently the case over Lily's lifecourse. In the present-day context, lack of money from a low Universal Credit income severely restricted Lily's ability to manage her period and other expenses. At the time of our interview, Lily received income support from Universal Credit, including a Disability Allowance for several health problems. In addition, she received a food parcel every week from the foodbank, in which she sometimes received menstrual products because Lily was menstruating again after a time of amenorrhea (an absence of periods) following her son's death 8 years ago.

In our conversation, Lily explained that over recent months she had not always been able to afford menstrual products. She spoke about how she struggles to afford the essential payments (rent, bills, and paying back loans) on Universal Credit in her present circumstances. In addition, the emotional side of this financial strain is illustrated by Lily saying "I've just gotta get on with it [...] what else can I do?". The daily pressures of austerity, Lily's anxiety, and the return of her period after 8 years can be seen as normalised in Lily's life as a coping strategy but also reflecting a sense of steadily being worn down by the intensely embodied nature of these emotional experiences (Clayton *et al.*, 2015; Pemberton *et al.*, 2017).

Referring to figure 1, I highlight Lily's 'penny shopping' to visualise how women geographically navigate period poverty and manage menstruation on a low income. Lily walks to different supermarkets to find the cheapest menstrual pads, powerfully illustrating another layer of embodied work it takes to avoid falling into period poverty. The body is central to experiences of period poverty here and intersects with sociocultural taboo and money. Lily's geographical mobility is something that, given her paranoia when on her period, she is likely to do when she is not menstruating, thus a degree of preparation and planning is essential in managing period poverty.

Lily's coping strategies here are subject to "warmer weather" but also must take into consideration (dis)ability and geographical proximity to shops. Where Lily described her penny shopping was at least a mile from where she lived, which is a considerable distance to walk and carry shopping back. It is well documented in health literatures that deprived areas have fewer amenities and where there are, they are often more expensive and insufficient, not necessarily having everything Lily needs for her period (Bambra, 2016). The geographical and spatial implications at play for Lily negotiating period poverty could also suggest further menstrual health inequalities, such as proximity to healthcare services and doctor's surgeries. An intimately interwoven lifecourse with episodes of period poverty is illustrated through Lily's experiences.

6.3. Daisy

Daisy (47) is a university educated woman now living on Universal Credit after losing her job in the 2008 recession. Daisy is one of few women I spoke to who explicitly recognised her experiences as ‘period poverty’. She was particularly eloquent in articulating her experiences and felt “a victim” of them. She powerfully reflected on her lifecourse and acknowledged that not having the money as a young person or later on Universal Credit to afford period products “has caused me period poverty”. Figure 2 on the following page illustrates how Daisy fluctuated in and out of period poverty over her lifecourse.

6.3.1. Mapping Period Poverty over Daisy's Lifecourse

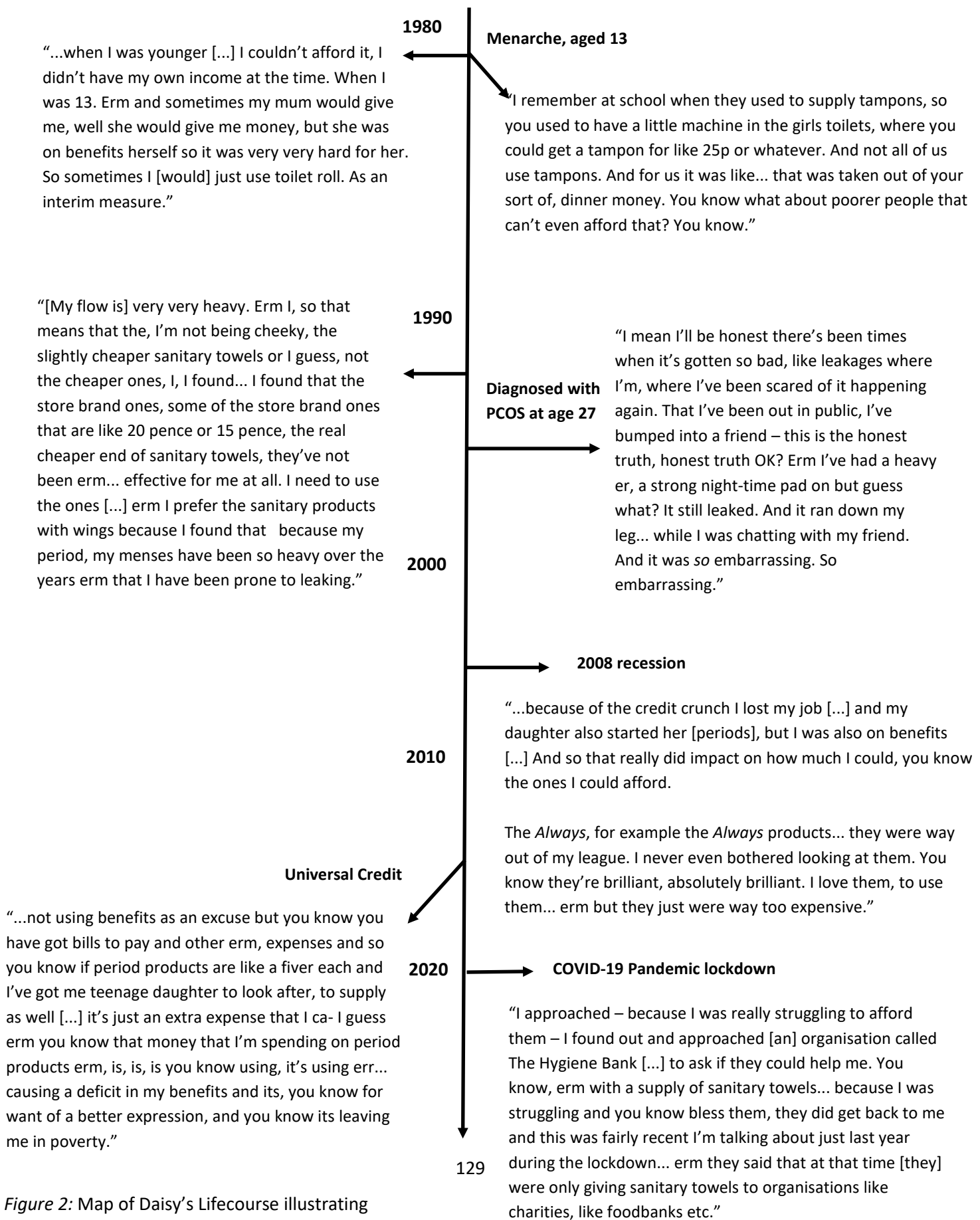


Figure 2: Map of Daisy's Lifecourse illustrating where she experienced period poverty

6.3.2. Analysing Daisy's Lifecourse

1980/1990: Menarche and Youth

As shown in figure 2, Daisy has experienced period poverty throughout her life. She was keen to talk with me to share her story and raise awareness of the social issue which she said was unjust because “definitely, absolutely there’s been times erm when I’ve really struggled to afford [menstrual] products.” The first time Daisy experienced period poverty was as a young girl at menarche without her own income. Dependent on her mother to provide either menstrual pads or money for Daisy to buy her own, Daisy explained how she knew her mother had very little income on government benefits. Daisy told me she was the eldest of 5 children, indicating a busy house, lots of mouths to feed, bodies to clothe and school supplies to buy, as well as the fundamental payments of rent and bills. Daisy was very aware of her mother’s financial insecurity as a child, illustrating how children are conscious that there may not be enough income to meet the families’ needs (Ridge, 2002). Daisy’s mother was stretched to financial capacity, which meant Daisy experienced period poverty in her younger years. Like experiences discussed in chapter 5, Daisy would use toilet roll “as an interim measure” because she knew her mother had little money to spare. Furthermore, if Daisy was experiencing period poverty through an absence of her own income and a shortage in household income, it is likely her mother also experienced period poverty (see chapter 8). These are common themes between Daisy and Lily’s lifecourses.

2000: Menstrual Health Conditions

In the early 2000s, Daisy was diagnosed with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome at the age of 27. As argued in chapter 4, having the choice and ability to use the menstrual products one prefers is incredibly important for confident and secure menstrual management. This importance is increased for women with menstrual health conditions, such as Daisy. PCOS thickens and increases the quantity of her menstrual blood. Alongside PCOS, Daisy has other menstrual health conditions (fibroids and ovarian polyps), which made her period very heavy. Menstrual crankiness is valuable to pull out here, as we see Daisy’s menstrual experience evolve over her lifecourse, which she understands in not a wholly ‘period positive’ light (Przybylo and Fahs, 2020). Daisy wants to feel clean and safe in her menstrual management, which she cannot do without the right products for her body.

Part of the importance of recognising menstrual health conditions that evolve over the lifecourse is the knowledge that menstruation is diverse, subject to evolution, and that how women manage their periods is based on personal choice for a range of reasons (see chapter 4). Over her life, Daisy found the cheaper store-brand pads were not effective in absorbing her menstrual flow and that she was “prone to leaking”. She therefore prefers to use winged menstrual products for extra security and confidence in managing her menstrual

flow when on her period. As discussed in the literature review, the fear of leaking is deeply engrained in women's and girl's experiences of periods and expectations of menstrual etiquette. Such embedding of menstrual stigma has severely detrimental consequences for menstruating women's confidence about their period and about doing everyday activities when menstruating. The material impacts of period poverty are meaningful to Daisy. Without menstrual products Daisy is anxious about her period, which affects her self-confidence both emotionally and physically.

For Daisy, the fear of leaking emerges out of lived experiences of her menstrual blood leaking in public places which she found embarrassing. Drawing out a quote from figure 2, Daisy said:

"I've been out in public, I've bumped into a friend – this is the honest truth, honest truth OK? Erm I've had a heavy er, a strong night-time pad on but guess what? It still leaked. And it ran down my leg... while I was chatting with my friend. And it was so embarrassing. So embarrassing."

This experience embedded a very real, embodied fear of leaking for Daisy and she emphasised the embarrassment and shame she and society associate with menstrual blood in public places. The heaviness of Daisy's period transgressed the boundaries of the 'ultra' winged menstrual pad and rolled down the outside of Daisy's body where social and cultural expectations tell us it should not be, presenting an agency *of* the body (Fingerson, 2005). This uncomfortable embodied feeling, previous experiences of leaking, and the fear of leaking impact both Daisy's mental health and everyday mobility. Even when she is able to afford and access the products she wants (when she is not in period poverty), Daisy feels anxiety around her period and said she

"prefer[s] to stay in. If I can when my periods are on. Or I just worry, with regards to the leaking if I'm on public transport or something like that, I just worry that, y'know, it could penetrate through my clothes."

Feelings of embarrassment, worry, anxiety about her period, and the material fear of external menstrual blood linger through Daisy's lifecourse. This leaves her more emotionally distressed about her period and with limited mobility to go about her everyday life when on her period, whether in period poverty or not.

2000/2010: The Credit Crunch

A central argument in my thesis is acknowledging that money is the biggest barrier for my participants. As illustrated through Daisy's lifecourse so far, lack of money plays a central role in her menstrual experience. In the late 2000s, after losing her job in the recession,

Daisy found herself in her mother's position some 30 years ago: needing financial support from the welfare state and struggling to afford period pads for herself and her daughter.

The materiality of period poverty is important over the lifecourse, as we have already seen in Daisy's (and Lily's) temporal map. Materiality is critical to recognise how meanings of cleanliness and hygiene are important for the women in this study. Conceptualised within Daisy's lifecourse, the sense of physical discomfort and shame are deeply embedded throughout Daisy's experiences and navigation of period poverty as an emotional and material disruption to her everyday life.

Reflecting on menstrual experience and the importance of personal choice, Daisy prefers to use the 'ultra' pads with wings, which are often the most expensive form of menstrual pad of any brand (likely because they are bigger and require more material for manufacturing). Given the money and choice, Daisy would use the brand *Always* because "they're brilliant" at absorbing her menstrual flow. However, "they were way out of my league" because they are "way too expensive", which Daisy sincerely explained would be £10 to get herself and her daughter a packet of pads out of her benefits. Yet the heaviness of Daisy's periods means that the supermarket own-brand and cheaper period pads are not suitable for her menstrual flow. Linking back to the meaningfulness of the material impacts of period poverty, Daisy's welfare income impacted the type of menstrual pads that she could afford, and as she explained before, the "cheaper end of sanitary towels [have] not been [...] effective for me at all".

The cheaper menstrual products are the only ones that Daisy could afford at multiple times over her lifecourse (including recently) which exacerbated her deep fear of leaking, her mental health and anxiety around periods, and her everyday mobility when on her period. The squeeze of austerity is an embodied experience for Daisy, feeling insecure in not being able to afford the menstrual products she prefers which limited her mobility and participation in everyday life.

2020: The Coronavirus Pandemic

As introduced in chapters 1 and 5, the COVID-19 pandemic presented barriers to women in accessing and affording menstrual products. Access to appropriate menstrual pads has been restricted over Daisy's lifecourse and was being felt at the time of our interview in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Finding both her children at home because the schools were forced to close in the lockdown, needing to feed them three meals a day and likely with an increased energy bill from her whole family being constantly at home, Daisy felt the strain of living on a low income.

Daisy tried to reach out to The Hygiene Bank, a grassroots organisation working around the country to alleviate hygiene poverty, including period poverty (The Hygiene Bank, 2022). However, as Daisy explained, The Hygiene Bank does not provide menstrual products to individuals, rather collecting donations to pass onto community partners who then distribute the hygiene, personal care, and cleaning products to people in need in their outreach programmes. Whilst an admirable and valuable initiative providing a secondary level of care through community-facing health/care organisations (such as the foodbank), it did not help Daisy as an individual in her time of need (Williams, 2021).

This shows how only a very short time ago menstrual products were not readily available or accessible for women experiencing period poverty. A swathe of organisations have been active since the coronavirus pandemic began to tackle period poverty (BBC, 2020a; Christou, 2020; Williams, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022). However, with Daisy's experiences over the lifecourse we can see how period poverty was not a priority (and arguably not publicly recognised) and therefore grassroots organisations, social and health care services were not providing or facilitating access to menstrual products for adult women before the pandemic. The pandemic acted as a devastating catalyst for Daisy to reach out for help for herself and her daughter in period poverty.

Without assistance available from The Hygiene Bank, Daisy went to the foodbank for menstrual products:

“It's great getting it from the foodbank, I'm very very grateful to receive them. The only thing is [...] sometimes its hit and miss coz some weeks you don't get any. But I guess, you know, yeh, I guess not every week you got your period I get that. I get that as well.”

Although the foodbank has availability of menstrual products, access on an individual level is limited. Furthermore, there is no choice in what menstrual products arrive in the foodbank parcel. Daisy and her daughter only use pads, but sometimes tampons have been delivered. I explore these access issues and the role of the foodbank in supporting women in period poverty in significantly more detail in chapter 8.

For the point of this chapter, understanding that women have experienced period poverty for decades and have struggled to access support in their situations is important to improve accessibility to women's healthcare and specific menstrual health-supporting services over the lifecourse (Bambra, 2016; Garthwaite *et al.*, 2016). This is evident in Lily's lifecourse too.

6.4. Chapter Conclusion

As we have seen in taking a lifecourse approach, Lily and Daisy have experienced period poverty at various points throughout their lives. Feminist standpoint theory has been a valuable tool in exploring period poverty over the lifecourse by starting with two participant life stories and developing analysis and understanding around them. These lifecourses are therefore powerful vehicles in which we can recognise 'period poverty' as a deep-rooted and longstanding social issue, experienced by women for decades and not just since 2016, when it was conceived in the media. This recognition is crucial in understanding the urgency of tackling period poverty and supporting women on low incomes in a myriad of ways that reflect menstrual experience (as argued in chapter 4). Further developed is how period poverty is a fluctuating experience (introduced in chapter 5). Both Daisy and Lily fall into episodes of period poverty at different points in their lives because of different circumstances, and with different ways of negotiating it.

In the same way that menstruation has been silenced, stigmatised, and made taboo throughout social history, period poverty in the UK has been hidden, ignored, and understood by women as something to 'just get on with'. Understanding how period poverty is experienced by women across a range of circumstances, at a range of different times in their lives and how it has an impact upon not just themselves but also their daughters, is vitally important to begin to build momentum and make changes to better support women and reduce period poverty. Lily and Daisy are only two of many women who have suffered from period poverty over their lives, but their stories play a key role in raising awareness of how women have been navigating period poverty their whole lives.

This chapter provides a good starting point to widen our understanding of period poverty into a conceptualisation of menstrual injustice. Whilst the presence and absence of menstrual products is important, particularly so in the monetary context I have been discussing, it is undeniable that stigma, taboo, emotions, and relationships have played a role in the experiences of period poverty in Lily and Daisy's lifecourses. It is unjust, for example, that Daisy feels like she needs to stay at home when on her period (but not in period poverty) because she fears menstrual leaks (the stigmatisation of the menstruating women in social space) and is embarrassed by her heavy menstrual flow (an internalisation of menstrual taboo). In the next chapter I explore this specific idea of menstrual injustice in more detail. I argue that we must expand our understanding of period poverty and investigate how women face menstrual injustice in a range of ways that is more than not having menstrual products to manage their menstrual flow.

Chapter 7. Menstrual Injustice: Broadening our Understanding of Period Poverty

In this chapter, I reintroduce and develop the idea of menstrual injustice. As I introduced in chapter 1, menstrual injustice is an intellectual term to conceptualise a broader set of conditions and circumstances that shape women's uneven experiences of their periods. Period poverty (the focus of the previous analysis chapters) is a part of this, but not the only way women experience inequality and injustice in relation to menstruation.

As I have previously discussed, access to and use of menstrual products is intersected with the body, menstrual experience, class, gender, stigma, taboo, and is temporally and contextually experienced. My wide explorations of period poverty already point to women's experiences as unjust and more complex than just access to money (although this is the biggest barrier identified by my participants; chapter 5). Therefore, I argue we must move to a broader understanding to ensure all women are protected from menstrual inequality and injustice. This is because women face a myriad of barriers to menstrual justice which are not covered within current understandings of period poverty. To illustrate my point, I now move to focus on other gendered social and spatial barriers at work which create an unjust menstrual landscape for my participants.

Menstrual injustice is a highly gendered social phenomenon, but it is also a very real lived experience. The everyday lives of participants in this study are impacted by intersecting forms of menstrual injustice including a lack of money, limited spatial and material resources, menstrual stigma, and gendered violence. Other forms of inequality including gender-based violence and homelessness were also identified as playing a role in why women may experience barriers to accessing menstrual products, hygiene facilities, and a safe space to manage their periods. I draw out these experiences in this chapter – working within the idea of menstrual injustice – as they would not be recognised under common definitions of period poverty nor under scholarly and activist calls for understanding period poverty as more than a lack of money for products.

I begin by further developing knowledge in how period poverty is not a singular experience, thus grounding the need to expand our understandings. I do this by illustrating the multi-layered and multifaceted experiences of working-class women in-work who, although have a bigger source of income than participants solely on Universal Credit, still struggle to afford the menstrual products they would like. I follow this with a discussion on how women are vulnerable to experiencing menstrual injustice through violence against women and girls, using two participant case studies of sexual assault and financial abuse. To finish, I discuss the impact of homelessness and the stigma and structural issues impacting upon experiences of menstrual injustice.

7.1. Layers of Injustice within Period Poverty

This section explores women's experiences of struggling to afford the menstrual products they would prefer, and how this can be understood beyond period poverty as menstrual injustice. I draw on my previous argument that illustrates the importance of preference and choice in menstrual products (see chapter 4). I argue that women may be able to afford some form of menstrual product but not necessarily their preferred type. This has implications in how they manage their period, negotiate their everyday life, and feel about themselves when menstruating. This argument highlights a menstrual injustice more complex than a complete lack of money or absence of menstrual products for women on low incomes.

Agency in product choice is important for good menstrual health (Hennegan *et al.*, 2021). Women must be able to choose the menstrual products suitable for them, their bodies and their periods (chapter 4). However, for many women experiencing period poverty, choice in menstrual product is rarely an option when they cannot afford even the basic products. Instead, they must resort to everyday materials available to them, such as toilet paper, kitchen roll, or clothing for example, to create a makeshift pad (chapter 5). The financial tensions between women and menstrual products are nuanced and more complex than outright not being able to afford products. Within the frame of menstrual injustice, many women feel the financial tension in how expensive their preferred menstrual products are without being in period poverty.

For example, a few of the women I spoke to explored how, whilst they had always been able to access menstrual products, they have not necessarily always been able to afford the product of their choice. Reflecting on the subjectivity of menstrual experience and menstrual management, Queen highlighted the different forms of struggle lived by menstruating women:

“Because you know, you might be able to afford them [menstrual products] but you could only just get the basics. So like own-brand kind of stuff. So you don't have a choice in it but you're still being able to kind of, you know, use something for that period, where other women can't afford it at all.”

This points to a more complex idea of period poverty as a multi-faceted experience rather than a singular experience. The term menstrual injustice is therefore better used because it is not an absence of menstrual product entirely, rather an absence of the type and/or brand of menstrual product they would like. Feelings of security and safety in menstrual management are disrupted when women have no agency in choosing their products. Necessity overpowers choice, which leaves women having to use products that are unfit for their menstrual experience, impacting their physical and mental wellbeing.

I have illustrated throughout this thesis how not having the preferred menstrual product creates feelings of insecurity (Kerrie, chapter 5), fear of leaking (Daisy, chapter 6), and a sense of reduced mobility (Lily, chapter 6), which is deeply detrimental to women's mental health and wellbeing. The corporeal impacts of not having adequate, preferred menstrual products also plays a significant role in cultivating an embodied sense of insecurity, fear and micro self-policing of everyday activities and behaviours. This was something experienced by Vicky (32) who explained that she has never struggled to afford menstrual products. However, echoing Queen's point above, Vicky uses a rhetoric implying that branded, better-quality menstrual products are a luxury. Vicky told me,

"No I've always made sure I've had some in. I've always, I, I, I get like erm, the basic ones or if I could afford it like the better-quality ones. But I've always made sure I've got something and so I've never struggled for them."

Although Vicky says she has never struggled to afford menstrual products the idea of the better quality, preferred products as a luxury begs us to explore the depth of what period poverty is. If Vicky doesn't have a choice but to buy the basic pads, can she adequately manage her period? I argue that not having enough money to buy the preferred product to manage your period adequately and comfortably, although not seen as a struggle by Vicky herself, can be understood as menstrual injustice. The micro-financial tensions for women to comfortably manage their period is overlooked when solely using the term 'period poverty' and perceiving it exclusively as an absence of product.

Unfolding this idea further, Laurel (35) talked about the barriers she faces in making sure she always has tampons. As Laurel explains,

"I mean I've always been able to buy them. I've always made sure I've had the money to buy them but it's very much that. It's very much like I know I need this product, like anything else you buy you know whether it be food or other toiletries you know you need... it's like the luxury of make-up, isn't it? You know it's expensive, you know it's an expense, you know it's a luxury but if you want it you save up the money to get something good, do you know what I mean? Erm but with *sighs* with these things [tampons] it's a necessity it's not like a treat. And I feel, I feel like I'm having to put money away for it like it's a treat *laughs* do you know what I mean?"

Laurel reiterates Vicky's rhetoric of menstrual products as a luxury in a more explicit articulation. Both Laurel and Vicky express financial barriers to accessing their preferred menstrual provision but with different framings of struggle. Laurel conceptualises her ability to buy the (*Tampax*) tampons she needs through the idea of saving for a treat, echoing the idea of menstrual products as a luxury. Vicky on the other hand, does not sense her

experience as a struggle but still reflects on how she has to buy the basic pads and it is only when she can afford the better-quality products that she is able to purchase her brand of choice.

At this point it is notable to mention that both Vicky and Laurel are employed. At the time of conversation in the second national lockdown, Laurel was on furlough from her job at a local pub and Vicky worked part-time in hospitality. I point to their employment status to show how even in work women struggle to afford their preferred menstrual products. By understanding the financial tensions and multifaceted experiences in menstrual management, we see how buying menstrual products has the potential to tip women on already limited budgets into emotional and financial tension of having to purchase undesired and inefficient menstrual products to manage their periods. This reveals the complexity of menstrual injustice. Further, drawing on experiences previously discussed in this thesis, women often must make the choice between menstrual products or food (Polly, chapter 5), childcare costs (Sarah A, chapter 5) and social wellbeing (Lindsay, chapter 5).

There is emotional work at play too: Laurel and Vicky have to think about what menstrual products they can afford. They have to think if they can afford the more expensive better-quality products. They must think about when their period is coming to be prepared for its arrival. They think about managing their periods in a way that women from more privileged backgrounds would not have to. I point back to Abby's experience of being a middle-class woman in period poverty (chapter 5) because this particularly illustrates the unseen and unspoken privilege middle-class women have with financial and material access to the menstrual products of their choice. For Laurel especially, but also for Vicky, there is a background sensation of not being able to afford the menstrual products they want which has physical and mental health impacts (both mentioned feeling insecure in their menstrual management without their preferred menstrual products).

Laurel and Vicky's experiences brings to light the reality of different forms of in-work poverty and the financial squeeze at play which creates an everyday struggle for women to afford the menstrual products they would like to manage their menstruation. What is powerfully illustrated is how different forms of women's experiences of periods and managing their menstruation – though not directly related to poverty or our ideas of period poverty – are still a socioeconomic struggle and a menstrual injustice. I move now to examine more closely social and gendered injustices within the concept of menstrual injustice.

7.2. Menstrual Injustice and Gender Based Violence

As a corporeal and gendered form of inequality, menstrual injustice is a form of violence against women and girls (VAWG). It is not often understood explicitly within the context of

gendered violence or domestic abuse, however. The lack of resources and safe spaces to adequately manage one's period is a form of gendered inequality and exacerbates women's vulnerability across sociocultural contexts (Tull, 2019; Rossouw and Ross, 2021). Period poverty as a key experience of women in abusive relationships or settings is only recently being recognised and predominantly in non-Western contexts (Tull, 2019; Olajide and Mbugua, 2021).

In this section I draw on two participant experiences of Gender Based Violence (GBV) which impacted their menstrual cycle and experience of menstrual injustice. Several participants touched on experiences of domestic abuse but only Beatrix and Sharon discussed the impact of GBV in relation to menstruation and being in period poverty. In the next section, I first briefly explore literature for understandings of GBV to provide broader context for this discussion of menstrual injustice and VAWG. I then focus the discussion to examine the impact of physical violence and financial abuse on menstruation, menstrual health, and experiences of menstrual injustice, using participants Sharon and Beatrix's lived experience to ground this discussion.

7.2.1. GBV and Isolating Survivors

In my research, physical and financial GBV were cited as perpetrator tactics that impacted menstrual experience and menstrual injustice. GBV is understood as a pattern of behaviour where one partner gains power over another partner (Sharp-Jeffs, 2008; Stark, 2009; Postmus *et al.*, 2016). Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a form of GBV which describes physical and/or sexual assault to a partner (WHO, 2005). IPV is a major contributor to women's poor physical, mental, and reproductive health. It is important for this research to underline that domestic violence (DV) is disproportionately perpetrated by men and experienced by women (Postmus *et al.*, 2012; Sharp-Jeffs, 2015; Women's Aid, 2021). As a corporeal experience, menstruation is an intimately embodied and gendered way in which male perpetrators can gain power over women, as I go on to discuss. Perpetrators use many tactics to coerce and control a partner and DV is not only about physical violence. It is about exercising power and control, which can happen in many forms (Stark, 2009).

Significant in this research is also economic abuse which is a common but often overlooked form of GBV. Between 94-99% of domestic abuse survivors have experienced economic abuse (Postmus *et al.*, 2012; Postmus *et al.*, 2020; Women's Aid, 2021). Economic abuse is defined as 'a deliberate pattern of control in which individuals interfere with their partner's ability to acquire, use, and maintain economic resources' (Adams *et al.*, 2008; Postmus *et al.*, 2020, p. 262). In a report for the charity *Refuge*, women's studies scholar Nichola Sharp-Jeffs (2015) proposes the term 'financial abuse' to more appropriately conceptualise the behaviours of economic abuse with a focus on money control, rather than economic resources (which can be employment, houses, transportation etcetera). Financial and

economic abuse is a very powerful way of controlling someone. These coercion and control tactics are highly significant in the gendered context of menstrual (in)justice.

Over the next two sections I draw on the concept of isolating, used in GBV scholarship, to frame an understanding of period poverty as a form of VAWG within the wider conceptualisation of menstrual injustice. The concept of isolating shows how DV survivors are isolated in several ways by perpetrators, communities, the public, and the state so that abuse is overlooked and kept hidden (Pain, 2021). In the context of this thesis, I argue that this silencing of GBV is interwoven with the silencing of menstruation by both men and women, survivors, and perpetrators/the state (Bildhauer, 2021). As geographer Rachel Pain (2021, p. 4) explains, isolation is a condition created and exploited by perpetrators but reinforced also by social expectation and practices. In this way, isolation is normalised and isolating practices are overlooked. As discussed in the literature review (chapter 2), there is a similar process of silencing menstruation and normalising menstrual etiquette at play for menstruating women. Instances of menstrual injustice are also overlooked, and I am interested in how the silencing of isolation and menstruation intersect and interact with each other in women's everyday lives as victims and survivors of GBV.

There are several forms of isolating that intersect with experiences of menstrual injustice in the context of GBV. Firstly, physical isolation restricts women's mobility, usually within the home or close by (Warrington, 2001). Psychological isolation sees the perpetrator breaking down a survivor's psyche, making them take responsibility for the abuse and see it as their own fault. Social isolation comes through the former practices of isolating, breaking down survivor's social networks and makes leaving the relationship more difficult. Material isolation restricts access to material resources for everyday life and the ability for victims to flee (Pain, 2021). These forms of isolating compound and weave with the corporeality of menstruation for women and not only act as intimate and constraining forms of GBV against victims, but also plunge them into experiences of menstrual injustice as I explore in the following section.

Finally, isolating discourses play a role in overlooking GBV and as I argue, the silencing of period poverty and menstrual injustice as forms of VAWG. Isolating discourses centre on the survivor's characteristics rather than abuse of the perpetrator. It is a violent public act of silencing of survivor's experiences and has devastating emotional impacts on survivor's ability to work through their trauma to a place of socioemotional safety. In the context of this research and Sharon and Beatrix's experiences, I argue that these isolating discourses are compounded with menstrual taboo, discourses of the dirty working-class woman, and the sociohistorical stigmatisation of women's bodies. These pressure working-class DV survivors to find respectability over their lifecourse and keep their menstruating status hidden. This in turns silences GBV, menstruation, and menstrual injustice for victims,

survivors, and the state. Menstruation is used by male perpetrators as an intimately powerful embodied form of control over women trapped by period poverty and GBV.

7.2.2. Sexual Assault

Sharon (52) is a survivor of IPV and sexual assault. This is intimately relevant to menstruation because she told me her periods changed because of the assault, becoming heavier and painful (Campbell, 2002). She told me that since menarche, her period had been “one day on, one day off...”

“...and then I hit 23 and I have 6 weeks of constant period. 6 week solid of very very heavy [bleeding]. I was using 3 or 4 pads a time all stuck together it was quite heavy [...] it’s something to do with the ovaries. I was, because I was, when I had a bad experience and I was attacked. In a sexual way. You know. But did a lot, a lot of damage down below...”

The impact of sexual assault upon menstruation, vaginal bleeding, and gynaecological health can be devastating (Campbell, 2002; Romito *et al.*, 2017). Sharon experienced a change in her menstrual cycle to a more severe menstrual condition because of sexual assault. The difference between having a one-day period to then needing to stick 3 or 4 period pads together at a time to manage a heavy menstrual flow is stark. Sharon explained that the sexual assault left her with “very very heavy” constant vaginal bleeding for six weeks. I note here that immediately after the assault Sharon did not experience a period in terms of a part of the menstrual cycle, but vaginal bleeding from the force of the assault. The medical terminology is less important here than the physiological and socioeconomic consequences of six weeks of continuous bleeding. Bleeding so heavily that she needed to layer several pads on top of each other at a time would have cost a significant proportion of Sharon’s income for six weeks. On top of this, Sharon explained that she struggled to afford menstrual products after leaving home in her late teenage years:

“After leaving home and especially after giving up work through health and being on the benefits I did struggle [to afford menstrual products]. I used to use erm, toilet roll if I didn’t have anything, you know. Yeh it was a struggle. Definitely a struggle.”

Already struggling to afford menstrual pads made Sharon’s experience of sexual assault both physically and emotionally messy. Sharon would be dealing with complex emotions of being a survivor of a crime, having heavy vaginal bleeding, and struggling with the cost of living on benefits. All this bubbles up to a severely distressing but frequently overlooked experience for a survivor of IPV.

As a survivor, Sharon experienced physical isolation as a physiological result of the assault. As Sharon described, she was using multiple pads at one time to manage her vaginal bleeding and said she could not leave the house because:

“Otherwise I would have had to, I had to carry uh like a full pack of pads with me. So I didn’t really do anything. I didn’t really go anywhere ‘cos I was thinking oh my god is it gonna come through? You know you have to be careful. ‘Cos it’s quite embarrassing.”

The impact of sexual violence, period poverty, and menstrual taboo restricted Sharon’s physical mobility and psychological wellbeing. The physical and emotional damage from her abuser left Sharon experiencing a deeply embodied injustice through an intersection of physiological changes to her period and socioeconomic position as a working-class woman with restricted money.

The everyday impacts of this violence were also drawn over Sharon’s lifecourse. Sharon explained the assault and operations after meant she could not have her own children. GBV had everyday impacts upon the potentialities of Sharon’s everyday life and desire to have children:

“That’s why, that’s the reason why I didn’t have children, I couldn’t have children.”

Correcting herself from why she “didn’t” have children to how she “couldn’t” have children suggests her desire to have been a mother. Material and social isolation work together over Sharon’s lifecourse to restrict her experience of motherhood and the material and social capital gained from childbirth and having one’s own family.

Sharon’s experiences are intimately physical and violently embodied. Menstrual changes because of sexual assault need to be understood as a menstrual injustice and an intimately gendered act of violence. GBV is an everyday occurrence overlooked by manipulative processes of isolation and can work in even more subtle ways of coercion and control, as I go on to discuss in the next section.

7.2.3. Financial Abuse

Period poverty *because of* financial abuse was another significant finding. Postmus *et al.* (2020) detail how economic (or financial) abuse is an invisible form of domestic violence, with physical violence dominating narratives in tackling and understanding IPV. Because of this, economic and financial abuse has only recently received attention from researchers as a specific feature of domestic abuse (Sharp-Jeffs, 2015). Furthermore, period poverty as a

feature of economic and financial abuse is unrecognised. I argue that financial abuse as a hidden form of IPV coupled with menstrual etiquette conditioning women to keep their periods hidden put financial/economic abuse as a form of both being in period poverty and being in an abusive relationship further away from public and policy view. In this section I draw on Beatrix's (31) experiences as a survivor of financial abuse. Beatrix experienced menstrual injustice through being in period poverty (as an absence of menstrual products) because her abusive ex-husband made her financially insecure.

Beatrix had lived abroad with her abusive husband for nearly 10 years before she fled to England with her two young sons. At the time of our conversation, Beatrix had found a new partner and was in a non-abusive relationship. Reflecting on her relationships and that her new partner was very mature and supportive when it came to her period, a comparison was raised about her ex-husband and his use of financial abuse and isolating to control Beatrix and her corporeal agency.

“...my ex, when I lived [abroad], he didn't even like to *pauses* buy tampons or pads or anything like that. Like I would be going without when I was [abroad] but that was 'cos I was in a shitty relationship [...] it would just be erm kitchen roll. And toilet roll.”

A form of material isolation and financial abuse, Beatrix's ex-husband refused to buy her menstrual products or allow her a source of income to buy her own. Beatrix was left with a messy materiality and therefore forced to use kitchen and toilet roll as a makeshift menstrual product. In addition, psychological isolation was in process, with Beatrix saying “my ex was very squeamish about it [menstruation]” which would have played a role in embedding ideas of dirt and menstrual blood as unhygienic in Beatrix's psyche. Without access to suitable materials or money to manage her period, Beatrix would have to stay at home which in turn enforced physical isolation upon her by her perpetrator.

The role of the home is significant to examine here, as tensions between home as a safe space and space of violence are pulled tighter when taking menstrual injustice into account. Home is often constructed as a space of safety and peace but in reality can be a hidden site of danger where women are constrained by perpetrators of domestic violence (Pain, 1997; Warrington, 2001). Menstruation complicates this relationship to home further. Looking back at chapter 5 for example, Nichola found safety in her home when in period poverty. The home was a space where Nichola was not anxious about others knowing she was on her period or fearing menstrual blood leaking in public space. Home was her refuge in period poverty and space she could negotiate a private form of menstrual justice. This is not the case for Beatrix where home was a key site of fear and corporeal violence. Beatrix's mobility and corporeality was controlled by a perpetrator of domestic violence centred within the home and within Beatrix's body.

The gendered dynamics of domestic violence is heightened by the sex-specificity of menstruation. By refusing to buy Beatrix products specific for her needs, a gendered divide becomes apparent in the provision of menstrual management. Beatrix's ex was using her body and menstruation to control her, her mobility, and self-confidence. He used financial violence and coercive control, which created the conditions of menstrual injustice for Beatrix.

As reflected on in Sharon's experiences of not being able to be a mother, the impacts of GBV and isolating practices have longevity in survivor's everyday lives. For Beatrix, she actively practices a survival strategy of buying more menstrual products than she needs because of her experiences of coping with kitchen roll. So that she isn't a victim of this form of period poverty again, she told me:

"Erm I do, I don't stockpile but I do buy more than I need for one month so I know I've got some for when I do come on. [...] it's not stockpiling but I make sure I have some in the house constantly just so I don't end up that way again."

The longevity of GBV and menstrual injustice over the lifecourse is illustrated through Beatrix's everyday practices and work to be respectable. Even here, the psychological isolation can be seen as deeply embedded within Beatrix's psyche saying she buys more menstrual products than she immediately needs so "I don't end up that way again". Despite knowing she was "in a shitty relationship", there is an underlying indication that she found herself in a position of menstrual injustice, rather than being put there by her perpetrator. The impacts of GBV and emotional embodied longevity of isolating practices by perpetrators hangs over DV survivor's lifecourses.

Menstrual injustice is a valuable concept to recognise the intersecting class, gender, and physiological inequalities at play for women and survivors of GBV. It is more than a lack of one's own income, but a complex experience of violence, taboo, and inequality which take away women's sense of good menstrual management. In this section, it is a perpetrator who has control in whether Beatrix or Sharon can have dignity in managing their periods. The next section explores other barriers, systemic and stigmatic, to menstrual justice for homeless women.

7.3. Menstrual Injustice and Homelessness

This section adds more deeply to the understanding of menstrual injustice through not having economic capital. Economic capital can mean money which as I discussed in chapter 5 is one of the biggest barriers for participants accessing menstrual materials. Yet economic capital means more than money and also includes housing and sanitation infrastructure. This moves our understanding of period poverty from a money and product focus to a

broader recognition of menstruation requiring products, sanitation facilities, and safe spaces to manage periods. These are better encompassed within a definition of menstrual justice. I explored these in relation to GBV menstrual injustice, and now I move to the injustice women feel when menstruating and homelessness.

At the time of the research interviews, 8 participants were living in homeless hostels or had experienced homelessness earlier in their lives. Talking with these women revealed the specific challenges faced by homeless women trying to manage their period. There is a growing body of literature on homeless women's experiences of periods as identified in the literature review in chapter 2 (Sommer *et al.*, 2020; Vora, 2020; Boden *et al.*, 2021; Gruer *et al.*, 2021; Maroko *et al.*, 2021; Teizazu *et al.*, 2021). The challenges identified in these literatures were also felt by the homeless women I spoke to for this research.

Specifically, four main challenges were raised across all the interviews with women with experiences of homelessness. These are systemic barriers to menstrual product access, the importance of public toilets, differing access to materials for makeshift menstrual products, and the cranky emotional reactions to periods when navigating them as a homeless woman. I draw on Lilet Queen, Lucy, Amy, and Brenda's experiences of period poverty and homelessness to illustrate the complex and compounding features of menstruation and menstrual injustice as a homeless woman.

7.3.1. Systemic Barriers

Firstly, there are systemic barriers to accessing menstrual products. Talking of a time nearly 20 years ago, Queen left home just before her 17th birthday. She explained,

“...when I was younger erm I went through a stint of being homeless for a little while and not gonna lie that was horrendous when I had me period. Absolutely awful. There was just absolutely nothing. [...] And I remember when I asked erm the Jobcentre for help with stuff and I literally got laughed at like, yeah, like or ‘the public toilets were over there you can go and buy some’ and I'm like well I can't afford to do that!”

Queen tried to ask staff at the Jobcentre for help with menstrual products and her request was received with animosity and a lack of care for women's specific needs. Lack of support from this employment organisation reveals a gendered discrimination in helping women into work (to then be able to afford menstrual products), and also in helping women *be able* to work, with gender-specific resources and materials to manage menstruation. Queen was homeless so did not have the financial resources to purchase the menstrual products for sale in public toilets. Such products are advertised in vending machines, which are

themselves a systemic economic barrier for homeless women (and women on low incomes) to be able to manage their period because they require money.

Amy (33) and Lucy (43) also experienced systemic barriers to accessing menstrual products in the homeless hostel they were temporarily living in. The role of hostel staff as a gatekeeper to menstrual products can increase feelings of shame around one's period and not being able to manage it (Gruer *et al.*, 2021). There is a mix of a lack of support from the hostel in providing menstrual products and uncertainty over whether products were available:

Lucy: "I don't know, I don't, I don't know [the hostel worker] didn't mention it yesterday when I told her I was going to do this interview. Erm I don't know, no I don't know. [...] There's nothing on show or there's no posters anywhere to say that they do [give out menstrual products] if that is the case."

Studies recognise an inconsistency in supply and demand of menstrual products in homeless service providers which not only limits homeless women's ability to manage their period, but also places staff as a gatekeeper to the menstrual products, often limiting or controlling how many products a woman can receive (Vora, 2020; Boden *et al.*, 2021). This presents a gendered form of discrimination as homeless women's specific needs are not recognised, nor are they allowed control of how they manage their period with their choice of type and quantity of product (chapter 4). The assumption of menstruation as a private, personal issue manifests in how "[the hostel worker] didn't mention it" when Lucy was talking about taking part in research about money for menstrual products. In this way, menstrual taboo influences the (lack of) uptake of services by homeless women because both homeless women and staff are embarrassed by it.

Furthermore, there is also an indication that it had not occurred to Lucy and Amy to ask if the hostel provided menstrual products. I asked Amy if the hostel provided free menstrual products and she also said she didn't know. Persistent sociocultural stigma around menstruation limits homeless women's access to menstrual products in hostels. This is internal: an embarrassment and shame from homeless women not feeling comfortable to ask for products and raising awareness of their menstruating status, and staff feeling embarrassed to offer them. But it is also a structural stigma: hostels just not having the menstrual resources to provide in the first place. Menstruation is politically and institutionally stigmatised which contributes to hostels not having the material menstrual resources because it is not seen as a necessity for funding. Furthermore, the implication from Amy and Lucy that homeless hostels do not provide menstrual products suggests that the hostels themselves require more support and an understanding that their residents may require such provision. Either way, homeless women face financial, stigmatising, and

systemic barriers to accessing the menstrual products they need to comfortably manage their period.

7.3.2. Messy Materiality

I have evidenced the insufficient and inconsistent access to menstrual products for homeless women, as well as homeless women having limited money to buy them. Without economic and material resources for accessing menstrual products, homeless women work to make pads out of anything they can get as an interim measure for managing their menstruation. The messy materiality of period poverty is experienced by most participants (see chapter 5), but here I point to the differing access homeless women have to materials to makeshift a menstrual product, such as having no home to access toilet roll from. There are more barriers blocking homeless women's access to money, products, and materials to use as an interim measure to absorb their menstrual flow.

Lucy explained how she used public toilet paper as a makeshift menstrual pad when she had no money to purchase menstrual products:

“Well, I just haven't been, I just haven't been able to have a penny in my pocket. Erm I've had to go into, into the public toilets and stock up and wrap toilet roll into, wrap it into... like make it into me own sanitary pad you know. And you do it like that.”

Lucy's lack of material resources was because of her lack of financial resources to access the products she needs both for her period and general toilet hygiene. Lucy relies on public toilets to get toilet paper to makeshift a menstrual pad which means she is also reliant on public infrastructural efficiency in maintaining and monitoring sanitation resources for her to use for her period. Lucy expressed that:

“It's not very nice. It's, it's horrible. You've got your period, you constantly checking yourself... erm I mean you haven't got a choice you've got... you cannot leave the house can ye?”

Not being able to manage her menstrual flow due to a lack of money and makeshift materials made Lucy feel that she was not able to leave the hostel for fear of leaking menstrual blood. The fear of leaking raised in chapter 6 is highlighted again as a spatially and emotionally restricting internalised form of menstrual etiquette expected in the UK sociocultural context. This fear of the leaky body is exacerbated when women have restricted financial resources, private space, and access to materials for managing their period and menstrual flow.

Similarly, Amy had been living in the hostel for 2 months and rough sleeping on the streets prior to that. Commenting on the challenges of accessing menstrual products at the hostel, Amy said:

“It's a financial thing. Because like, I don't get enough dole money. By the time I've paid me rent I'm left with like 3 quid”.

Other women I spoke to who had past experiences of living in homeless hostels explained how they were required to pay rent for their room and shared kitchen and bathroom facilities, but food, toiletries and menstrual products were not provided. After the hostel rent and bill payments, Amy only had “3 quid” left to live on which would have created tensions in choosing what to buy, whether she needed tampons or food to survive.

Brenda (28) experienced these tough decisions when she was homeless in her younger years. She explained that:

“...like I was homeless and stuff so like obviously sometimes it was like do you eat or do you buy a box of tampons?”

When she chose to eat, Brenda had to negotiate the messy materiality that comes with not having menstrual products. In the homeless hostel she stayed in, this messy materiality intersected with gendered stigma and feelings of embarrassment.

“I can remember I think a couple of times I had to just use toilet roll me, ‘cos it wasn't like, I lived in a hostel and at one point I was the only girl who was there and I remember not wanting to ask anyone I wouldn't, I wouldn't like I possibly could have just said like can I have some money to go and get some tampons and somebody would have given us some but I didn't ‘cos... dunno I think it was like pride as well as embarrassment really, so yeah so I can remember like having to like fold up toilet roll really. And that's how I had to get by.”

The only woman in the hostel, Brenda felt embarrassed to ask the other residents (who were all men) for money because she would have to reveal it was for her period, and as something they would not experience, Brenda felt uncomfortable doing so. A very specific gendered form of menstrual stigma is prevalent here, with feelings of shame associated with having to ‘reveal’ her menstruating status to non-menstruating men. This is heightened by Brenda's situation as a homeless woman as she did not mention other places she could go for support. Brenda had to resort to using toilet roll to navigate the messy materiality of periods, which is something the men in the hostel did not have to do.

Here I highlight that the lack of menstrual products is more than period poverty and lack of money. It is an unjust intersection of menstruation, very limited welfare income, the financial expectations for lodgers to pay rent, restricted access to makeshift materials, and gendered menstrual stigma which heightens psychosocial responses to feeling limited in social space. Homeless women are on very restricted (if any) income which makes already difficult choices in budget management more difficult. Menstrual injustice encompasses the coping strategies of makeshift menstrual products but also recognises that access to such materials is unequal depending on women's situations.

7.3.3. Public Toilets, Hygiene, and the Lockdown

Public infrastructure plays a key role in unequal access to materials and facilities for homeless women to manage their periods. Queen spoke of using public toilets when she was homeless and how "horrendous" it was to have her period during this time. She explained how she managed her period:

"Erm the best I could. Erm If I want to be brutally honest sometimes I would have to [...] either have to use tissue paper from like popping into ASDA toilets or something like that erm, because at the time me periods were actually quite heavy. I've had to use socks. I've had to use like an old bra. Erm I've had to steal them erm... which I'm less than, you know, proud to admit that I've had to do but I know there was other girls who had to do exactly the same. 'Cos we had no support. And that was kind of like... and even then, and this sounds absolutely ridiculous that I'm saying this out loud, but even when I did have to... to go and take them from a shop erm... I got the cheapest that I could because I felt like I didn't deserve anything else. Erm you know so... I would like kind of try and stretch tampons out as far as I could, which probably I've been really lucky that I've not getting toxic shock."

Evident in the above quote, Queen experienced shame around her period and the materials and spaces she had to manage it when she was homeless. Through an (un)deserving narrative, she expresses her feelings of shame and how it manifested in her actions: choosing the cheapest tampons to steal because she felt undeserving of her preferred products to manage her period. I point back to Queen's experience in the importance of choice and preference in a woman's menstrual product (hers being *Lilets* tampons, see chapter 4). Having no support in place for homeless women coupled with the internalised shame of menstruation, Queen was left with no choice but to sometimes steal tampons – cheap tampons that were not suitable or comfortable for her body – to manage her period. When she did steal tampons, she would wear them for a longer time than usual and risk her health with conditions that are associated with not regularly changing a tampon (such as Toxic Shock Syndrome) (Bobel, 2010; Vora, 2020).

These experiences had detrimental impacts on her mental health as well, feeling 'dirty' and embarrassed in having to use very public spaces, such as the *ASDA* supermarket toilets, to makeshift period products and attempt to wash herself to feel clean. Homeless women's navigation of periods on the streets is more than just managing menstrual flow with products:

"...being able to wash your stuff as well, I found that really hard, I just had to wash in *ASDA* or *Tesco* toilets really and that's, that's not great when other people come in and see you trying to dry your knickers off. It's not great. Or your pants or like you've accidentally bled through and [your] period's not like on the top of your mind, like food or where you going to sleep that night is."

Here the idea of how important hygiene and feeling clean is for menstruating women is raised again by Queen. Homeless women have little to no access to basic hygiene facilities and when menstruating they have to make their menstruating bodies vulnerable to the public eye and disrupt sociocultural ideas of menstrual etiquette. The importance of hygienic public sanitation facilities, where women can negotiate their periods with privacy, dignity, and in a safe space must be recognised as a longstanding but still relevant issue to provide spaces of safety and cleanliness for homeless women. Public toilets are important spaces for menstruating homeless women, but (infra)structural and stigmatic barriers impact women's ability to feel safe, secure, and dignified in managing their period.

Infrastructural barriers – especially the limitations of movement in social space and access to makeshift materials – were intensified during the coronavirus pandemic and UK national lockdowns. Compounding with a lack of financial resources, Lucy and Amy's everyday mobility and ability to manage their period was more greatly restricted because of the lockdowns. Being homeless in the context of the coronavirus pandemic saw nationwide closure of public spaces, shops, and facilities; structural and infrastructural obstacles stripping homeless women of their coping strategy of using public toilet facilities, including toilet roll as a makeshift menstrual pad (Teizazu *et al.*, 2021). Lucy explained that over the months of the nationwide lockdown,

"...there have been times where I've just had to, to go without. Because [they] shut them down on, erm the public toilets as well you know. Throughout the lockdown the shutters were pulled down on the toilets."

The impact of the lockdown is another specific challenge for women experiencing homelessness trying to manage their period. The sudden inaccessibility of public toilets was quoted by both Lucy and Amy as the main barrier to being able to manage their period. Public toilets are important spaces for public health, but more so for vulnerable women seeking a safe, hygienic, and private space to manage their menstruation (Maroko *et al.*,

2021; Teizazu *et al.*, 2021). Without these spaces, Lucy and Amy were physically restricted in their spatial mobility both from infrastructural barriers of closed public toilets and the impact of the messy materiality and menstrual stigma creating an embodied fear of leaking. The lockdown was difficult for all participants, however Amy and Lucy's access to materials and space for managing their periods somewhat privately was severely impacted by the pandemic.

7.4. Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how access to menstrual products, sanitation facilities, makeshift materials, and safe spaces to menstruate privately can be obstructed by various forms of menstrual injustice. These are gendered and violent. They leave women in incredibly vulnerable positions when menstruating. I argue that, moving forward, using menstrual injustice as an intellectual term is crucially important to recognise the widespread, diverse, and overlooked forms of struggle that women can suffer when menstruating. The experiences of the women in this chapter powerfully illustrate the gendered and violent power dynamics at play within menstrual inequalities that are often forgotten and ignored. With the intellectual concept of menstrual injustice, we broaden our understanding of period poverty as a complete absence of menstrual products to include intersectional experiences of social, economic, physiological, and gendered inequalities in relation to menstruation.

Chapter 8. Relationships, Gender, and Social Capital: Support for Menstrual Justice

The previous four chapters have answered my first two research questions. These examined the ways in which period poverty and menstrual injustice are experienced by women, and how women navigate these experiences in their daily lives. This chapter responds to my final research question which seeks to understand the ways in which women are, or are not, supported when seeking menstrual justice.

The previous discussion has revealed how the messy materiality of period poverty and menstrual injustice is significant to show how women's everyday lives and socioemotional response to participating in everyday life is disrupted by access (or lack of access) to capital and material resources. As I discussed in chapter 5, there is a complex relationship between respectability and menstrual etiquette: menstrual etiquette is sometimes needed for women to perceive themselves as respectable. Entwined with taboo, patriarchal oppression of women's bodies, gender, class, and education, menstrual etiquette is a form of respectability practice. Such practice is significant for working-class menstruating women to feel able to participate in everyday life.

It is important to remember that the materiality of menstrual products is also significant for the women in my research. Without products, women and girls have to makeshift menstrual products and find creative embodied coping strategies (chapter 5). Menstrual products, as discussed throughout this thesis, are of central importance in the performance and negotiation of menstrual justice. Period poverty and other menstrual injustices disrupt the material and emotional embodied navigation of confident menstrual management and good menstrual health. I refocus the importance of menstrual products in this chapter to explore how women are, or are not, supported with various access routes to menstrual products.

This chapter critically examines how women as mothers, daughters, adults, children, and neighbours navigate menstrual (in)justice. I begin with an exploration of how mothers work in emotionally charged and embodied ways to prevent their daughters falling into period poverty. I then examine how children (both girls and boys) are aware of their mother's financial struggles, and how they take on responsibilities to assist their mothers in the context of menstruation and menstrual justice. Moving beyond the familial realm, I then discuss how women can access support from friends, neighbours, and grassroots organisations (including the foodbank). Finally, I reflect on some barriers women find in accessing various forms of menstrual support. This has implications for achieving menstrual justice.

8.1. Mother's Protection of Daughters

For many of my participants, experiences of menstrual injustice were intertwined with the emotional and embodied labour of ensuring their daughters did not fall into period poverty. There was an intergenerational, unspoken, and assumed responsibility of the mother to provide menstrual products for their daughters. Amongst financial, emotional, material, and embodied pressures, all the mothers I spoke to for this research always considered and put the needs of their daughters first.

I explore this as interwoven with classed expectations and practices of respectability. This is intimately connected to menstrual etiquette which gives significant weight to the symbolic effects of menstrual stigma. Both respectability and menstrual etiquette are key in underpinning motives in the physical actions of mothers protecting their daughters and gaining respectability for them. Mothers – like Samantha and Kasia, whose lived experiences are discussed in this section – (sub)consciously perform menstrual etiquette to achieve a sense of respectability in order to protect their daughters.

I argue there is a triple burden of responsibility for the mothers in this study. First, they are conditioned by menstrual etiquette to not talk about their own experiences of period poverty. Secondly, they have a lack of money. Thirdly, there is the responsibility of physically needing to provide their daughters with material resources to manage their periods. There are gendered intergenerational social, economic, and physiological barriers for menstrual justice which are emotionally charged and embodied. I explore these through Kasia and Samantha's lived experiences.

Speaking to Kasia (33), the stark reality of the stress and financial strain in needing to buy menstrual products for herself and her daughter was revealed. I spoke to Kasia in January 2021 when she told me that herself and her husband had lost their jobs in the first UK national lockdown during the coronavirus pandemic. She said:

“Errr I was under a lot of stress at the time [...] I had a lot of problem because we had no money, we had the bills coming, we are in debt and I was really worried, I couldn't sleep at night at all. Err it was just a really tough time for me.”

This experience would have impacted upon both their mental and physical health, but as a woman, Kasia also had to deal with her menstrual cycle and the effects of stress and worry on her menstrual health. In addition, they had a pre-teen menstruating daughter to care for. Kasia explained that at the crux of their financial worry both her period and her daughter's period started. At this time, they had no menstrual products and no money to afford them:

“...three months ago, we really had a tough time, we had no money for electricity or whatever... and then my period came and 2 days later my daughter’s period came... and I had no money whatsoever to purchase any [menstrual products]. So I had, er... I had a golden ring that I had to pawn in order to be able to buy erm those stuff. That was the last thing I had left. I took it to the pawn shop so I got the money and went and purchased period products. That was it, there was not really anymore that I – at the time, errm no that was my only choice.”

Highlighting how mothers put their daughters first, this suggests that Kasia went for two days without menstrual products before pawning her ring for money specifically for menstrual products when her daughter’s period started. Like many other participants, Kasia embodied menstrual injustice in her experience of period poverty through a messy materiality of going without menstrual products. In an emotional response to her daughter’s period starting, and with her own embodied experience of period poverty, Kasia would not put her daughter through the same messy embodiment. The sociocultural expectations of menstrual etiquette, symbolic power of menstrual stigma, and material importance of menstrual products for working-class women is highlighted by Kasia putting her daughter first and buying menstrual products by any means necessary.

Samantha also told me how she always put her daughter’s needs first when it came to menstrual products. In chapter 5, I discussed how Samantha had had times where she had not been able to afford menstrual products because she did not have enough money for them. Although Samantha only started receiving menstrual products in food parcels from the foodbank because of the coronavirus pandemic, in March 2020, she had been experiencing period poverty throughout her lifecourse. I asked if there had been any times when she couldn’t afford period products for herself and her daughter. She said,

“I always made sure that they was there for me daughter. Like it’s not fair to put her through that do you know what I mean? I would always make sure that there was some there.”

Samantha said that she sometimes had to go without menstrual products herself so that her daughter would always have them. She added “I wouldn’t tell me daughter that”, showing the emotional labour involved in supplying her daughter with menstrual products to protect her from this menstrual injustice. The sense of concealment in her actions – not wanting her daughter to know she embodies the messy materiality of period poverty – illustrates the impact of menstrual stigma and menstrual etiquette on Samantha’s role as a mother providing menstrual care for her daughter. A sense of shame is present in Samantha’s desire for her daughter not to know what her mother has been through. There is an unspoken and assumed gendered role of mothers to provide menstrual products for their daughters but

with this comes a shame in struggling to afford them for both mother and daughter. Arguably, Samantha's lived experience elevates the taboo feelings around her period and provides reasons for the emotionally charged work she applies to ensure her daughter does not experience the same. She explained that:

"There's times where I haven't had any [products] and I've had to just like kind of bleed. I put toilet roll like, try and make like a pad out of toilet roll and it's not very good like. But it stops it going everywhere you know. It's not very nice when you get it all over the bed and stuff because you haven't been able to put a pad on."

Because of these messy embodied experiences, Samantha actively worked to ensure her daughter did not experience the same struggle:

"I wouldn't want my daughter to go through with it 'cos I don't like it meself when it happens to me. It's not nice. Couldn't, couldn't do that to me daughter. Like aye, I would make sure she had them rather than me."

Highlighted in these moments of care is the sense of menstrual products being vital, the shame felt in not having them, and the physical discomfort in menstruating without being able to absorb the menstrual blood. From both Samantha and Kasia's lived experiences, we see how mothers take extra measures to provide menstrual products for their daughters so they do not have the socioemotional feelings of shame and taboo, nor the embodied feelings of not being clean associated with a lack of material resources in period poverty. This is key in understanding that menstrual products are important for women to comfortably participate in their everyday lives when menstruating.

In part, the reliance on menstrual products can be seen as a form of menstrual injustice. The expectations of women to use disposable menstrual products to 'control' and 'conceal' their menstruating status is embedded in Samantha and Kasia's role as mothers to prevent their daughters being shamed and condemned by society as 'uncontrollable' menstruating women. In Samantha's case particularly, feeling the shame in being unable to perform menstrual etiquette herself, she centres her role as a mother to ensure her daughter can meet expectations of menstrual etiquette. This comes with the sacrifice of her own material resources to manage her period, and the internalised secrecy of not wanting or being able to talk about their experiences of period poverty.

However, also illustrated in this section is the role of mothers in taking responsibility for their daughters' period (rather than fathers or other family members) and how that responsibility is emotively charged by participants' own experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice. Mothers work to ensure their daughters have menstrual products and

do not fall into period poverty. The necessity of their daughter's access to menstrual products is underpinned by respectability, which in turn is connected to the symbolic and embodied power of menstrual etiquette. This creates a complex triple burden requiring working-class mothers to navigate multiple periods (theirs and their daughter's) on a low income, source materials for their daughters to prevent them falling into period poverty (upholding their daughters' respectability), and conceal their own experiences of menstrual injustice so not to worry their daughters (and maintain their own respectability). Respectability and menstrual etiquette are significant concepts for working-class women to feel confident and able to participate in everyday life and the mothers in my research use the tools within these concepts to support their daughters through experiences of menstrual injustice.

8.2. Children's Awareness of their Mother's Struggle

The previous section illustrated the emotional and embodied work that mothers do to prevent their daughters from experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice. Despite a mother's best efforts to conceal their experiences of menstrual injustice and the messy materiality of menstruating without material resources, children are aware of the struggles their parents face. This was highlighted in participant reflections on their younger years, and more recent experiences of the responses of their children in supporting them with menstrual products.

Research has shown how children are aware of the financial struggles their parents face (Ridge, 2002). In this section, I expand on this through the lens of menstruation with two examples. I begin with a discussion of how girls are aware of their mothers' struggle with affording menstrual products because of their own experience of periods. I then refocus this gendered lens to explore how one participant's son played a role in her access to menstrual products. I highlight how children, both girls and boys, are aware of financial and material struggles their parents may face, despite their mother's best efforts to conceal their embodied, messy experiences of period poverty.

8.2.1. Girls

Beginning with how girls are aware of their mother's struggle in affording menstrual products, and its impact on their ability and choices in managing their menstruation, I point back to Daisy's experience in chapter 6. Daisy reflected on her experiences of period poverty as a child and acknowledged her mother's financial struggle when raising a family and managing a household on welfare state income. Daisy explained how she would sometimes use toilet roll as a makeshift pad because she felt like a burden on her mother and her already-stretched budgets. The sense of burden is not isolated to mothers but also felt by daughters who can see their mothers' not being able to afford menstrual products. As

menstruators, girls also take on the burden of managing their periods without adequate material resources to support and protect their mothers from being further financially stretched.

Mary (39) also spoke of her awareness of her mother's struggle on a low income in the context of menstruation. Mary reflected on her experience of period poverty as a young girl, which is something she only recently came to understand as a form of poverty. She explained:

“My mum didn't have much money growing up so there wasn't always the availability to like, for something that was stocked up on. 'Cos nothing was stocked up and it was always the very cheap brand of sanitary towel. And sometimes I was using tissue. [...] My mam would always try to like get stuff like that but it might just be a case, or she might not have... say if it was a Sunday, she might not have any money until the Monday and then she would have to rush out in the morning before I went to school [to] the corner shop.”

Mary recognises her mother's financial tensions and describes the embodied work her mother took to make sure Mary had menstrual products. Putting Mary first, her mother provided emotional and embodied labour to prevent Mary from falling into period poverty. This embodied work can also be reversed in the relationship between Mary and her mother. Mary took an embodied action of using toilet paper as an interim measure to manage her period because she knew her mother's budget was already stretched. In hidden ways, both mothers and daughters channel menstrual etiquette behaviours and respectability practices to prevent experiences of financial and menstrual poverty and to be able to feel like respectable working-class women.

With these examples, I illustrate that girls can feel the burden of their mothers' financial tensions in relation to menstruation, especially when they themselves menstruate and need menstrual products. In response, menstruating girls silently take on the gendered burden of period poverty so not to push their mothers deeper into poverty. This is an intimately embodied form of menstrual injustice which impacts girls and young women who are dependent on their mothers for materials and support when menstruating. The impact of menstrual injustice is intensified when understanding how daughters also work to protect their mothers from period poverty. Identified here are the informal and familial networks which women and girls, mothers and daughters, work within to support each other.

8.2.2. Boys

I now refocus the gendered lens to explore how sons can also play a significant role in supporting their mothers. In my research menstruation may be experienced by women, but

it is not an isolated social experience. Boys and men must also negotiate their place in relation to menstruation and the menstruating women in their lives, such as their sisters and mothers.

However, menstruation for men and boys is often perceived as a 'woman's issue'. In the UK it is common that pubescent boys are not educated about menstruation when girls are, thus express a lack of knowledge and experience of menstruation among the women in their lives when growing up (Allen *et al.*, 2011; Peranovic and Bentley, 2017). Further, research shows that from an early age boys accept negative ideologies of menstruation, and as men continue to construct and utilise pejorative ideas of periods through the lifecourse (Erchull, 2020). Framed within menstrual injustice, this negativity is a product and tool of reinforcing gendered hierarchies and patriarchal practices restricting menstruating women's everyday lives.

It is important to understand the gendering of menstruation in the context of support because the women in my research understood their experiences and identities as women in a binary relation to men. Many women spoke about feelings of embarrassment, shame, and discomfort when talking to men about periods or having to negotiate period poverty with only men around (for example, having to ask a male neighbour to borrow money for menstrual products). This was a common theme but not the only experience participants had with men and menstruation. I draw on one example from Nichola (whose feelings of dignity I discussed in chapter 5) that powerfully demonstrates the positive role men and boys can play in women's menstruating lives.

Nichola explained that she had been struggling to afford menstrual products for herself since she was 18, and for her daughter (now 18) when she reached menarche. With a lack of money from Universal Credit being the biggest barrier for Nichola to afford menstrual products, she explained that:

“...I get like paid every month. And sometimes I, I use a whole box of tampons on me period that month so then the next month I come on and I can't afford them because obviously I come on before me payday so I have to just wait basically. It's horrid.”

Elaborating on her situation of menstrual injustice as a woman, but also as a mother with a daughter to supply Nichola continued, saying that “sometimes I can't even afford them for my daughter as well, so for me it was like hell. It was really hard”. The emotional work of being a mother on a low income struggling to provide menstrual products for menstruating daughters is raised here again, illustrating the widespread nature of this intimate relational issue for women (specifically mothers) on low incomes.

At the time of our conversation, Nichola's daughter had left school but her 14-year-old son was still attending. Nichola mentioned how, before she left school, her daughter could go to the school nurse at the secondary school to get menstrual products when she needed them. This service is commonly expected to be used by schoolgirls. However, Nichola's son was also taking advantage of the school giving out free menstrual products to help his mum and sister. Nichola said:

“... me son started high school, he thought he was great coming in with tampons for us ‘cos the school was giving them away [...] and he didn’t, see I thought ee my god if his friends seen him saying ‘me mam needs some tampons can I have some’, and I thought ee he could be getting bullied and anything for that and he just was not bothered. [And] I didn’t know anything about it.”

Nichola had not asked her son to get herself or his sister menstrual products from his school and it was a complete surprise when he came home with them. Nichola was worried for her son and concerned he would get bullied for asking for menstrual products. This reflects both the deeply embedded shame around menstruation and echoes the internalisation of gendered ideologies of menstruation as a ‘woman’s problem’. These feelings from Nichola did not appear to concern her son, however. As her son was 14 at the time of our conversation – and it appeared that he had been providing his mum and sister with menstrual products since he began secondary school at age 11 – Nichola’s son had taken on an unspoken role of a menstrual justice champion for 3 years. Seemingly not impacted by menstruation or the shame associated with it, Nichola’s son saw his mother and sister struggle for menstrual products and took the initiative to get them their preferred menstrual products (noting the care taken to get his mum tampons and his sister pads, knowing that’s what they use). Nichola further explained that,

“... ‘cos like obviously my daughter finished school, and they must have been doing like a lesson about them, erm condoms and things as well. And he just went and got us both, brought his like sister pads back and brought me some tampons back and so, I’m so happy I couldn’t believe it. [...] Yeah he told us as well like literally after school he went to the erm to the nurses’ office and that, for pads... oh no he did it at dinner time! So he was walking around with them in his bag all day. [...] Yeh *laughs* he really didn’t care, that’s ‘cos he probably knew I never had none.”

Nichola’s son, not a menstruator himself, was driven by the knowledge of his mum and sister struggling to get menstrual products to ask for help for his family. Acquiring products (for which he had to personally ask the school nurse for, rather than just taking some that were out and available) and having them in his schoolbag for the rest of the day, Nichola’s son was not embarrassed or ashamed to support his family. He disrupts the unspoken

gendered responsibility for mothers to provide menstrual products for their daughters. These actions demonstrate a stark contrast to sociocultural expectations of boys and men being disgusted by periods. Nichola's son clearly felt no disgust in getting menstrual products to help his mum and sister. Nichola highlighted how "he probably knew I never had none", illustrating how children are acutely aware of their parent's situations – more so than parents probably realise – and how he wants to support his family. Negotiating his position in relation to menstruation, Nichola's son plays a positive role in how men and boys can support women experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice over the lifecourse.

8.3. Access to Menstrual Management

Navigating menstrual (in)justice requires negotiation of access. In the context of my research – where the material resources of menstrual products are centrally important for participants to go about their everyday lives – access refers to the availability and accessibility of menstrual products. So far in this chapter, I have demonstrated how mothers and children negotiate different access to menstrual products. In the next section I explore the idea of access and accessibility of material and symbolic support for women experiencing period poverty. I examine how support may be in place, however the accessibility of support needs to be critically analysed to explore how period poverty can be prevented and how women can be better supported when struggling with different forms of menstrual injustice. I investigate the intersecting roles of social, cultural, symbolic, and material capital on access and accessibility of menstrual products and wider related support.

I begin by exploring the local networks of support between women in Newcastle. Chapter 3 introduced how the foodbank supports women in period poverty by providing menstrual products. I now draw on participant experience of extending the reach of the foodbank's distribution of menstrual products to women who are not foodbank recipients. I then explore how material support has been available for women in grassroots settings, supplied informally by other women. These cover explorations of access and participant's negotiation of material access to menstrual products. Finally, drawing on ideas of accessibility I discuss some of the barriers participants experienced in accessing menstrual products.

8.3.1. Local Relationships and Structures of Support

I begin with an extract from my fieldnotes to highlight the local neighbourly support networks at play in the area. It introduces the tight-knit nature of the local community in the area of Newcastle which the foodbank delivers to. As described in the extract below, this recipient demonstrated her neighbourliness by distributing items from her own food parcel to other houses on the road.

7th January 2021, extract from fieldnotes;

'The next house requested one bag of food, a bag of toiletries, and a bag of sanitary items (and specified tampons only). I didn't have a tampons-only option so give her the bag with the bigger box of tampons in as well as some pads. I take the bags up to the door and knock. A woman in pink pyjamas opens the door, looking at me suspiciously and I find it a bit intimidating.

"Hi, I'm here with your things from the foodbank" I say, pointing at the bags at her feet. She looks down at the bags and lifts her hands to her face in a relieved manner. Her whole demeanour changes as she realises what I'm doing on her doorstep. "Oh thank you!" she says, looking and sounding incredibly grateful. She continues;

"What I'm gonna do, next Thursday, I'm gonna pick out all the food we don't use and give it back t'ya. And we've got loads of donations. Bedding and curtains and stuff. Am I right in thinking you don't take electricals? Because we've got a washing machine and things. But I'll gather all the tins with no expiry dates that we don't use and give them back to you. And what I'll do is I'll take the sweets out and give 'em over the road. And take some over there, alright?"

She does an incredible whistle and calls to someone: "Hey Josh can you take these over to Linda for us?" As I drive away, I think about the sudden change in demeanour by this recipient and reflect on what she told me. She said she was going to distribute the food out to people - there's a strong sense of community there - but I wonder also if there are other people on her street in need? Is she in contact with the foodbank and in a position of responsibility for helping those who live near her? Why is she able to give things back to the foodbank? Maybe she gets the food parcel not for herself but her community?'

On many occasions after documenting the first time delivering to this recipient, I got a sense of her community and caring for other female foodbank recipients. Often when I was getting back into my car or driving away, I saw her redistributing items from her own food parcel to other houses in the street. I only ever delivered to two houses on this street including hers so knew the others were not foodbank recipients. Looking back at my fieldnotes, I feel awkward that I had initially felt intimidated by a pink-pyjamaed but evidently extremely caring and proactive woman. In a way, this recipient's suspicion at a strange woman at her door on a cold Thursday morning in January reinforced the later understanding of her communality and support network she organises. She is protective of herself and the women she supports but once she realised where I was from her demeanour changed and she actively welcomed my presence and role as a foodbank volunteer.

A few months on from this encounter, she asked me if I had delivered to one of her friends (which, by chance, I had) and asked me if her friend had answered the door. She explained that she wanted to check she was OK because her friend's phone was not working and she wanted to make sure she had received her food parcel. The friend she was asking about lived 2 miles away which suggests the micro-local support networks evidenced in her street might not be that micro after all, extending far beyond the road she lives on. As a volunteer I only get a snapshot of the networks of support between women in the local area. From this extract and brief encounter, however, there is a strong sense of social capital between women, neighbours, and friends. Both through volunteering and interviews, I gained small but very significant insights into how women support each other in their community. Over the months of fieldwork, these insights suggested a strong sense of communality, neighbourliness, and local mutual aid in times of crisis and everyday struggle.

Social capital is an important resource for the women in this study. The above extract illustrates how women take on a caring role for their friends and neighbours (as well as their own daughters as I discussed previously). The ability to provide material capital to perform this caring role is facilitated by the foodbank. In the context of menstrual justice, social and material capital intersected with each other in the local areas I was researching and volunteering in to provide extended distribution of foodbank supplies to friends, family, and neighbours in need. This gendered social capital is significant for women to navigate period poverty and menstrual injustice.

As indicated by several participants, the foodbank provided copious menstrual products at the beginning of the coronavirus lockdown restrictions. This resulted in some women having a surplus, or at least a comfortable stock, of menstrual products. This happened to Samantha who "ended up with like loads at one point. Far too much. I was sharing them with me neighbours." Furthermore, preferring to use period pads, Samantha explained that she gave the tampons she does not use to her neighbours:

"I don't use tampons you see so I give them to me neighbours. Like a few of me different neighbours. I mean I've still got quite a stockpile of sanitary towels at the minute because I did have that, I was getting them like every week at one point off the food parcel. So I've still got quite a stockpile of them so if you could let them know that I've got quite a few, so I don't actually need sanitary products at the minute. So they could give them to somebody else who will need them do you know what I mean? See I don't use tampons so I gave them to a few of me neighbours. Cos them are struggling as well. Everyone struggling at the minute. So if I wasn't going to use them it's best to pass them on to someone who is."

Samantha wants the menstrual products to be used and requests for a break in deliveries to her so they can go to someone else who needs them. Enacting social capital on a very local (distributing to her neighbours) and wider (asking the foodbank to deliver products to someone else who needs them) level, Samantha is supporting other women in the wider community who she knows must be struggling because “everyone struggling at the minute”. To understand more deeply the social navigation of accessing support in the sociocultural context of menstrual taboo, I asked Samantha how she came about sharing tampons with her neighbours:

“I have had a couple of times where... I've had people knock and ask if I've got any and that but I, this... I usually just like say well I've got, like if it come up in conversation or something, do you know what I mean... I'm like yep, yeah I've got a few like drop round I'll give you some. 'Cos best to. Instead of them sitting there not being used. I'd rather them be used.”

Samantha draws attention to a tight-knit community and gendered micro-local support networks at play on her street. There is a sense of emotional support and confidence neighbours have in asking other neighbours for help when they cannot access menstrual products. There is a local atmosphere of supporting each other and feeling comfortable talking to their female neighbours because periods do “come up in conversation”. This is an important illustration of both social and symbolic capital at play. Samantha creates a caring, almost maternal environment for her neighbours to access menstrual products, which is symbolically powerful in diminishing menstrual stigma and taboo between women, friends, and neighbours at a micro-local scale.

Equally, Beatrix took on this gendered caring role in redistributing any menstrual pads she received, preferring to use tampons. Exhibiting again how women support each other in their local communities, Beatrix explained that:

“I got some pads in a couple of the things [food parcels] but I don't use pads so [I] gave some to my friend that actually uses them. Erm but if she wasn't gonna take them I know the school, the [local] secondary school they take donations for them. For the girls who can't afford it. So if she didn't want them that's where I was gonna take them.”

Passing on the pads from the foodbank, Beatrix's act of support reflects a sense of gendered responsibility and social capital facilitating the provision of material resources for her friend and local schoolgirls. By thinking about giving menstrual pads to the local secondary school, Beatrix demonstrates an acute awareness that many girls and young women in her community may struggle to afford menstrual products themselves. Being able to pass on the menstrual products that women receive but do not use extends the role of the foodbank in

tackling menstrual injustice and supporting the women they work with beyond that of formal foodbank recipients. It also enables women to support other women in their local area. Without the option to give the pads back to the foodbank (detailed further in section 8.3.2. of this chapter) and rather than let them go to waste, Beatrix donates them to the local secondary school who take donations of menstrual products. In turn this supports girls and young women at school through their period. It also provides Beatrix with a sense of agency in how she can support women through situations she has experienced (chapter 7).

Helping women in the same position as themselves, and being in a position to share menstrual products to support women through menstrual injustices, is an empowering act of agency for working-class women. This is important in the context of the pandemic, but also in relation to local struggles from austerity, the legacy of deindustrialisation, and high levels of unemployment in underserved communities (Jupp, 2017; Hall, 2019b; Poulter *et al.*, 2022; Williams *et al.*, 2022). Working-class women have been disproportionately affected by austerity and the pandemic but the act of supporting each other through hardship shines through and empowers women. Their material and economic capital may be limited, but they find other ways to express their charity and communality, such as micro-locally extending the reach of the foodbank provision through local networks of social and symbolic capital. For example, Sarah B felt empowered in how she could support her sister through a time that she recognised herself having suffered when she was younger:

“Yeah well me sister, she's, she came on [her period] the other day and she was in my boat what I would have been in years ago, she come she says ‘got any like pads?’ and I was like ‘yeah like I've been getting them off the food parcel’. So obviously I say, ‘I tell you what I'll give you the number for the food parcel you can get, just ask for an appointment and you can get them’. So basically I give her a few packs that I had anyway. So yeah. [And] I've had like friends that have asked us er if they've been out and about or one of me colleagues. I've always guaranteed I've kept them [menstrual products] in me bag anyway.”

Sarah B was able to pass on material resources (several packets of menstrual pads) and information (the number to the foodbank) to her sister to take control of her situation. Having experienced period poverty “a few times where I'd like, obviously I've had my own flat since I was 16 and like I've had to pay me bills and I totally forget that I'm due on and had no money”, Sarah B knew the feeling of not being able to afford menstrual products. Through her own experience, she was motivated to support her sister and other women, such as her colleagues, if they ever found themselves in that position. Sarah B explained that she “had to go on ask me parents or someone if they've got any spare [pads] till I got sorted” and that “it's pretty embarrassing as well at the same time, have to go like doing that”. Like many of the women in this research, Sarah B felt a sense of shame and

embarrassment about her period and not being able to access menstrual products. Reverberating through this is menstrual etiquette requiring women to physically and verbally conceal their menstruation. Sarah B's embarrassment in revealing her menstruating status and economic struggle to her parents is rooted in menstrual etiquette and period poverty disrupting her ability to feel respectable.

A key motivator for Sarah B was that she "was always having to have the money to go out and buy them. Unless there was organisations I wasn't aware of". Sarah B slipped in and out of period poverty for a decade. During this time there were no obvious initiatives working to tackle period poverty. As I argue, despite period poverty being unrecognised until recently, women have been working to support other women at a grassroots level for a much longer time. With the support of the foodbank, Sarah B was in a comfortable position with plentiful menstrual products and thus an ability to help her sister out of the position she was once in. She could further support her sister by passing on the number of the foodbank; a source of organisational support for her sister to begin to receive a regular supply of products. Again, the support of the foodbank is extended to reach more women in need.

Social capital in the networks described above is an important form of local support for women navigating menstrual injustice. As detailed, women use their social networks to redistribute material resources and cultivate a powerful non-stigmatising form of symbolic capital for menstruating women experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice. Thus far, the discussion has focused on the micro-redistribution of the foodbank's resources through women's close social networks on a very local level. Formal organisations, like the foodbank, are the most documented and known forms of support for women experiencing period poverty (Williams *et al.*, 2022). However, experiences of women supporting other women in period poverty informally through local organisations was also revealed in conversation with participants. The informal nature of this structured support was that often it was women taking initiative to provide menstrual products for other women in public spaces, rather than formal provision of menstrual products in relation to there being a known need.

Polly highlighted the local support networks women were putting in place for other women over several previous years, before period poverty was popularised as an important social issue in the public eye in 2016 (Brooks, 2016). Recalling her experiences of period poverty and stealing toilet roll to manage her menstrual flow at multiple points in her life (chapter 5), Polly talks about how for the past two decades her friend, Alice, had been providing menstrual products in the local community centre toilets for women who visited the centre.

"Yeah I think I met Alice first, erm going back a long time now. I first met Alice when she was just doing [local] arts [and] I think Alice must've been the first, one of the first people to put sanitary products into a toilet at the community

centre. Which is brilliant 'cos you could just go in and change your sanitary towel. Or... wow that's amazing! Why, why haven't people thought about this before? Why haven't people thought about putting products in places that are accessible?"

Polly had known Alice since her 30s and had known she was putting menstrual products in the community centre toilets for women to use when they had none, including times when Polly herself was caught short. With Alice's provision of menstrual products in the community centre, Polly knew she had a safe place to go to access menstrual products. Alice's initiative is an example of the hidden support networks women put in place for other women. It highlights how menstrual products in public spaces, such as the local community centre, opens up a valuable avenue of material and embodied capital for women like Polly to manage their menstruation.

The fact that free menstrual products were available in the community centre was not openly advertised. However, the social networks of support between women in this area of Newcastle allowed word-of-mouth news about where to access free products to travel to those in need. On a neighbourhood scale, knowledge of women's struggle with menstrual injustice and access to free menstrual products spread around the community. The grassroots news of such micro-scale support became evident later on in my fieldwork process when talking to Vicky (32) who told me that,

"I've seen them [menstrual products] in a few [community] centres. I've heard a few people mention it. [...] It's actually very helpful when you're out and about and you might have one [a pad] on but you might not have a spare and you're a bit heavy, it's always nice to know that you can go to a centre. You don't have to feel embarrassed, cause sometimes you will feel embarrassed and go run to a shop to get something, but it's nice to just be able to go to the centre and just put one on and so you can get home. So it's always nice. It helps."

Vicky explains that she had heard about free menstrual products being available at community centres, and though she had not used them, the knowledge of menstrual products being available if she were caught short gave Vicky a sense of security knowing there is a safe space for her to go to. Access to menstrual products in public spaces such as community centres is valuable to help women like Vicky negotiate feelings of embarrassment when menstruating in the public sphere.

Unfortunately, the community centre both Polly and Vicky were talking about was a casualty of the coronavirus pandemic and has permanently closed its doors. Not only does this take away the much-appreciated source of menstrual products for women but also removes any activities on offer for women, taking away a platform of local support, social activity, and

mental wellbeing. The precarious and insecure availability of menstrual resources discussed thus far only intensifies menstrual injustice and leaves women in worse-off positions.

8.3.2. Men Supporting Women

Thus far I have focussed on how women support other women (aside from Nichola's son earlier in this chapter). It was these gendered support networks between women that were the most talked about in our interviews, however a few women spoke about the positive role the men in their lives played in their menstruation. In this section I focus on Clara, who was one participant who had several men in her life who were willing to support her. Clara talked about her dad (a single father), husband, and close male friend when discussing her social networks of support. Beginning with her father, she explained that all these men were willing to support her with buying menstrual products:

“...when I was younger I had to ask me dad to go for us. Said ‘Dad I need you go to the shop for sanitary towels or *Tampax*’. He's like ‘what do I get you?’ So he'd go to the shop for us and he'd ring us when he was at the shop and he'd put us on with the friggin lady at the shop to ask what I wanted *laughs*”

Clara's father willingly went to the shop, but there's something to say about him asking the woman who worked there to speak to Clara directly about what menstrual products she wants. Whilst the initiative to ask is positive, and it ensured his daughter got the right products, it places the responsibility of menstruation as a woman's burden. What would happen, say, if there was no woman in the shop to ask? Would Clara's father not have been able to get the products because he did not know which ones to get? Or perhaps he would have (unknowingly) gotten unsuitable products for Clara's needs?

This example raises two important points. Firstly, that fathers can and do play an important and positive role in their menstruating daughter's lives. Secondly, that men need a better understanding of menstruation, menstrual products, and the menstrual experience of the women and girls in their lives. This will come from improved education for boys when they are younger, but also action to break the stigma around menstruation which makes it harder to talk about menstruation to non-menstruating people. Breaking this stigma can also partly come from sharing stories like this: that fathers can and do help their daughters. It raises awareness of men's role in menstruation, that support can come from anyone, and that it is not solely a woman's (or mother's) responsibility to get menstrual products for their daughters.

Moving on to the support Clara receives from her husband, I point back to chapter 4 where I introduced to Clara's menstrual experience with PCOS and subsequently a heavy menstrual

flow. This meant that Clara needed a lot of products to manage her period. Reflecting on the role her husband plays in supporting her with this, Clara said:

“My husband just said that he's seen us go through a whole box [of tampons] in one day. And on a bad month I've went through a whole box of *Tampax* in one day. And he's had to actually go out and get us some more, when he could leave the house. He's agoraphobic you see, sometimes he cannot leave the house at all himself and he's managed to get up the courage to go and get some. He's had to go and you know... and then it's to buy *Tampax* it's not like it's not embarrassing for him you know.”

At the time of interview, I could hear Clara's husband in the room with her. Every now and then he would chime in with a comment about periods, including how “it's like a tax” (that women must buy menstrual products when men do not) and, as described above, that he has seen Clara's menstrual experience and how many products she needs for it. Despite his active engagement in the conversation Clara and I were having about periods, Clara projects an embarrassment onto her husband's experience of buying menstrual products for her. This is constructed partly by his agoraphobia, an anxiety condition that makes leaving home and being in crowded spaces very difficult, if not impossible. It is also influenced by menstrual taboo and gendered stigma against menstruating women, which assumes all men are embarrassed by menstruation (Erchull, 2020). Clara's projection could also be influenced by the experiences of her father being embarrassed and needing to ask a woman in the shop for help when buying her products when she was younger. From a young age, Clara is exposed to the idea that men are always embarrassed by periods, even when they are willing to support them in very public ways, such as buying menstrual products.

This embarrassment also seeps into Clara's ideas of how men respond to supporting menstruating women when she asks her male friend to help with products, when herself and her husband were shielding in the lockdowns. Again, looking back at chapter 4, Clara used incontinence pants as her menstrual product of choice. She felt more comfortable with the thicker absorption these offered. In the COVID-19 lockdowns, Clara found it a particular struggle to access these products. When she could not access them herself, she asked her male friend to buy them for her:

“It can be difficult because obviously at the minute while we're in lockdown I'm not supposed to go out as much with us having medical problems and my husband having medical problems, so say if I go shopping or I can't get it delivered I've got to go shopping myself and I forget to pick them up, I've got to send somebody else. And I don't really know many people [here]. So it's usually a male friend that's got to go for us. I mean I'm quite close to this male friend so I'm not too bothered, but he's always embarrassed. There's a few times he came

back with men's ones as well. Yeah, actual men's incontinence pads and I've been like 'what the hell is this', and he's like 'that's what you asked for' and I'm like 'no that's not what I asked for' *laughs* I goes 'these are men's'. He goes 'aw I didn't see that'. [...] I use them anyway so. Erm I mean they do the same job there just a bit bigger.”

Again, the projection of this man's embarrassment comes from Clara, rather than evidence that her friend actually felt embarrassed himself. Clara says she is not bothered, but there is a sense of secondary embarrassment from her perception that the men in her life are embarrassed to help her with her period. We do not hear from the men themselves to know how they feel about it (which I reflect on in chapter 9), however their willingness to support points to a more positive experience of men negotiating women's menstruation than Clara discusses.

Perceived and real embarrassment aside, Clara has three men in her life who very positively support her menstrual needs. This should be celebrated but more importantly normalised. Menstrual injustice is a social justice issue which must be tackled with the involvement of men and non-menstruating people. If men are not involved, the idea of menstruation as a woman's issue is reinforced. The crux of this point is that this is not a woman's issue. I come back to this idea in chapter 9.

8.3.3. Barriers to Access and Support

I move now to discuss the barriers the women in my research faced in accessing menstrual products and support. The legacy of austerity and impact of the pandemic has very real and harmful effects on the accessibility of women's health services and menstrual wellbeing support. This is revealed through the closure of community centres, similar to the one Alice founded her grassroots menstrual support in (section 8.3.1.). Grassroots organisations have sprung up to tackle head-on the social issues worsened by austerity, deindustrialisation, and the pandemic. While these organisations serve to fill the ever-widening gap in the welfare state, they are not – and should not – be seen as formal fixes to the state's failure to support the most vulnerable in society (Garthwaite *et al.*, 2016; De Benedictis, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2022).

My time volunteering at the foodbank highlighted the very real need people have for welfare support to survive, let alone live. I saw first-hand and documented the struggles of a donation-based system and the reliance on volunteers which can restrict their service:

9th December 2020, extract from fieldnotes;

'I did a last-minute delivery shift this morning. I was sat at the kitchen table in my PJs marking essays when I saw I had a missed call from the foodbank. A text came through after asking me to give them a ring back when I'm free, so I got up to make a tea and rang them back. They informed me that their regular volunteer was sick today and needed someone to cover the delivery shift.'

21st January 2021, extract from fieldnotes;

'[Main foodbank staff member] asked if I worked with any places that gave out menstrual products, explaining that their stock was completely empty now. I told her about The Hygiene Bank and how they deliver to support organisations like the foodbank with toiletries and sanitary items but there isn't really anything else.'

I share these fieldnote reflections and knowledge of how stretched organisations like the foodbank are to contextualise the next section. I do this because in the first part of the upcoming section of this chapter, I explore how the foodbank missed the mark for supporting some women with their menstrual needs. Several interview participants – who were also foodbank recipients – shared that they did not always get what they needed or preferred to be able to manage their own or their daughters' periods.

I raise these concerns not to criticise the organisations but to provide reflections on how support can be improved. Of course, I am well aware of the limited capacity organisations like the foodbank have and support the calls for state interventions and responsibility for improving and supporting women's health and wellbeing, menstrual justice being a large part of that. Nonetheless, my experience as a volunteer and knowledge gained from my participant's experiences illuminated a few simple ways in which the foodbank could more acutely support women using their services until formal state funding is in place.

8.3.3.1. Material Barriers

The diversity of menstruation and the subsequent importance of menstrual product choice is a significant argument threading throughout this thesis. Participants in this study frequently found themselves unable to access their preferred menstrual products because of affordability (chapter 4), low incomes (chapter 5), homelessness (chapter 7), domestic abuse (chapter 7), and a gendered sense of maternal responsibility (this chapter). Access to adequate material resources is an important consideration for supporting women through menstrual injustice and in this section I discuss this in the context of the foodbank menstrual product provision.

As mentioned by Beatrix earlier in this chapter, she sometimes received menstrual pads from the foodbank which she then redistributed because she preferred to use tampons. There is no choice in the provision of menstrual products recipients might receive, which is in part due to the donation-based organisation of the foodbank and the stretched capacity of foodbank staff and volunteers during a global health pandemic. Nonetheless, participants experienced difficulties when they received menstrual products they did not use and could not redistribute easily.

Daisy was quite vocal about the problems that arose when she received tampons from the foodbank. As introduced in chapter 6, both Daisy and her daughter use pads. They have received tampons – and sometimes only tampons – from the foodbank however, which impacts their ability to manage their periods. When Daisy receives tampons, she is left in a position of uncertainty for herself and her daughter and they are at risk of falling into period poverty when her financial budget is stretched.

Daisy was keen to suggest some solutions to receiving products she doesn't use. She explained her mixed feelings of gratefulness for receiving support from the foodbank, but that the donation and volunteer nature of that support leaves her with a sense of being unable to suggest alternatives and improvements to the support being offered:

“I'm not being cheeky but, yeah I do get tampons sometimes and I ended up, I end up not knowing what to do with them [...] I'd love to just er... give it back but I feel rude giving it back, but we don't use tampons. But we have been given tampons. Yeh I think even the last pack, the last round of sanitary towels we got were tampons. And I can't, we can't use them. We just don't use them here.”

“You know maybe if we're even given the option of perhaps even being able to hand them back or y'know. Erm if you've got some place whereby we can just, I dunno some kind of bank or something. Like a, you know like a clothes bank or something where we can perhaps you know, give unwanted products back to yourself so that it can go to someone who does use them. Rather than it go to waste you know what I mean? Mhmm. It's just an idea. Just an idea that just came across my mind.”

In these quotes, Daisy expresses her concern about the tampons she cannot use going to waste because she cannot pass them on to others or feel like she can give them back to the foodbank to redistribute. She repeats “we don't use tampons” frequently to emphasise how they are not an appropriate product for her family and feels at a loss to know what to do with them. Even in the way she starts saying “I'm not being cheeky” and ending with a nonchalant “just an idea that came across my mind” suggests Daisy feels in some way

uncomfortable with suggesting ways the foodbank could improve their support of herself, her daughter, and other women experiencing menstrual injustice.

Of course, the foodbank is run on a donation basis and the driving force is the generosity of volunteers. At the height of lockdown, the foodbank was distributing food parcels to over 200 households. Shortages of food, toiletry items, and people to volunteer struck at several points. Resources and flexibility are limited for the foodbank at the best of times, so despite Daisy's good intentioned suggestions, the ability for the foodbank to cater to every individual woman and their household needs (beyond efforts made to meet dietary requirements) is restricted. However, a few important points are raised through both Daisy's suggestions and the foodbank's inability to cater to individual needs.

The first point to focus on looks back to the fractured landscape of period poverty support in England. Reliant on donations, if the foodbank does not receive enough menstrual products, they cannot provide this service to foodbank recipients and the smaller local charities they partner with. It is not the responsibility of charitable organisations to fill the growing gendered gap of the welfare state that is plunging women into period poverty (Crossley *et al.*, 2019; Williams, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2022). If a centralised funding system was in place, charitable organisations would always be able to provide menstrual products.

Secondly, in response to Daisy's suggestions: women should not feel rude in offering to return menstrual products back to the foodbank if they do not use the products offered. This connects to broader feelings of not wanting to seem ungrateful for the foodbank's help. I recall a time in February 2021 when I was volunteering and a recipient approached me when I was getting food parcels out of my car. She first asked if I had any dog food because she had not received any for a while and her dog was hungry. She also explained that she does not eat a lot of the food she receives and so gives it to the children on her street who would eat it. In my fieldnotes I see that she repeated several times that "I'm not being ungrateful like" but she hated waste, cared for her dog's wellbeing, and saw children in need on her street who would eat the food she didn't. Emphasising that it was not because she was ungrateful was an important act for her to mitigate feelings of rudeness and actively show how she was grateful for the support, it was just not always what she needed (again, an issue of the donation-based system of food aid provision).

Turning back to the context of menstrual injustice, these feelings of not wanting to seem ungrateful are further fuelled by menstrual etiquette and the feelings of shame and embarrassment that arise from menstruation and experiencing the double-edged sword of period poverty (menstrual taboo and poverty stigma). This rings back to my argument that the diversity of periods needs to be more widely recognised and appreciated for women to manage their menstruation in a way that works for them (chapter 4). The generosity and good intentions of the recipients also needs to be acknowledged. Daisy was not suggesting

giving back tampons with malicious intent but simply because her household do not use tampons and she wants them to be able to go to a household where they will be used. In a similar way to Beatrix and Samantha – who use their social capital to extend the material resources provided by the foodbank – Daisy wants to enact and expand the local support networks and care for women in her community through the medium of the foodbank volunteers but lacks the social capital and confidence to do so. By suggesting the option of giving menstrual products back to the volunteers, Daisy recognises and highlights the wider reach of the foodbank to support more women experiencing period poverty and menstrual injustice in the local community. As talked about in the previous section, there are hidden local networks of support from women for women experiencing period poverty. These networks often prove to be a solution for women to redistribute any products they receive from the foodbank but do not use. Daisy appears not to have the social capital to redistribute these material resources and needs the established distribution services of the foodbank and its volunteers with a stigma-free perspective to provide localised support and care for other women in need.

8.3.3.2. Symbolic Barriers

As touched upon in the previous section on material barriers, shame and embarrassment are deeply embedded in women's negotiation of period poverty and their navigation of menstrual injustice. The symbolic power of menstrual taboo is, for some women, a large barrier to access which can impact the accessibility of menstrual resources local organisations are offering. Such symbolic power works in subtle and often invisible ways. Organisations may have good intentions in providing access yet be unaware of the broader symbolic barriers in place for some women. I discuss this, drawing on Mary and Marie's experiences of symbolic accessibility of menstrual product provision and menstrual justice support.

Within the frame of menstrual etiquette and symbolic power, Mary (39) reflected on her feelings of embarrassment and shame in asking her friends for menstrual products when she experienced period poverty as a teenager. Mary experienced period poverty when she was younger, living with her mum who was on welfare state benefits for her income. Mary described herself as a proud person and not wanting to ask for help during these times. Not seeking help is a pervasive symbol of menstrual etiquette and taboo which would have exacerbated her feelings of shame in period poverty as a young girl. She said:

“...when I was younger, I'll have definitely been embarrassed. And a bit ashamed. I sort of didn't think about that as a barrier for other people even. But can totally sympathise with young girls and, and I think when you haven't experienced it erm, it's sort of difficult for people to believe that's even a thing. Like that somebody can't afford... I don't know how much they cost now I mean

the ones I would have got were like a pound at the time. But even then some people don't have that erm, in between pay days or in between receiving benefits. So yeah it's embarrassing because erm... how do you talk to your friends about that? Especially if they are not experiencing it as well.”

Mary's embarrassment stemmed from her feelings of being unable to talk to her friends about her experiences. She felt that no one else was experiencing what she was and, because of this, was ashamed of her situation. As discussed in the literature review (chapter 2), periods are personal and often private experiences that most girls and women will experience, but menstrual etiquette conditions women and girls to keep their periods a secret, which has enforced a silence surrounding periods. For Mary, this created feelings of uncertainty and not thinking others could be experiencing a similar situation to her. Perhaps Mary's friends were experiencing period poverty but were all also conditioned to feel embarrassed and ashamed in sharing their experiences? Whatever the case, the symbolic power of menstrual taboo and etiquette left Mary with reduced social capital, materially unsupported, and unable to ask for support from her peers.

The accessibility of products is limited by symbolic power – Mary felt too embarrassed and ashamed to reveal that she did not have the material resources to manage her period, which she assumed everyone else would have. Deepening this point, there are interwoven feelings of embarrassment and jealousy. As a teen, Mary was exposed to the idea of 'better' products (which were branded products). As she explains, Mary felt jealous of her friends who could afford the so-called 'better' products:

“Something that actually I only came to realise recently which might sound a bit ridiculous but I'm happy to share, as a teen I was sort of jealous of my friends who could afford the better branded products. The ones that you see advertised on TV and, and I would have never... if I like needed to borrow one, I wouldn't have wanted to hand over the ones that I had in exchange for what they had, if you see what I mean?”

Already feeling embarrassed by her period now coupled with feelings of jealousy, these compounded to create feelings of shame about both her menstruating body and the types of products she was using to manage it. There is a compounding shame around the (in)accessibility and acceptability of menstrual products in what Mary perceives to be respectable materials to manage menstruation.

Being on benefits, Mary's mother would have been limited to the products she could afford, which were likely to be the cheapest products available. Because of this and the sociocultural idea that there were 'better' products, Mary felt unable to ask her friends for menstrual products in fear of them one day asking her for some, and Mary only being able

to give the ones she had. Internalising the idea of 'better' products creates an invisible trend of acceptable products, which gives more symbolic power to the already deeply embedded concept of menstrual etiquette. Despite being a silenced and secretive experience, it appears trends were created through the advertisement of branded products. Branded products became the preferred products – or at least the assumed preferred products – and anything else was deemed inadequate for managing periods. Because of this (un)acceptability, the accessibility of menstrual products for Mary was symbolically restricted within the widespread frame of menstrual taboo and menstrual etiquette.

Another example of symbolic power in reviewing the accessibility of menstrual products is from Marie's more recent lived experience of navigating menstrual injustice as a mother (see earlier in this chapter for context of Marie's menstrual experiences). Marie spoke about feeling embarrassed and ashamed about asking her family, neighbours and others for help getting menstrual products, reflecting an embedded menstrual taboo. With Marie's daughter being pre-menarche, Marie does not have to purchase menstrual products for them both yet, however she has struggled with affording menstrual products at various points in her life and feels a strong sense of shame and embarrassment when she falls into period poverty (also see chapter 5).

“...it does happen quite often and there's not a lot you can do apart from depending on toilet roll at that point and it's just... it's not the best solution. You hear about it all the time, like you hear about stuff like period poverty and that all the time but I know me daughter's school had a little thing in the reception window like if you just need to, ask. But I don't even think I'd have the... think I'd be a bit too embarrassed to ask.”

Marie explains that “it's just a little sign in the reception window to say that if you're struggling just ask”, which she assumes is just for the parents as her daughter is at primary school where fewer schoolgirls will be menstruating (as the average age for menarche is 12 years old when girls will be at secondary school, NHS 2019b). Seemingly a physically accessible place for women to pick up some menstrual products if they are struggling to get them, Marie said that “I'd just be too embarrassed to ask them though”. The symbolic power of menstrual etiquette and conditioning to conceal one's menstruation makes the accessibility of these menstrual products very inaccessible. Marie experiences the stigmatic obstacle of embarrassment in asking for them.

“Like I say I'd be too embarrassed to go into my daughter's school and ask or anything like that. 'Cos they know me and stuff like that and I don't wanna be all like, oh that's the mother that can't afford and stuff like that.”

The fear of being seen as a 'bad mother' and the implications of concerns around whether Marie can afford other things for her daughter if she cannot afford menstrual products makes this form of menstrual product provision inaccessible for Marie. Through the deeply embedded menstrual stigma and shame associated with periods, poverty, and period poverty, Marie has an internalised symbolic barrier that prevents her from seeking help. This internalised shame is experienced by nearly all menstruating women and most certainly all of the women in this research. It is a form of menstrual injustice. On top of this, the institutional barrier of the school and Marie's position as a mother adds to the inaccessibility of this menstrual product provision. Having to physically ask for menstrual products from the school creates a compounding of structural and symbolic barriers for menstrual justice.

It is not only in the school setting where Marie faces these barriers. Intersecting gender and stigma with these obstacles, Marie talked about a time when she had to ask her neighbour, who was a man, to borrow money to buy menstrual products:

"... one of me neighbours I had to ask, and he was like an older bloke. Literally had nobody else I could contact at the time so was like do you mind if I borrow a couple of quid I need to go and get something. 'Ah well what for?' And you tell them and they're just too afraid to ask any further than that *laughs*"

"It was just really embarrassing especially when someone's like asking what for. Because you feel like something you should be on top of and its not the nicest of conversations to have. Especially with having to ask a bloke *laughs* like you say they don't, they're not exactly sympathetic but *laughs*"

Her neighbour being a man heightened Marie's feelings of embarrassment and shame when asking for help. Her response suggests an embedded idea of menstruation being a 'woman's problem', as well as the perception that men are also embarrassed by talking about and being involved in supporting menstruating women. I point back to section 8.3.1 which discussed the significance of women supporting women through gendered local support networks. Marie did not have other women (whom she felt comfortable with) nearby, so there are symbolic, social, and gendered barriers that intersect to create difficult circumstances for Marie to access help when in need, especially if that help has to come from a man.

Marie recognises this struggle and expresses that she does not want the same for her daughter when she starts menstruating. Marie is conscious of her daughter being vulnerable to period poverty. She says,

“The last thing that I want is a few years down the line for me daughter to be going through the same thing as like ‘aw well how do I get this?’ And being too ashamed to approach the subject like let alone reach out for help about it.”

The assumed role of mothers in preventing their daughters from falling into period poverty is revealed again through Marie’s concern of the symbolic power of menstrual taboo limiting access to material menstrual resources for herself and her daughter.

8.4. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have illustrated how support is available in many ways but is often not formalised. It tends to be women supporting women, although I have highlighted ways in which boys and men can play an active role in championing menstrual justice. Women and girls will have intimately embodied lived experience of what it is like to menstruate, and for the women in this study, what it is like to menstruate without adequate materials. These lived experiences are a driving force in why mothers and daughters go without menstrual products to support their female family members through times of period poverty and menstrual injustice.

As working-class menstruating women, it is revealed how menstrual etiquette plays a role in respectability. I have highlighted how menstrual taboo and shame interacts with women’s access to support. With this frame, I further illustrated that in some places where support is available, it is inaccessible. Barriers to accessibility of support must be recognised to achieve menstrual justice. Yet key to acknowledge is the precarity of support systems because of their position in filling the gap left by the dismantling of the welfare state. It is not the responsibility of grassroots organisations and charities to fill the gap in the welfare state that is causing women to fall into period poverty and experience menstrual injustice. However, such grassroots organisations will continue to serve women in need and support underserved communities until formal state funding and policy is established. Until then, there is no harm in working to improve the grassroots and local support women and girls can receive and fight for menstrual injustice.

Chapter 9. Conclusion: How Can We Achieve Menstrual Justice?

Menstrual injustice and period poverty are very real, current, and devastating experiences and issues for women in England. I undertook my research in a very specific (a global health pandemic) and no longer prevalent context (the UK national lockdowns). Of course, the legacy of austerity discussed in this thesis continues to impact those in vulnerable positions and in underserved communities. The legacy of austerity has been worsened by the COVID-19 global health pandemic, during which the data collection and interviews for this PhD research took place. Whilst my participants had experiences of menstrual injustice over their lifecourse, their experience of talking with me and sharing their current experiences are framed within their lives in the pandemic. For example, my participants did not use the foodbank services before the pandemic (indeed the foodbank did not exist) and many noted they had never used a foodbank before. After my fieldwork, I went away, analysed, and wrote up my thesis over the course of 14 months, a time in which the state of the country has been in turmoil with the UK inching closer to economic and social crisis. It can almost go without saying that under the Conservative government, the most vulnerable in society are the victims with further public service cuts and policies serving to push people deeper into poverty. One year after speaking to women for this research, we are seeing a severe cost of living crisis.

In April 2022, the cost of living rose considerably, severely impacting the vulnerable and financially stretched in society, as well as creating financial tension for those previously in more comfortable financial positions. The energy price cap rose by 54%, water bills rose by 1.7%, council tax rose by 3.5% and cost of renting also rose with an average increase of 8.6% as of February 2022 (Butler, 2022; Wilson and Westwater, 2022). The cost of food and everyday essentials are increasing, with pressure being applied to foodbanks to serve those becoming more and more reliant on food aid to get by (Wilson, 2022). Donations to foodbanks are decreasing whilst the number of people being referred to them is increasing (Kingsley and Zakir-Hussain, 2022). During the pandemic, the government increased Universal Credit incomes by £20 per week but reduced this in October 2021, plunging thousands of people (children included) into vulnerable positions (BBC, 2021). This crisis continues with the energy price cap rising a further 82% in October 2022. The cost of living is dramatically increasing, and this crisis will undeniably worsen and acutely impact my participants and their families.

The impacts of this crisis will be intimately embodied and emotionally charged. Women who were already struggling to afford or access menstrual products will continue to struggle, and their situations will likely worsen when accounting for the intersecting disadvantages they may face. Women who had not struggled before will start to struggle and experience menstrual injustice in shocking and new ways. Women's health and wellbeing is on the line.

There are significant risks to all menstruators and achieving menstrual justice must be prioritised in public health, social and economic policy, and state action. My PhD research emphasises the urgency for further study in this area as the changing landscape of crisis in the UK evolves and cracks in the welfare state, public health, and women's everyday lives deepen.

9.1. Reflections on my Research

This thesis has studied the lived experiences of women navigating period poverty and menstrual injustice in Newcastle upon Tyne. It applies a feminist theoretical approach to show that women face hidden and violent gendered, classed, and structural injustices when navigating their periods. I have produced a cross-disciplinary analysis of what it is like to be a working-class menstruating woman navigating menstrual injustice. Lessons can be learned from my participants' stories in this thesis to show how menstrual injustice is experienced and negotiated in contemporary society in England. This feminist thesis has given voice to my participants and their experiences. Each discussion chapter was created and framed around the stories and experiences my participants told me. An evidence-based approach, this research is significant in raising awareness of period poverty and menstrual injustice for women in England.

I bring this thesis to a conclusion in this chapter. In the following sections I discuss the academic significance and original empirical, conceptual, and methodological contributions of this research and thesis. I examine the social and policy significance of my research. Finally, I reflect on the limitations of my research design and point to areas of further research to be conducted in this field.

9.1.1. Contributions to Research: Empirical, Conceptual, and Methodological

My PhD research makes an original contribution to interdisciplinary social sciences. It is a novel geographic and topical area of research and debate in critical menstruation studies. My thesis provides insights to sociology, human geography, anthropology, and other related social science disciplines. It develops research around austerity, poverty, class, health, and everyday life, and also introduces menstruation for the first time to some of these disciplines (human geography in particular). As I outlined in chapters 1 and 2, period poverty and menstrual injustice in the UK, particularly England, is a severely under-researched area. With only a few studies focussing on women in period poverty in academic research (Briggs, 2020; Vora, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2022), adult women's lived experiences are hidden and ignored among the preference for research and policy action aimed at schoolgirls in England. As I discussed in chapter 2, there is no class-focussed UK-based research or analysis about period poverty and menstrual injustice. Further, there is no existing research using

the concept of menstrual injustice. This lack of research makes my PhD a conceptually, empirically, and methodologically original contribution, and a significant piece of research.

A significant conceptual contribution of this research is the development of the concept of menstrual injustice. My findings revealed that women experience an intimate intersection of gendered, classed, and violent obstacles which are not fully appreciated or recognised within current definitions of 'period poverty'. Menstrual injustice as an intellectual term conceptualises a broader set of circumstances and conditions which create an uneven landscape for working-class women. Menstrual injustice is a valuable concept because it acknowledges period poverty as a struggle for some working-class women, but also recognises that period poverty is only a part of a wider set of unequal structural, political, and personal conditions which women must navigate when menstruating. I make my claim for the idea of menstrual injustice alongside my argument that a lack of money for menstrual products is the biggest barrier for women experiencing menstrual injustice. What is important is to recognise how access to products is intersected with structural issues of taboo and stigma, and experiences of homelessness, gender-based violence, precarious employment, and personal situations.

The significance of my research is strengthened through my empirical findings, which illustrate the detrimental physical and mental impacts of women's struggle to afford or access menstrual products. Taking a feminist approach, my empirical research and thesis provide a detailed and thorough account of 38 women's lived experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne to highlight the urgency with which more research, activism, and policy must be undertaken to achieve menstrual justice.

Over the next few paragraphs, I explore the empirical and conceptual contributions I made in each analysis chapter. I do this to highlight the overall findings and larger significance of my research and thesis.

In chapter 4 I laid the empirical foundations for understanding that the ways in which period poverty and menstrual injustice is experienced by women depends on an individual's menstrual experience. All women have different periods and menstrual experiences, therefore how they manage their period impacts upon their experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice. My analysis centred on the menstrual product, because when my participants spoke about their experiences of menstrual injustice, it was predominantly about their struggles stemming from the absence of menstrual products. I discussed the importance of menstrual product choice in women's navigation of menstrual injustice and explored how women's choice in the type of menstrual product they use is significant in how they experience their period, period poverty, and menstrual injustice. In the chapter I also introduced the expense of menstrual management, which impacts upon women's

experience and navigation of period poverty and menstrual injustice because menstrual products were too expensive to buy.

I developed these ideas through chapter 5, which focussed specifically on experiences of period poverty as a lack of money. I discussed how a lack of money from Universal Credit, part-time employment incomes, and circumstantial poverty left women struggling to afford menstrual products after paying for their other essential expenses. I used respectability as a conceptual scaffold upon which to build my analysis in the chapter and following chapters to show how disruption to menstrual products impacts women's ability to participate in their everyday lives in various ways.

I argued that the idea of respectability is important for the women in my research because menstruation complicates being a working-class woman: the women in this thesis were othered in three ways: as working-class, as women, and as menstruators. Being a working-class menstruating woman is a vulnerable position in British society. Alongside working-class stigmatisation and patriarchal othering of women as second-class citizens, menstruation has been stigmatised at a social, cultural, and historical level. These intimately impact access to and knowledge of capital, legitimacy and moral authority when negotiating menstrual justice.

As introduced in chapter 5, women sought respectability through finding materials to feel clean and thus gain a sense of dignity. Respectability highlights why working-class women use and need menstrual products to feel respectable. This is even more so when they have different access to capitals and experience structural issues such as austerity, social class, menstrual stigma, and living in underserved communities. These disrupt their ability to manage their period and sense of respectability. Removing menstrual products as a focus for organisations supporting women and calls for funding serves to devalue the resources working-class women rely on to participate in everyday life. Taking away the source of women's mobility in period management plunges them into period poverty, which has detrimental impacts on women's lives, health, and wellbeing. My thesis shows that the everyday impact of not having menstrual products to manage one's period is debilitating and engenders deeper feelings of shame and taboo for women.

In chapter 5, I also introduced the messy materiality that women must navigate when experiencing period poverty. This messy materiality highlighted the reality of periods as bloody, fleshy, and often physically messy to experience. It is intimately embodied and coupled with sociohistorical legacies of menstrual taboo, stigmatisation of the menstruating woman, and class-based stigma. Ideas of dignity and hygiene were identified as central to the ways in which women mentally and physically navigated being in period poverty and their sense of respectability. I argue that the importance of feeling clean when menstruating cannot be overlooked in research. Scholarly and activist critiques of the term 'feminine

hygiene' and myths of period blood as polluted are symbolically valuable in different ways for menstruators and in different areas of menstruation scholarship. However, for the women in my research hygiene and cleanliness were incredibly important in navigating the messy materiality of period poverty and menstrual injustice. Menstrual crankiness was a key concept to explore the more difficult aspects of menstrual experience in my analysis, including not having materials to manage one's period and the more painful, uncomfortable, and at times traumatic physical and mental impacts this had for the women in my research. Taking a cranky approach helped to conceptually deepen our understanding of individual women's menstrual experience, which validates the different needs of women. This can assist in providing better support and understanding for women (and menstruating people, as I reflect on later) when seeking menstrual justice.

I add that menstrual stigma plays a large symbolic role in women's everyday lived experiences of menstrual injustice, but the actual real and lived ability to participate in everyday life without fear of leaking or having to use inadequate, makeshift materials is more important. This theme was explored throughout all the analysis chapters, but particularly in chapter 5 where I found that there are very real, tangible, and embodied impacts of not having suitable menstrual products. As menstrual products allow women to participate in everyday life, I argue that they are important and should not be relegated to the side line as an irrelevant or unhelpful tool to tackle menstrual injustice. My empirical contribution supports my argument that there needs to be more urgency in addressing 'period poverty' for women experiencing it on the ground than in engaging with abstract theories of how menstrual products are reinforcing menstrual stigma.

In chapter 6, I identified that period poverty and menstrual injustice are not isolated or singular experiences. This empirical contribution illustrated that women can fall in and out of struggle over their lifecourse for different reasons. In my thesis, period poverty over the lifecourse was strongly determined by whether working-class women were in or out of work, their living situation, their relationship, and their familial circumstances. This is a significant empirical contribution from my research because it points to the longevity and deep rootedness of period poverty in women's lives. Period poverty is not something which has been experienced by women since 2016, when it was first conceived by the media; it has been an issue for 40 years and more.

Chapter 7 is particularly key for my conceptual contribution of developing menstrual injustice. I brought together findings to illustrate how gender-based violence including sexual assault and financial abuse, experiences of homelessness, and having to save money to afford the preferred menstrual product all create a landscape of inequality and injustice in how women can manage their periods. I argued that these are often hidden experiences, particularly when using the term 'period poverty' which denotes a particular set of

circumstances for menstrual injustice. Recognising these experiences highlights other significant gendered, violent, and structural obstacles to menstrual management and menstrual justice other than money.

Finally, chapter 8 illustrated how care and support on a local level is given mainly by other women, often those who have experiences of struggle themselves. Men and boys can play a positive role in caring and supporting the menstruating women in their lives, but it was less commonly talked about and, as I discuss in the next section of this chapter, men are a stark absence in my research and thesis. More formal organisations offered support for women, which in many ways was well-received and appreciated, however my participants identified ways in which sometimes this support could be inaccessible and inappropriate for their individual needs. This is empirically significant as evidence to improve services seeking to support women with their periods.

Before moving on to the social and policy significance of my research, I must re-state the methodological contribution my research offers. In particular, using telephone interviews as the main source of gathering data proved highly successful, despite concerns expressed in existing methodological literatures. As I discussed in chapter 3, certain aspects of interviewing over the telephone including anonymity, flexibility, widened participation for the women I spoke to, and minimal restrictions in data quality made telephone interviewing a successful and efficient method for collecting data on a sensitive topic. Of course, there were challenges (the financial cost of participating, occasional disrupted audibility, and a lack of non-verbal cues), but overall telephone interviews produced a high-quality, ethically rigorous, and inclusive research experience for my participants and myself.

The success of telephone interviews presents a significant methodological contribution to qualitative research, particularly in a growing post-pandemic era of remote and online working and research. Face-to-face interviews are no longer the 'gold standard' for ethically rigorous and high-quality research, particularly on sensitive topics, and I have illustrated how telephone interviews are perhaps preferable for women recollecting traumatic experiences to someone who is effectively a stranger. They can have an incredibly positive and significant role in qualitative social science research and should be embraced.

9.1.2. Contributions to Research: Public and Policy

As explored in chapter 1, the policy focus in England has been on school pupils at state-funded primary, secondary, and further education institutions. As I discussed in chapters 7 and 8, adult women in England have no centralised or national funding for menstrual health care and support. Charities and grassroots organisations, like the foodbank I volunteered at during this research, are filling the gap in the welfare state (see chapter 8). The state and local authorities need to take responsibility for menstrual health as part of public health and

provide funding and structural support for menstrual justice. An achievable, tried and tested solution is to follow Scotland's lead by making access to menstrual products a legal right (which they did in August 2022) (Barry, 2022; BBC, 2022). My research empirically evidences the physical and mental hardship women face when they do not have access to menstrual products. Providing menstrual products in public spaces, such as local libraries and public toilets, is an excellent first step toward achieving menstrual justice. Not only will this help working-class women, like those in my study, but will also help women with incontinence, girls and women caught short, homeless women, victims of GBV, women experiencing miscarriage, workers, volunteers, and anyone who menstruates to participate in their everyday life. Without centralised funding or financial support from local authorities, charities and foodbanks will have to continue to fill the gaps of a weakening welfare state, and the landscape of preventing period poverty in England will always be fractured.

There is public health significance to my research. Drawing on Hennegan et al's (2021) definition of menstrual health (see chapter 2), access to menstrual products, an environment free from stigma and taboo, access to menstrual education, and access to healthcare services are all vital in achieving good menstrual health. My research highlights the struggles working-class women can face in accessing good menstrual health. The structural barriers are particularly significant, as access to good menstrual health for my participants is a complex intersection of financial, sociocultural, gendered, systemic, and symbolic obstacles to having good menstrual health. As I have illustrated in my research, not having menstrual products, facing taboo and stigma, GBV, homelessness, and financial precarity all play a part in diminishing women's good menstrual health. Poor menstrual health restricts women's everyday lives and their physical and mental health in significant ways. Therefore, my research can be read with a public health lens to highlight the social and economic barriers to menstrual healthcare service provision in underserved communities in England.

Finally, my research has educational significance. I draw specifically on chapters 4, 7 and 8 here to highlight the significance my research findings can have for organisations seeking to support women experiencing menstrual injustice. Chapter 4 illustrates the importance of 'knowing your normal'. By this I mean it is significant for women to get to know their bodies and menstrual cycle to understand what a normal period is for them. Every woman has a different menstrual experience which arguably differs from the biomedical model girls and women in the UK are taught at school (NHS, 2019a). Knowing that everyone's menstrual experience is different and 'knowing your normal' is highly significant in navigating menstrual management and accessing healthcare for menstrual justice.

Chapters 7 and 8 demonstrate the need for organisations such as homeless hostels and foodbanks to recognise the diversity and subjectivity of menstrual experience. I begin with a

caveat that, of course, these organisations run on a donation basis. There is little or no state funding and these organisations are taking on the responsibility of the welfare state. This means there is often very little room for manoeuvre when it comes to being able to provide the type of menstrual product every woman wants. As I argued in chapter 8, until state funding becomes available it is important that grassroots organisations continue to support women in need. However, if organisations and charities wanted to improve their service and better understand the needs of their service users, my research provides an overview of some of the struggles women face when using homeless hostel and foodbank services.

From an educational and service-user standpoint, small changes can be made until policy is in place. For example, perhaps foodbank volunteers can take a selection of menstrual products for recipients to choose, or if there is scope, organisations can deliver a survey of what type of products women would prefer and add this to their database. For example, when I volunteered at the foodbank, I was given a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with information on; this could be a space for detailing the menstrual needs of individual women and their households. Of course, not all women would participate in the survey, but perhaps it is a place to start. In homeless hostels, menstrual products could be made readily available for women to take without having to ask. These small changes would take a big step toward improved provision but also deconstructing stigma barriers in place by opening a conversation about menstrual health needs for recipients and organisations alike.

9.1.3. Research Design Limitations and Questions for Further Research

My research has demonstrated how menstrual injustice is a valuable way to conceptualise women's experiences of period poverty and menstrual inequality. In this section I provide some reflections on the limitations of my research design. In practice, these design limitations come from restricted capacity, time, and funding for one person completing a PhD, which is a significant and lengthy piece of research. However, I found that reflecting on my research design limitations opened important questions and debates for further research around period poverty, menstrual injustice, and menstruation more generally. I therefore present some questions for further research in this section too.

As introduced in chapter 3, I use feminist methodologies to frame my research and focus on women's experiences of menstrual injustice. Ethnographic participant observation and relational interviewing methods assisted me in understanding and answering my research questions. There are, of course, limitations to my choices in methods (see chapter 3) and limitations to who I could reach and learn from. This research focuses on adult women but as previously mentioned, not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women (Laws, 1990; Bobel, 2010). The voices and experiences of menstruating people who do not identify as women, such as transmen, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people, are

not heard in this research. This is, in part, because of my methodological framing but also the geographical and sociocultural locale in which I chose to ground my study. More research must be done to hear the experiences of those who menstruate and do not identify as women. As I discussed in chapter 2, we have been socialised to directly assume reproductive health, including menstruation, with a person's gender but contemporary society is changing, recognising gender as something which is constructed and fluid. There is a rise of research and activism around trans-rights and gender non-conformity, and transgender men and non-binary/non-conforming people who menstruate (Chrisler *et al.*, 2016; Frank, 2020; Frank and Dellaria, 2020; Rydström, 2020). Research is needed on the lived experiences of menstruators who do not identify as women and how they negotiate menstrual injustice in their everyday lives. Their stories are just as important in the debates for menstrual justice.

Equally, the racial and ethnicity demographic of my research design is narrow. As I outlined in chapter 3, East Newcastle has over 90% White British residents and all but 3 of my participants were White British. Of course, this reflects the population of my specific research area which remains a valid methodological frame. However, a more ethnically diverse sample might reveal racialised and cultural differences in how and why menstrual injustice is experienced and navigated. More research in this area, and with a wider ethnic demographic pool, is crucial to deepen our knowledge and understanding of how women of different backgrounds experience menstrual injustice. The sociocultural nuances in how and why women negotiate menstrual injustice is critical for more holistic, inclusive, and sensitive action to achieve menstrual justice for all women in the UK.

Another important consideration for menstrual justice is to look more widely and deeply at menstrual health conditions. I have touched on but not deeply examined the role of menstrual health conditions for working-class women, and how this has different impacts upon women's navigation of menstrual justice. There is evidence of more complex struggle for participants like Daisy and Clara who have PCOS, but this was not the focus of my research and therefore we did not explore the role of their health condition on their experiences in great detail. More research is needed into how menstrual health conditions impact women's menstrual experience, and thus how women with PCOS, endometriosis, fibroids and other conditions need more tailored support and understanding of their needs to achieve menstrual justice.

Building on this area for further research, women's experiences of perimenopause and the menopause needs focussed attention for menstrual justice research. Continuing a lifecourse approach of perimenopausal/menopausal women would be valuable in understanding the longevity of period poverty and menstrual injustice for working-class women. Menopause changes the menstrual cycle in varied ways, but common symptoms include heavier and

temporally longer periods. Women would need more menstrual products to manage this. This is currently overlooked in research, public health work, and policy. The Hormonal Replacement Therapy (HRT) prescription change made in 2021 (one prescription for a year of HRT) is an important step in the right direction towards improving menstrual health and women's healthcare (PharmaTimes, 2021). But what of those who cannot afford the prescription? Or of those women who cannot afford the bus to the GP, like Lily? Through engaging with the lifecourse approach, participants of a range of ages, and rich qualitative research about the longevity of period poverty as a social health issue, I identify a gap in knowledge, research, and policy/healthcare provision in this area.

Menstrual research is also significantly able-bodied, and this research is no exception. There is an absence of empirical research about the disabled body and experiences of periods for those with disabilities or impairments (Nair, 2021). Whilst many of my participants received disability benefits, the reasons for this and the impact their disability or impairment has on their periods and navigation of menstrual injustice was not discussed. Empirical research about how people with disabilities and impairments navigate menstrual injustices is critical for more inclusive and impactful research, policy, and change for menstruating women and people.

Another question for further research was raised several times when presenting my research at academic conferences. Research on menstrual justice needs to begin to think about sustainability. Menstruation and sustainability are growing concerns of menstrual activists, however there are class politics involved in this debate which go unnoticed. When it comes to disposable menstrual products, debates around period poverty and supporting working-class women with single-use menstrual products is often the focus. This centres working-class women, who are more likely to experience period poverty, in these critiques about sustainability and periods. In doing this, the women who have never struggled to buy products who are also using disposable menstrual products go unnoticed. Middle-class women will have more financial, educational, and spatial resources to use sustainable products, but will not be for various reasons (possibly product reliability or familiarity, discussed in chapter 4). These debates around sustainability and period poverty risk devaluing working-class women's capital, especially material capital of menstrual products, which as I have discussed in this thesis are important for women's everyday lives. I find that these debates around sustainability in the context of period poverty effectively say that the way working-class women choose to manage their period is not valued in society, and they are the problem with unsustainable menstruation. At the same time, there is no accountability for the middle/upper-class women who use the same products, which creates problematic class politics around this issue.

Having said this, finding more sustainable ways to achieve menstrual justice could be very valuable from a personal circumstance and environment perspective. Beginning with education and exposure to reusable menstrual products at a young age will assist with product familiarity for girls at menarche. Organisations who give out disposable menstrual products could work to tailor the support they give so products are not wasted or left unused. Sessions designed for adult women to learn about and become familiar with different reusable menstrual products could be delivered by women's organisations with the aim of assisting women to using more sustainable products. Options are available, but a lot of it will depend on the capacity and funding organisations and educational institutions receive to determine whether such initiatives are feasible.

9.1.4. Disseminating the Research

Throughout my PhD I disseminated my research orally at a range of academic conferences including the Menstruation Research Network Annual Conference, the British Sociological Association Annual Conference, and The Royal Geographical Society Annual Conference. I participated in several smaller sessions, including Gender Based Violence seminars and the Newcastle University Methods Group YouTube learning sessions.

By far, orally presenting my research was what I felt most comfortable with. As I'm sure many PhD researchers feel, I had imposter syndrome and experienced a lack of self-confidence in my work and ability to disseminate so held off in the written format. Having said that, I did present findings occasionally and informally with the use of social media, both on Twitter and Instagram. Notably, I utilised Instagram (where I also recruited several participants) as a platform for engagement. Throughout the writing up phase I updated and posted insights and findings onto the channel in a written and visual format to make the research accessible. Whenever I spoke at a conference, I tweeted about my presentation to open conversations about my research to anyone who might be interested.

However, deeper, more meaningful, and long-lasting dissemination of my research to the academic community, the women's organisation I worked with, my participants, and the wider public is significant and is a driver in my completion of a PhD in the first place.

At the time of writing, I have kept in touch with the women's organisation and intend to share my findings with them. I will share key findings in the form of a short report I made which has patiently been waiting for my own confidence boost post-viva. Following this, I will work with the organisation if they wish to use my findings and data for their own social media and support work to improve their service and lives of the women they support. The report is in an accessible format but still retains a significant amount of text. I aim to synthesise and reduce this even further to a compact format to give to my participants. This

will most likely take the form of a Zine, which is a high impact and low-cost feminist form of presenting research in an accessible and radical way.

9.2. Menstrual Justice is a Social Justice Issue

Finally, in this section I want to re-state that menstrual justice is a social issue. As a social issue it is crucial to recognise that, although my thesis has focused on women, menstrual justice is not a woman's problem. Achieving menstrual justice needs the involvement of men. In this section I therefore address a large absence in my thesis: men. By this, I mean the absence of partners, husbands, and other men who may or may not be involved in my participant's menstruating lives.

Overwhelmingly, this PhD is about women and their lived experiences.

The first thing to remember is the feminist nature of this thesis and my engagement with feminist standpoint theory. This plays a large role in why the focus is on women's lives, with their experiences at the forefront. Feminist standpoint theory structured the design of my thesis, the way the chapters were created around women's experiences, and validates my methodological choices of talking only to women. The conversations my participants and I had in the interviews concentrated on women's personal experience, with an emphasis on how *they* managed their periods in *their* times of struggle. Because of this, few women moved the conversation to discuss the men in their lives. However, we must reflect on this absence of men in this thesis and in my interviews with women because, as I introduced in this section, menstrual injustice is a social justice issue which needs the involvement of men to tackle.

Of course, there are men and boys in these women's lives. Indeed, in chapter 8 I highlighted the positive role Nichola's son played in supporting his mother and sister with menstrual products from his school, and the men in Clara's life who are willing and active in supporting her menstrual needs. However, as I identified at other points in my thesis, most women have more negative experiences of navigating menstrual injustice, period poverty, and menstrual stigma when men are present. Take Beatrix's experience of domestic abuse from her ex-husband, and Sharon's experience of sexual assault from a man as I discussed in chapter 7, for example. With the focus on periods, their reflection on the violence these men enacted was minimal (this is likely a survival strategy), instead moving to talk about how *they* managed *their* periods because of this. It is also notable that most of the women I spoke to were single. Many were single mothers who did not have partners or husbands to share the financial burden of menstruation for themselves or their daughters.

Fundamentally, negative experiences tend to dominate, and this is not surprising considering the gendered sociocultural stigma around menstruation and patriarchal myths

about the menstruating woman. However, positive experiences and men's interest in supporting menstruating women are there, have been (somewhat briefly) explored in my thesis, and need to be heard. Because I only spoke to women in this research, we do not hear the experiences of single fathers, brothers, sons, and male friends who support the menstruating women in their lives. These are important and valuable insights that need research, particularly in the context of menstrual injustice. Educational curriculums need to engage boys in learning about the menstrual cycle and women's health at the same time girls get their first 'period talk'. This will help break the gendered stigma around menstruation, because without engaging men in this discussion, the idea of menstruation as a 'woman's problem' is reinforced. Menstrual justice is a social justice issue, and it cannot be examined in isolation from non-menstruating men.

9.3. Chapter Conclusion

Lessons can be learned from my participants in how menstrual injustice is experienced and negotiated in contemporary society in England in a myriad of ways. These lessons open up an avenue through which we can more directly, accurately, and holistically work towards menstrual justice in England and the UK more widely. The intimate everyday lived experiences my participants shared with me are critical in understanding the complexity, longevity, and subjectivity of menstrual injustice. These findings in turn bring attention to how we must approach menstrual justice with nuance and intersectional approach in order to enact positive impact and change. My PhD offers significant and original contributions to research and action for fighting for menstrual justice.

Epilogue

There is so much that remains unsaid in my thesis. The conversations I had with women covered much more than their experiences of period poverty and menstrual injustice. In conversation with my participants, I found that these experiences were not isolated from other menstrual experience, discussion of childbirth, wider gynae health talk, and motives for participating. I use this space to share the reasons why the women I spoke to chose to participate in my research, and why this reflection is significant.

Most of the women participated in this research for reasons wider than sharing their experiences of period poverty. This is illustrated in my development of the term menstrual injustice, as there is more to menstrual inequality than what is understood by the term 'period poverty'. As a way of building rapport, the participants and I had mutual conversations about our periods, finding comfort in commonalities and curiosity in hearing about new or different experiences. At the end of each interview, I asked why they had decided to take part in the research. Some of these were directly related to sharing their experiences of period poverty for research but many were not, focusing more on menstrual experience in general.

There are four main wider reasons why my participants chose to participate, beyond sharing their experiences of menstrual injustice, that I share in this epilogue. The first was from a desire to empower girls and other women. Secondly, and in relation to the first reason, some of the women stressed the importance of knowing what's *your* normal when it comes to your period and understanding menstrual health better. The third main reason was wanting girls to have a better education than they had themselves. Finally, some women wanted to share their experiences to help improve services and support for themselves and women in their situation.

In addition, an overarching reason these women chose to take part in the research was their desire to help. Help research, help the foodbank, help themselves, and help others. The generosity of my participants cannot be overlooked or dismissed. It is only through their generosity and willingness to participate that my research took flight and I have things to write about. As such, I feel it important to share their reasons for participating in an epilogue because they not only validate these women's experiences but also gives strength to the ethical quality I strive for in this research.

Empowering Women and Girls

“... 'coz every little helps. 'Coz it's like building up another woman's confidence and sharing like how each woman feels. On their period, you know what I mean?”

The first main reason for women choosing to talk to me for my research was because they wanted to empower other women and girls. Like Katie (28), who is quoted above, the women in my research showed a keen interest in sharing their menstrual experiences to show girls and women they are not alone in the diversity of periods. Further, a desire to open conversations about periods and demonstrate that it is not taboo to talk to others about them, especially if they are troublesome in terms of period pain, menstrual flow, or difficult symptoms of menstrual health conditions. Similarly, Laurel expressed her motives for participation:

“...because more people have to read this you know. More people need to look into this and... d’you know the hoards of women that look at it and go ‘fucking yes! Yes that’s me! That’s my life!’ you know like they will do that and so yeh, people like you need to be heard so yeh.”

Empowering women and girls to talk, learn, and be unashamed of their menstruation was an emphatic contributing factor for why my participants wanted to speak to me for my research.

Menstrual Health

Menstrual health was another significant topic some women talked about in the research interviews. Through sharing their stories, the women expressed the importance of menstrual health literacy. Knowing their periods and knowing what is normal for them was an especially significant point of discussion directed by my participants.

Specifically for Brenda (28), the importance of knowing her normal – and recognising when her period was not quite right – saved her life. Changes in Brenda’s period when she was in her early twenties encouraged her to seek help when she knew she was not experiencing her normal period. When she was 22 her period suddenly stopped and after seeking medical help discovered she had a rare form of ovarian cancer. The tumour was removed and after a few days of Brenda’s period went back to ‘normal’. A couple of years later, when she was 24, Brenda’s menstrual flow suddenly became unusually heavy. Seeking medical attention again, Brenda found out she had cervical cancer, which resulted in a hysterectomy at the age of 25.

Brenda emphasised that it was ‘knowing her normal’ that saved her life. Without changes to her period – changes that were unusual to her – Brenda would not have sought out medical help, and the ovarian and cervical cancers would not have been treated. These experiences were a significant reason for Brenda wanting to participate in my research. She said:

“I think sharing your situation can help somebody else hopefully. And I've had such a colourful life I'm not even, I'm not embarrassed by it or anything at all so. [...] I've always said that it's so like... the first thing, I think it's so important to know your own period. Obviously because if I hadn't known my own period like I might not even be here 'cos erm obviously I had it twice. And like it [cancer] came back.”

Helping to Improve Girls' Menstrual Education

The third key reason why women decided to take part in the research was because they wanted to help girls access a better and more detailed education about periods than they had. Several participants talked about not knowing what periods were and feeling panicked when they started their first period because they did not know the cause or reason for suddenly finding blood in the toilet or their underwear. Many of my participants expressed a desire to help improve the next generation of menstruating girls' education, so they would not be shocked and unprepared at menarche. Queen explained that she wanted to give girls “what we never had when we were like their age”, including access to stigma-free menstrual education.

There was also a consensus that much still needs to change in relation to menstruation: menstrual justice, stigma, taboo, and wider gendered social issues. For example, Jade explains that:

“There's still so many issues around equality and around women's issues, gender issues whatever, like there's still so many questions to ask and like we're not as far ahead as we think we are you know. There's still a lot of problems in our society, and like we really need to, you know, be doing this sort of research. We need to sort of have it in the public eye, you know. That these are questions that haven't been answered yet. These are issues that haven't had enough investigation into them yet.”

Highlighting that there are many questions still to be asked and answered, Jade decided to participate to help improve education and future directions for research. Further, and leading into the final set of participation reasons, Jade said she wanted to help because she believes more research is needed in this area.

Interest in Topic and Helping Research

All the women showed an interest in the research topic and a desire to help with menstruation research. As illustrated through my thesis, all the women who participated had a personal interest in the research topic. This was from both personal experience of

menstrual injustice specifically and just taking the opportunity to be able to participate in a piece of research they can speak to with lived experience about menstruation. Josephine (25) said:

“...when I see a piece of research that I could actually help with, I understand how difficult it is to get participants, part of that sung to me first but also I'm fed up of living in a world where periods aren't recognised or struggles with periods aren't recognised.”

Similarly to this, Mary explained that she wanted to help with the research because:

“Just that I think it's something that does need to be talked about more. Researched more, like what you're doing because I think that it's something that has been a bit taboo. There's so many different issues but it's kind of like a thing of, oh well every woman experiences it every month so it's not like... I don't know if there's an opinion that it can't be that bad um and that you are just like meant to get on with it, but it can be years of issues for people. It can really affect people's lives.”

Both Josephine and Mary speak to the longstanding taboo and sociocultural history of periods as 'something to get on with', not always recognised as troublesome, and that more research and acknowledgment of women's lived experience is needed in research and general discussion of menstruation.

Setting out to recruit participants, I was told by several different people that I would find it hard to find women who wanted to talk to me about their periods. In some cases I talked to researchers who had struggled to access participants on this topic themselves because a gatekeeper thought the women they worked with did not want to talk about it. The assumption is made by both gatekeeper and researcher that women do not want to talk about their experiences of menstrual injustice.

My thesis and research has challenged this assumption. All of my participants were keen to participate in the research for a range of valid, valuable, personal, and wider reasons. I argue that by assuming women do not want to talk about their experiences or strongly stating that it will be hard to find participants only acts to perpetuate menstrual taboo and the idea that periods should be kept secret and silenced. This serves to severely limit empirical research about menstrual injustice and women's lived experiences of it because we assume they will not want to talk to us. By not opening a conversation in this way and at least trying to conduct research to explore women's struggle and socioeconomic hardship in managing periods, we are silencing menstruation and continuing to hide the injustices that surround them.

I write this epilogue to show the willingness of women to share their menstrual story. Perhaps this epilogue is a way for me to make peace with my position as a middle-class woman writing about working-class women's lives. Emphatically more than this, however, is the fact that the women I spoke to were incredibly generous and giving with their time and experiences and I want their stories to be heard. Their stories deserve to be heard. This epilogue presents just a snapshot of the generosity and care women take in helping other women and girls. I share their reasons for participating because it further validates my participant's experiences and gives voice to what is left unsaid in my thesis, restricted by research aims and questions.

Participants are active social agents in any research process. If they do not want to talk about something they will not talk about it. If women do not want to talk about their menstrual experience and injustices they face in relation to periods, they will not participate in the research. Indeed I had many women choose not to participate after initial context during my recruitment phase. I have thus written this short epilogue to show how many women do actually want to share their menstrual experiences for a range of reasons. Women are interested in helping make social change for girls and women, grow knowledge on the topic, and participate in achieving menstrual justice. This should be taken as a positive sign to move forward and increase critical menstruation research, all acting to achieve menstrual justice in the UK.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

<https://www.stylist.co.uk/life/period-poverty-uk-pandemic->



**£10
voucher
for taking
part!**

Participants Needed!

Have you ever struggled to afford to buy period products?

Can you spare 30 minutes to have a phone conversation about your period?

Lottie needs to talk to women in Newcastle about their periods and times its been hard to afford period products.
Can you help?

Text/call Lottie on 07518 024008 if you can take part.

All conversations will be **anonymous** and **confidential**. You must be



over 16 years old to participate in this research.



Economic and Social Research Council

Appendix B: Information Sheet 1

Participants Needed!

Hello! My name is Lottie and I am a research student at Newcastle University. Originally from London, I am proud to have Newcastle as my home for the past 5 years. I started volunteering with [REDACTED] in October and you might have seen me out and about delivering food (although wearing a face covering and a few steps back from your doorstep!).



As a research student, I am doing a 3-year long project about periods, how women manage them, and any barriers women face to getting period products. It is a very under-researched area, which is a problem for women's rights and social justice. My research is UK-based, focusing on women in Newcastle and specifically women living in East End and West End Newcastle. I need women living in Newcastle to be involved and share their period stories for this research.

I am looking to chat with women for around 30 minutes about their personal experiences of periods and any problems accessing or affording period products. This means any times it was hard to;

- Afford period products
- Get hold of period products
- Have a choice in period products (pads, tampons etc)

I am also interested in finding out how different women manage their periods differently; for example if there are any items that help you deal with periods (e.g. a hot water bottle or ibuprofen) or if there are places that are better or worse for managing periods (i.e. at home or elsewhere).

These experiences will help to build an important evidence base about the barriers and difficulties women may face when managing their periods. It will help tackle struggles of menstrual inequality and take steps towards improving period research, women's rights and social justice. All conversations will be confidential and made anonymous.

You will receive a **£10 supermarket voucher** as a thank you for your time and participation.

How to get in touch:

Please feel free to ring or text/WhatsApp me on **07518 024008** if you would like to be involved or get some more information about my research.

You can also email me directly at theeverydayperiod@newcastle.ac.uk.

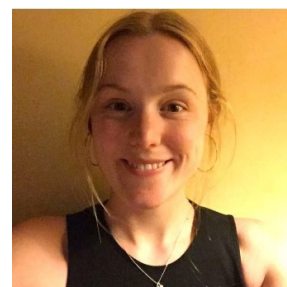


Appendix C: Information Sheet 2



The Everyday Period Research Information Sheet

Hello! My name is Lottie and I am a research student at Newcastle University. I am funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. I am interested in making research accessible and working with young women as experts about their menstruation experiences for this particular project. Originally from London, I am proud to have Newcastle as my home for the past 5 years.



About the Research Project

As a research student, I am doing a 3-year long project about periods, how women manage them, and any barriers women face to getting period products. It is a very under-researched area, which is a problem for women's rights and social justice. My research is UK-based, focusing on women in Newcastle and specifically women living in East End and West End Newcastle. I need women living in Newcastle to be involved and share their period stories for this research.

I am looking to chat with women for around 30 minutes about their personal experiences of periods and any problems accessing or affording period products. This means any times it was hard to;

- Afford period products
- Get hold of period products
- Have a choice in period products (pads, tampons etc)

I am also interested in finding out how different women manage their periods differently; for example if there are any items that help you deal with periods (e.g. a hot water bottle or ibuprofen) or if there are places that are better or worse for managing periods (i.e. at home or elsewhere).

These experiences will help to build an important evidence base about the barriers and difficulties women may face when managing their periods. It will help tackle struggles of menstrual inequality and take steps towards improving period research, women's rights and social justice. All conversations will be confidential and made anonymous.

Data Security

The information or 'data' produced in these methods will be securely stored and password protected, accessible only by myself and not shared in its original form. For confidentiality, you will be made anonymous in the final report using chosen pseudonyms (a different name than yours to use in the written research). This data will primarily go towards a written PhD thesis at Newcastle University, and it might also be used in published academic articles, book chapters and reports.

How to get in touch:

Please feel free to ring or text/WhatsApp me on **07518 024008**.

You can also email me directly at theeverydayperiod@newcastle.ac.uk.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form



SCHOOL OF GEOGRAPHY, POLITICS AND SOCIOLOGY

Negotiating and Managing Periods and 'Period Poverty' in Everyday Life

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

Please read the research information on the separate page before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from this, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to take part. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Read through the points below, checking off each one to make sure you understand what you are volunteering for.

Name:

- I confirm that I have read the statement about the research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can leave the project at any time, without needing to give a reason.
- I consent to giving personal experiences for the research.
- I understand that the research will be anonymised and data received is protected and confidential.
- I know how to contact the researcher should I have any questions or problems.
- I give permission for the data I provide to be used in the final research product and published in academic articles, book chapters and reports.

Please sign your name below (digitally is fine, i.e. typing your name on the line), to show you consent to participate in this research.

X _____

Researcher: Lottie Rhodes, contact via email at theeverydayperiod@newcastle.ac.uk or phone on 07518 024008.

Appendix E: Debrief Information Sheet



Economic
and Social
Research Council



Debrief Information

Project Title: How Women Negotiate and Manage their Periods and 'Period Poverty' in their Daily Lives

Thank you for participating in this research project.

Your participation in this study contributes to my findings. Your knowledge and expertise on this topic provide the data which I will analyse to answer the questions this research investigates. The activities you were involved in for this project will primarily be used in the written product for this project (my PhD thesis), as well as published in academic articles, book chapters and reports. Your pseudonym will be used when referring directly to anything you said, and direct quotes may be used. By using the pseudonyms, you will not be identifiable.

I remind you of your right to withdraw from the research project at this stage. If you do not want the data you produced to be used in the written product of this project please email (theeverydayperiod@newcastle.ac.uk) or text (07518 024008) me to let me know.

If you would like more information about the study or would like to know about what my findings are when all the data have been collected and analysed then please feel free to contact me on theeverydayperiod@newcastle.ac.uk. I hope to be able to produce a short booklet with the main findings on for you to keep at the end of the project (approximately December 2023).

Thank you again for helping me with my research project.

Lottie

Tel: 07518 024008

Appendix F: Initial Ethics Approval (Interviews)

Newcastle University

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee

Review of Application for Ethical Approval

Researcher: Lottie Rhodes

Title: *How Young Women Negotiate and Manage their Periods and 'Period Poverty' in their Daily Lives*

Date: 02/06/2020

Ethics reviewer: Prof Shirley Jordan

Thank you for submitting your application for ethics review.

This is a terrific – and terrifically important – research project. Ethical issues are carefully and comprehensively thought through. You have considered appropriately how to move forward given the situation into which COVID-19 has plunged us. Proper consideration is given to the sensitivity of the topics of periods and poverty. The strategies to help with this – including appropriate pastoral support on request – are clearly in place. The participant-created group contract is excellent practice. I also like the idea of participants selecting their own pseudonym (an attractive proposition for young people). All documentation for participants and guardians is very helpfully and appropriately set out. The project is clearly explained. The informed consent form is excellent. The opt-out consent and debrief forms are also really clear and helpfully worded. The FAQs are perfectly pitched.

I have no suggestions for improvement, then.

I wanted to add a brief comment to the effect that a contact of mine, Maria Tomlinson, is currently working on a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship on the subject of period poverty at the University of Sheffield (Department of Journalism Studies) and she has been doing some of the things that you propose to do (e.g. focus groups) in the Sheffield area. It might be really interesting / productive were you to be in contact with each other. That is just a thought if you would like to pursue it.

Good luck with your research!

Appendix G: Secondary Ethics Approval Email Confirmation (COVID-19 Changes)

Hi Lottie

Thank you for your application for an amendment to the ethical approval of your project. I confirm that Dr Ilke Turkmendag is happy to approve it on behalf of HaSS Ethics Committee and Prof Nigel Harkness is happy to approval if on behalf of the Faculty. This additional approval is in line with current guidelines.

I hope your project goes well.

Best wishes

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
10.16, Henry Daysh Building
Newcastle University
NE1 7RU
Telephone: [REDACTED]
E mail: [REDACTED]



From: Lottie Rhodes (PGR) <C.Rhodes2@newcastle.ac.uk>
Sent: 16 November 2020 16:06
To: [REDACTED] >
Subject: RE: Adjusted ethics for PhD research

Dear [REDACTED],

Thank you for that link and PDF, it is helpful and I've had a look at how it applies to my fieldwork adjustments. Apologies for my sparse first email. Below I have provided more details about my fieldwork amendments and I have attached a risk assessment. Would you like me to also provide my updated informed consent, information sheet, data management plan etc?

On top of my existing ethical approval (of online interviews and remote solicited diaries), my project now requires travel to West End and East End Newcastle from near the city centre to undertake an ethnographic participant observation through volunteering activities with local organisations. Primarily this will be helping at an emergency COVID-response foodbank to organise and make

parcels of food, and do foodbank parcel deliveries where I will drive around the locales of West End and East End Newcastle in my own car to deliver the parcels.

I wish to undertake an ethnographic study of these volunteering efforts as a researcher and volunteer. This will include volunteering at a foodbank with no more than 2 other volunteers in a large, well ventilated room that we will be more than 2-metres apart when doing volunteering activities. In line with the government's and foodbank organisation's COVID policies, face coverings will be worn at all times, hand washing/sanitising stations are in action and a track and trace system is in place. Although this is face-to-face fieldwork, it is only 'face-to-face' in the sense that I wish to volunteer at an emergency foodbank and be 'out in the field' off campus. There will be little actual face-to-face contact with volunteers and potential participants at this point. When local lockdown restrictions allow (likely no sooner than 2021), I wish to conduct in-person interviews but these will be in line with University guidance and government guidance of the locality at the time. If this is not permitted due to local lockdown, then I will only conduct online interviews alongside my ethnography.

My fieldwork will incorporate volunteering activities working in response to the COVID pandemic that continue through national and local lockdowns to provide relief for those in need during the pandemic. This is in line with government guidance where 'you can leave home for work purposes, or to provide voluntary or charitable services, where you cannot do this from home' (please find attached the government link where I have found this guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-national-restrictions-from-5-november?priority-taxon=774cee22-d896-44c1-a611-e3109cce8eae>). I believe this also aligns with University guidelines in all tiers permitting research that adheres to local guidelines where the fieldwork is taking place, as volunteering is still permitted where it cannot be achieved at home which is the case for the volunteering-based fieldwork I would like to do.

Please let me know if I need to provide any more detail about my request to add ethnography to my ethic approval.

Best wishes,

Lottie