

Girlhood menstrual management and the 'culture of concealment' in postwar Britain

Hannah Froom

Introduction

In modern western culture, the widespread existence of menstrual taboos means that menstrual experiences have rarely been discussed openly and in detail. It therefore remains difficult to research the history of menstrual experience. Today, attempts to render menstruation culturally visible, to decrease stigma, and to tackle systemic factors driving period poverty are on the up, but day-to-day menstrual experience remains largely hidden.¹ This chapter draws on an extraordinary resource for historians of menstrual experience: the response of 238 cisgender women to a 1996 Mass Observation Project (MOP) Directive on 'Women's sanitary products and menstruation'.² The Directive (referred to as 'the Directive' or 'the Menstruation Directive' throughout this chapter) was created by Alia Al-Khalidi, a postgraduate student at Southampton Institute, in collaboration with the MOP. Different versions of the Directive were sent to women and to men. Structured as a qualitative questionnaire, the Directive sent to women asked for comments on topics including first menses, sex education, day-to-day menstrual management, advertising, Value Added Tax, menopause, and premenstrual tension. The responses to this Directive provide unique insight into girls' and women's subjective experiences of menstruation in twentieth-century Britain, shedding light on an under-researched area of 'everyday health'.

Here, I explore the responses of women born after 1950 to the Menstruation Directive, focusing particularly on women's recollections

of their girlhood menstrual management practices, and the emotions, sensations, thoughts, and feelings elicited by menstruating and wearing menstrual technology. I apply a phenomenological perspective to illuminate how girls and women came to understand their menstrual bodies and experiences through sensory perceptions of dress, space, and place which were shaped by a broader ‘culture of concealment’ surrounding menstruation. This testimony allows us to work from the ‘bottom up’, to privilege the voices, perspectives, and embodied experiences of ‘ordinary’ women, and to explore menstruation as an ‘everyday’ phenomenon.³ This approach historicises how white upper working-class and lower middle-class girls growing up in postwar Britain managed menstruation in their day-to-day lives, and the emotions this management elicited. The Directive responses reveal that it was not just stigma that made menstruation an uncomfortable experience for girls. Ill-fitting and ineffective technologies made menstruation more difficult, compounding girls’ anxieties about menstrual concealment and their own menstruating bodies.

A ‘culture of concealment’

Karen Houppert’s phrase ‘culture of concealment’ encapsulates how stigma and taboos perpetuated by the menstrual technology industry have encouraged menstruation to remain hidden in the United Kingdom, Europe, and United States throughout the twentieth century, shaping menstrual experiences and perpetuating feelings of shame and secrecy among menstruators.⁴ In the twentieth century, the invention, advertising, and use of modern menstrual technology entrenched concealment as a pervasive and defining facet of menstrual discourse, management, and embodiment.⁵ As Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie state, advertising was, and is, the ‘most explicit and loudest form of discussion of the menses’.⁶ For girls growing up in postwar Britain, this ‘culture of concealment’ meant menstruation was rarely visible beyond advertising in women’s and girls’ magazines. Menstrual advertising proliferated in girls’ magazines such as *Jackie*, *Honey*, and *Petticoat* in the postwar era. Menstrual technology manufacturers began to deliberately target towels and tampons at younger consumers, capitalising on the new-found spending power of teens.⁷ Greater opportunities for schooling and employment, and

increased disposable income, meant girls growing up in this era spent more money on themselves than their mothers had.⁸ With their new-found income, girls' leisure pursuits often revolved around the purchase of dress, cosmetics, magazines, and clothes, with leisure centred on 'the department store, the cinema, the dance hall, and the mass production of newspapers, magazines and cheap books'.⁹ These resources offered, in Judy Giles's words, a 'kaleidoscope of images, commodities and experiences, representing a world beyond the family, home and the locality'.¹⁰

Menstrual manufacturers knew that teenage girls were a lucrative market. Girls needed menstrual technologies and, if garnered early enough, brand loyalty would likely continue across the life-course. Adverts for towels and tampons tapped into postwar ideals about growing up as a process of self-actualisation, whilst also playing on adolescent awkwardness. They warned against the embarrassing spectre of stained clothes, odour, and revealing one's menstrual status, both exploiting and further entrenching ideals about secrecy and invisibility in cultural scripts about menstruation. This 'culture of concealment' ensured that menstrual experience was hidden from daily life, and, as a result, from the historical record too. As Chris Bobel notes, until recently scholarship that takes menstruation as its subject was 'relegated to the fringes' of academic study. It is still transgressive to resist menstrual concealment, and as a result subjects 'socialize this biological process – including serious inquiry into its form, function and meaning – into hiding'.¹¹ Histories of menstruation are sparse, and those that do exist are often 'top down'. They centre the gaze, knowledge, and perspective of individuals embedded in medical, psychiatric, political, and commercial institutions, and the discourses that emanated from these cultures, over the subjective experiences of ordinary menstruators. Furthermore, to date much of this literature has focused on North America, with much less attention to Britain in the postwar period.¹²

In producing and disseminating a Directive about menstruation, Al-Khalidi and the MOP acknowledged the blind spot that socio-cultural insistence on concealment had produced around everyday experiences of menstruation, and challenged its normalcy. The Directive provided respondents with the rare opportunity to record and relay their menstrual experiences, and to write as briefly or as extensively as they liked about an intimate aspect of their personhood

and daily life. For historians interested in menstruation, the Directive responses are a rich and rare source base that provides a level of insight into 'ordinary' women's 'everyday' menstrual experiences unavailable anywhere else.

'Everyday' accounts from 'ordinary women'

Since 1981, the Mass Observation Project has sent Directives to volunteer writers at regular, typically quarterly, intervals. Seeking to understand and record everyday life in Britain, the MOP has asked for stories, anecdotes, beliefs, and observations on diverse subjects including personal hygiene, the NHS, the Falkland Islands Crisis, pocket money, Christmas cards, and dreaming. These questionnaires and responses offer a wealth of information for researchers interested in the subjectivities and everyday lives of 'ordinary' Britons both past and present. As Claire Langhamer states, the 'ordinary' and 'the everyday' are 'malleable' and 'messy' concepts, but ones closely associated with a critique of institutions and expertise.¹³ Volunteers who wrote for the MOP deemed themselves 'ordinary', in opposition to identifications such as 'posh' or institutions such as 'the media', and had no 'expert' training in health or medicine. Mostly upper working- and lower middle-class, left-leaning, and white, the contributors were self-defined 'ordinary people'.¹⁴ There are notable gaps in the archive, especially around class, race, and ethnicity, and the experiences of trans and non-binary people.¹⁵ As this suggests, even within a project dedicated to understanding experiences that are usually unrecorded, it can be difficult to record and retrieve the experiences of the most marginalised.

In itself, MOP volunteers' commitment to recording and archiving their thoughts, experiences, and memories for a social research project marks them out as in some way extraordinary. The simultaneous typicality and atypicality of the cohort benefits historians interested in subjectivity. Writing about intimate parts of the self is a form of self-fashioning; as James Hinton explains, 'the focus is on the site of agency, where individuals are present at their own making'. Life-writing provides an opportunity to explore the 'creative moment in which an individual, struggling to make sense of him- or herself in the world, will bend, select, recombine, amend or transform sources of meaning available in the public culture'.¹⁶

The Menstruation Directive asked respondents to reflect on their girlhoods, to remember their formative experiences of menstrual management, and to narrativise them. It is evident that many women thought carefully about what to write and some emphasised that they had taken time to craft their responses. Other respondents wrote spontaneously, as indicated by scribbles, crossings out, and non-linear narratives. Responses varied in length from one paragraph to ten sides of A4 paper. These responses help us to understand how subjects made and make sense of their experiences, how they articulate them, and how memory informs this process. Women's memories of their girlhood menstrual experiences, and their articulations of these memories, might not provide exact accounts of 'how it was', because people do not simply remember what happened to them. Oral historians have demonstrated that memory, shaped and reshaped by culture, is inherently unreliable. As the *History Workshop* editorial collective suggested in 1979, 'memory does not constitute pure recall: the memory of any particular event is refracted through layer upon layer of subsequent experience'.¹⁷ Reflections on menstruation offered in Directive responses demonstrate how women's subjectivities, and memories of girlhood, were shaped by both the 'culture of concealment' and the accumulated experiences of their life-courses.

These influences can be seen in responses to the final prompt on the Directive, which encouraged writers to reflect on how they felt about menstruation, and on whether it was a suitable topic for a directive. This question implied awareness from its creators that the Directive might be viewed as unconventional, divide opinion, and elicit impassioned responses – and it did. The degree of enthusiasm and detail differed widely between responses. Some respondents stated that they had decided not to discuss their response with anyone, despite typically doing so.¹⁸ A forty-four-year-old woman from Mirfield, who had recently experienced the menopause, refused to comment in detail. For her, menstruation had always been inconvenient and she was pleased that she no longer needed to think about it.¹⁹ Offering only half a page of writing, a thirty-five-year-old woman living in Essex concluded that her recent hysterectomy had altered how she reflected on her girlhood menstrual experiences, resulting in 'mixed feelings' about responding.²⁰ A thirty-three-year-old 'part-time teacher, full-time mother' from Dorset described her visceral reaction to writing about her experiences, manifest in a 'churning

stomach', whilst a seventy-seven-year-old respondent from North Yorkshire questioned whether girls now knew too much about the 'facts of life' and if this had contributed to an increased number of teenage pregnancies.²¹

Other women described the experience of responding to this Directive as 'refreshing' and affirmational, stressing that it was an important topic, worthy of study, that could make a meaningful contribution to destigmatising menstruation.²² A thirty-two-year-old respondent from Liverpool branded the Directive 'unusual', but concluded her two pages by emphasising that she did not mind answering because increased menstrual visibility might help her nieces to avoid the 'pointless feelings of embarrassment and shame' she had experienced when growing up.²³ Respondents occasionally expressed a desire to read other responses, showing how the 'culture of concealment' had limited open discussion and understanding of other menstruators' experiences.²⁴ Similarly, replies expressed curiosity about the existence of the men's directive, the questions it contained, and how male Mass Observers had reacted to the Directive.²⁵

As Liz Heron asserts in the introduction to her edited volume on girls growing up the 1950s, 'the past can never be disposed of, can never be cut off from our knowledge or experience of the present'.²⁶ Layers of subsequent life experience and cultural messaging affected the reflections women offered. The diverse array of responses demonstrates how the 'culture of concealment' maintained the contentious cultural position of menstruation from some women's mid-century girlhoods right up until the last decade of the twentieth century. These mixed reactions to rendering menstruation visible are the crucial context for understanding and interpreting women's reflections on their girlhood menstrual management, as explored in the remainder of this chapter. They show how subjects operated within a 'culture of concealment' that extended up to their time of writing, and prompt us to consider what impact this had on their subjectivities and embodied menstrual experiences.

Phenomenology, menstrual management, and dress

A phenomenological perspective can help us to interpret women's descriptions of their girlhood menstrual experiences. Phenomenology

is concerned with understanding embodiment, and the relationship between individuals and wider societal structures. This approach can benefit historians interested in accessing and understanding the interior lives and embodied experiences of subjects in the past. This focus on subjectivity is imperative for historians interested in ‘everyday health’, defined as ‘the emotional, psychological, and bodily state-of-being in individuals’ day-to-day lives, and the strategies they pursue (or do not) to maintain equilibrium in this state-of-being’.²⁷ Here, I outline how phenomenological approaches might be incorporated into studies of menstrual embodiment.

Havi Carel describes phenomenology as a ‘philosophical approach that focuses on phenomena (what we perceive and experience)’ such as ‘the experiences of thinking, perceiving, and coming into contact with the world’.²⁸ Many iterations of phenomenological theory presuppose that an individual’s sensory perceptions influence how they interact with and interpret the world around them. The work of sociology and fashion studies scholar Joanne Entwistle on embodied dress practices provides a good example of this approach.²⁹ Entwistle uses phenomenology to understand what drives subjects’ routine and mundane day-to-day dress practices and how these practices affect their interactions with the world, including their experiences of space and place. Entwistle does not discuss menstruation, but this chapter extrapolates from and builds upon her insights to understand embodied experiences of menstrual management, and how they relate to embodied dress practices. This, in turn, highlights the relationship between menstrual management, dress practices, and everyday menstrual experience.

Entwistle argues that sensory perceptions of dress inform the way subjects perceive, understand, and move through space. To explain the phenomenological approach to dress, she draws on Umberto Eco’s account of wearing jeans a size too small. Eco notes how the jeans feel on the body, how they pinch and restrict movement, and how they elicit awareness of the lower half of the body – how they come to constitute an ‘epidermic self-awareness’ *unfelt before*:

I lived in the knowledge that I had jeans on, whereas normally we live forgetting that we’re wearing undershorts or trousers [...] as a result I assumed an exterior behaviour of one who wears jeans [...] Not only did the garment impose a demeanour on me; by focusing my attention on demeanour it obliged me to live towards the exterior world.³⁰

Eco records the ways that his clothing, and the feelings and sensations it elicits, mediates his experience of selfhood and how he orientates himself to the world. Using this account, Entwistle demonstrates that clothing has the potential to ‘impinge upon’ subjects’ ‘experience of the body’, making them aware of its ‘edges, the limits and boundaries’, particularly if the clothing feels uncomfortable. This alters their comportment, and how they move through and interact with the world.³¹

A similar ‘epidermic self-awareness’ can be traced in experiences of menstrual management. One of the prompts in the Menstruation Directive asked respondents to describe their use of menstrual products, and to outline how and why this use had changed over time. Individuals were asked to comment on the ‘availability, size, absorbency, comfort and style’ of technologies. The number of references in responses to the feel of products and the bodily sensations, particularly discomfort, induced by using ill-designed and ill-fitting products suggests that these were extremely important and memorable aspects of menstrual experience that affected how girls moved through the world. A phenomenological approach to this testimony suggests that menstrual technologies made girls aware of the ‘edges, limits and boundaries’ of their bodies, acting as another layer of dress marked with meaning that connected them to the social world.

Entwistle asserts that while dress practices are often characterised as methods for self-expression and statements about identity, they are just as likely to be shaped by mundane factors such as a desire for comfort, or moral and social codes regarding appropriate dress. She suggests that subjects dress themselves in the knowledge that wearing clothes can be ‘done’ correctly or incorrectly depending on social setting, and gives examples of ‘mistakes of dress’, including an undone fly or a stain on a jacket.³² Again, this point is relevant to testimony about menstrual management. Women’s accounts reveal that notions of secrecy, shame, and stigma informed how they managed and dressed their menstruating bodies in girlhood, and what they deemed important to emphasise in their responses to the Menstrual Directive. The social and moral codes born from the ‘culture of concealment’ impinged upon day-to-day menstrual management practices. Under the guise of hygienic etiquette, these codes prioritised secrecy, invisibility, and routine care. They required girls to mask pain or discomfort, to hide menstruation and menstrual

technology, and to limit disruption to daily practices, regardless of their feelings, in order to avoid revealing their menstrual status.

A phenomenological reading of Mass Observation testimonies

Menstrual technologies were marketed as a means for girls to manage menstruation in line with socially prescribed ideals of secrecy. They functioned as another layer of dress that enabled subjects, operating within the 'culture of concealment', to orientate themselves to the world 'correctly'. Advertising promised that the purchase and adornment of modern mass-produced menstrual technologies could meet the urgent need for invisibility within the culture of concealment, offering girls peace of mind and alleviating their shame. The 'culture of concealment' meant that blood-stained trousers, indicating a subject's status as menstruating, were regarded as a 'greater mistake of dress' than an undone fly or stain on a jacket. Testimony reveals that girls felt it to be shameful or abnormal when they inadvertently engaged in 'mistakes of dress' and rendered visible their menstrual status. Even now, the decision to ignore menstrual management and to 'free bleed' is considered transgressive, radical, disruptive, and empowering.³³ But the women who responded to the Menstruation Directive had not intended to be radical, subversive, or disruptive by not conforming to menstrual etiquette norms. Instead, girls' non-conformity was unintentional or arose from the lack of accessible facilities or technologies – a lack that itself often resulted from stigma and the culture of concealment.

Kathleen (b. 1951, first menses aged thirteen) wanted to wear miniskirts; to embody 1960s fashion trends in comfort without being restricted by her menstrual cycle.³⁴ Her desire to be both fashionable and comfortable, and the importance of both to her sense of self, spurred her decision to start using tampons in her later teenage years. She stated,

My mother gave me sanitary towels, which hooked on to a belt type of thing, and I loathed this. I felt this great wedge of cotton wool or whatever it was between my legs and I felt uncomfortable [...] my friends all felt the same [...] as I got further in to my teen years, out working, wearing mini-skirts and so on, I started wearing tampons which felt less intrusive and more comfortable.³⁵

Whitney (b. 1970, first menses aged fifteen) also commented on the way ill-fitting menstrual technologies amplified her discomfort and changed her relationship to clothing during her teenage years. She used 'bulky standard' towels recommended by her mum for the first few years, but this meant she 'was not comfortable wearing certain clothes, especially tight ones'. The towels altered the fit and appearance of tight-fitting clothes, disrupting social codes that prioritised menstrual concealment and appropriate dress practices, whilst also hindering her ability to wear clothes comfortably.³⁶

Similarly, Carol (b. 1960, first menses aged thirteen) reflected on her adolescent concerns that menstrual technologies were visible through clothing. She explained, 'it was excruciating when a towel came loose and wandered up your back [...] I was always worried that people could see a towel when I was walking along'. Carol felt 'very self-conscious' as a result of these anxieties. Her testimony implies awareness that visible menstrual technology was a 'mistake of dress' that could disrupt social codes regarding menstrual concealment and appropriate dress practices. This awareness made her feel ashamed.³⁷ Like Carol, Billie (b. 1955, first menses aged twelve) wrote about feelings of shame and self-consciousness. She remembered after starting to menstruate feeling like she 'looked different and that everyone must be able to tell'. Her desire to conceal menstruation impacted on how she related to and interacted with other girls. She noted that she 'used to despise girls who gave away when they were menstruating'.³⁸ Barbara (born 1953, first menses aged twelve) also framed her response in relation to feelings of self-consciousness. She 'hated' the feel of the sanitary belt she used when she first started to menstruate. She explained, 'it dug into my puppy fat and the bulky towels were too big for me'. In contrast, 'tampons were great for an active self-conscious teenager. Nobody could tell when you were having a period, you could go swimming.'³⁹

Other responses also suggest that the feel, visibility, and type of technology exacerbated feelings of shame and fear regarding menstrual concealment. Beverley (b. 1960, first menses aged thirteen) had her first period in 1973 while on holiday. At times, Beverley was unable to use over-the-counter menstrual technologies because her family could not afford them, instead using home-made 'rags'. She described what these 'rags' felt like and provided an anecdote about a situation where they had failed to conceal her period. The original syntax

and crossings-out in Beverley's response offer insight into her psychological state at the time of writing. Beverley started to write about using 'rags', but then decided to add the clarifying information that her mother did not always have towels because they were expensive. This detail about her upbringing and her family's financial situation in turn justified Beverley's wearing of 'homemade' menstrual protection:

I would have to whisper to my mother that I wanted a towel, I remember once or twice when she did not have any ~~she cut up~~ and could not afford to buy them – she cut up pillowcases or sheets, folded them in strips and I would have to use them with pins holding them in place, more often or not it would slop and blood would come through my jeans [...] when I was 14 and I was sitting on a washing machine with jeans on, and it had come through, all my friends – laughed and teased me, I could not go out again for weeks.⁴⁰

By failing to conceal her period, Beverley broke social codes regarding appropriate forms of menstrual management and dress. As in the other responses discussed here, this caused her embarrassment and affected relationships with her peers.

Angela (b. 1974, first menses aged eleven) revealed, in biographical statements littered through her testimony, that she was ashamed of puberty to the point where she could not bathe, as she did not want to look at herself; that her parents were not open about sex, and that when she did learn about periods from a conversation with friends, her mum was furious. She recalled feeling like her mum wanted to protect her, but also that she had very little interest in learning about sex and periods from her mum. She wondered if this reluctance stemmed from 'terror at not being a child anymore' and said that she still felt 'immense regret' that she was no longer small. Angela described her teenage anorexia in terms of a regression to childhood and stated that after 'several years of introspection' she believed her anorexia and her shame at growing up were linked.

Angela's first period arrived during her 'top year of junior school'. She had a 'funny tummy ache' and found blood in her knickers. Angela recalled that she 'couldn't handle the physical aspects of it', because 'junior school is not really equipped for menstruating little girls!'⁴¹ Angela described the culture surrounding menstruation at school, where the onset of a peer's first menses became the subject

of gossip. She 'felt sorry for those that it happened to', but when a peer confided in her about their first period she felt 'honoured', and viewed them as 'older, and more mature'. At the same time, conveying her own feelings of shame and isolation was an important aspect of Angela's writing. She explained, 'I had heavy periods but I would have been far too embarrassed to take a change of towel with me. Once I had to ask a teacher for one, and I could have sunk through the floor I was so embarrassed.' This lack of preparedness, born from a sense of self-protection and self-preservation, had the opposite effect, revealing her status as menstruating and compounding her embarrassment.

The shame and embarrassment Angela associated with menstruation and menstrual technology meant she did not want to be 'found out'. As a result, she preferred to wear six pairs of knickers to 'cope with the inevitable flooding' and to avoid 'tell-tale stains' on her clothes and the chairs she sat on. She recounted how her friend once 'wore a pink skirt once during her period and was the laughing stock of the whole school' when a bloodstain showed through. For Angela, both her clothes and the objects she interacted with, such as the chair, became potential threats that could reveal that she was menstruating. The implication that seeing menstrual blood on the chair would be deeply humiliating for her, and an invitation for others to judge and re-evaluate her, reveals how menstruation altered her sense of self, her interactions with and understandings of the objects she encountered, and how she was perceived by and interacted with her peers.

In Angela's testimony, items of dress, much like pieces of furniture, acquire symbolic dimensions intimately bound to her understanding and experience of her menstruating body and her interactions with people and space. Wearing multiple pairs of underwear while menstruating was an attempt to uphold the 'culture of concealment'. In linking this story to her friend's experience of leaking menstrual blood onto a pink skirt and becoming the 'laughing stock' of the whole school, she re-emphasised the role of clothing in masking or revealing menstrual status, and therefore in disrupting social codes regarding both menstrual management and dress. This story also reveals the likelihood of stigmatisation, embarrassment, and social exclusion for the girls if menstruation was not managed appropriately. Both friends 'failed' to ensure menstruation remained concealed,

one by asking a teacher for a towel, and the other by bleeding onto her skirt.

Her friend broke social codes of dress by wearing, even unwittingly, a stained item of clothing; a doubly outrageous mistake of dress because the stain was menstrual blood. As a direct result of menstruation, Angela broke social codes of dress in multiple ways: by not wearing any menstrual technology, but also by instead wearing ‘several pairs of knickers’ under her school uniform in one incident and under her swimming costume in another:

The worst time was when I went on [a] school journey to the Isle of Wight. We stayed in a small hotel, which had its own swimming pool. I had my period while I was there, and I couldn’t even contemplate not going in the pool. For a start it would have singled me out from everyone else, but also, I wanted to swim, and have fun like the others. I had never heard of tampons at this stage. So I wore a sanitary towel, and several pairs of knickers underneath my swimming costume. Looking back, I can’t believe I did it!

Angela tried to avoid singling herself out as menstruating to her peers by sitting at the poolside, but the multiple pairs of knickers that remained invisible under her school uniform could be seen when she was wearing the swimming costume:

I was climbing up the slide, and a boy (who had created the name of ‘Big V ...’ for me already as I needed a bra) climbed up behind me and say [said] ‘ugh, why have you got pants on?’ The *shame* of it! I don’t think he knew enough to recognise the bulge that must have been there – thank god. I discovered tampons a year or so later, at secondary school. By this stage I was no longer on my own, and periods were not so shameful.⁴²

In this moment at the swimming pool, Angela’s need to adhere to social codes of menstrual etiquette (ensuring her status as menstruating was not revealed to her peers) overruled the need to adhere to social codes of dress. This part of the testimony demonstrates Angela’s hierarchical organisation of social codes: in this moment the social and moral imperative to keep menstruation hidden was more important and less stigmatising than adhering to dress codes. Angela used her agentic capacity to break (some of) the rules, but this was not an empowering decision. Her testimony shows that breaking

social codes of dress because of menstruation caused stress and shame, even though she felt compelled to do so.

This feeling of compulsion demonstrates Angela's lack of real choices. The decision to prioritise menstrual over dress etiquette was caused by desperation and perceived necessity, as emphasised by the references to shame and embarrassment. To sit out swimming would have required conversation with teachers and revealed her status as menstruating, whilst participating in swimming lessons wearing multiple pairs of underwear at least made it possible to maintain menstrual concealment. Angela's framing of this story as 'the worst' of several implied incidents, and her retrospective disbelief that she ever made this decision, indicates its powerful place in her psyche, even at the distance of decades. This affects how we should interpret it. Angela's story illustrates the powerlessness of young girls within the 'culture of concealment', operating with limited knowledge, language, and tools for navigating the menstrual world. Agentic capacity does not equal empowerment.

For Angela, and the other women whose girlhood experiences are explored in this chapter, choices to wear certain technologies or items of clothing were shaped by their economic status, their sociocultural status (or powerlessness) as girls, and by fraught understandings of appropriate menstrual management. Whilst shame is a highly subjective emotion, felt, understood, and sometimes overcome by the individual, accounts of menstrual management reveal how larger structuring forces shaped and reshaped menstrual shame, and how these structuring forces were embodied in girls' everyday practice and experience. The 'epidermic self-awareness' girls often felt whilst menstruating demonstrates the extent to which they internalised sociocultural notions of secrecy, shame, and concealment, affecting their subject positions, their relationships, and their everyday activities.

Conclusion

The accounts of menstrual experience found in the MOA privilege the narratives and voices of women without medical or professional authority or formal expertise on menstruation. They provide access to facets of menstrual experience often unexplored by histories that

focus on institutional discourses or media representations. Evidence from the MOP enables a ground-up study of menstruation as an everyday phenomenon. Focusing on the emotions, thoughts, feelings, and sensory experiences of 'ordinary' women, these testimonies enable researchers to explore how subjects managed menstruation in their day-to-day lives, and how discourses of concealment informed these everyday menstrual management practices.

Testimony reveals that menstrual discomfort arose not only from menstrual pain and menstrual stigma, but from other aspects of embodied menstrual management. A phenomenological perspective on experiences of wearing menstrual technology reveals that while the 'culture of concealment' debilitated girls and caused feelings of shame and embarrassment, available menstrual technologies also restricted their day-to-day menstrual management. Poorly designed, ill-fitting, ineffective, or uncomfortable technologies compounded girls' uncomfortable menstrual experiences and complicated feelings about their menstruating bodies. Furthermore, this debilitation was often intensified by girls' class and economic status. Girls who used home-made 'rags' because they could not afford to purchase menstrual products experienced intensified feelings of shame and embarrassment as well as further restrictions to their comportment and day-to-day lives. These narratives show how difficult it was for girls with limited access to effective and comfortable menstrual technologies, and limited knowledge, language, and tools to navigate the menstrual world, to manage their periods in physical and psychic comfort, without shame or embarrassment. They also illuminate the complex feelings about menstruation and menstrual concealment that continued to structure women's psyches across the life-course, influencing how they felt when asked to record their experiences towards the end of the century.

In 1987, anthropologist Emily Martin called for more acknowledgement that menstruation could be described, understood, and interpreted in ways that diverged from medical explanations. She wanted an explanation focused on 'how something feels, and what you do, rather than what is happening'. Martin suggested that paying attention to women's articulations of the sensory and emotional experience of menstruation could aid understanding of the totality of menstrual experience, which in turn might help to reduce some of the disgust associated with it in popular culture.⁴³ In a similar

vein, in 2005 the philosopher Iris Marion Young questioned the implicit assumption in much feminist literature that menstruators 'ought to have an accurate and complete understanding of the physiology of menstruation'. She stated that 'few men and women have a very accurate or complete understanding of the physiology of other internal bodily processes [...] this assumption that "menstrual knowledge" is equivalent to medical science may itself contribute to a sense of alienation women have from the process'.⁴⁴ Like Martin, Young argues that enabling subjects to focus on describing feelings and sensations associated with menstruation might be the antidote to these feelings of separation from embodied experience.⁴⁵

These studies suggest that phenomenological approaches can complement and enhance menstruation studies in two ways. First, phenomenology sets out theoretical questions and methods that account for menstruators' assessments of what knowledge about menstruation matters to them. Second, phenomenology does not frame articulations in ways that bolster the notion that scientific explanations are the only accurate way of describing and defining menstrual experience. Indeed, it throws into question whether scientific explanations are 'accurate' in any meaningful way at all.

Amplifying embodied sensory and emotional experiences deprivileges scientific readings of menstrual experience, whilst also acknowledging that identity and politics, as well as cultural understandings of sex, gender, nature, and culture, inform how individuals understand themselves and interpret the world around them, impacting on how they are understood and treated. The phenomenological 'lived body', as Young states, offers a 'means of theorizing sexual subjectivity without danger of either biological reductionism or gender essentialism'.⁴⁶ From the perspective of a historian rather than a philosopher or anthropologist, this approach can add texture and dimension to studies of past experiences, and allow these experiences to be understood as historically and socially specific, shaped by the social mores and ideals and scientific understandings of the era in question. Avoiding biological reductionism and gender essentialism is particularly important when it comes to understanding and historicising intersectional and marginalised histories of menstruation and menstruators, but because of the culture of concealment that has surrounded menstruation, the *historical* evidence necessary to adopt this interpretive strategy is almost entirely lacking.

The responses to the MOP's Menstruation Directive are unusual in that they allow historians to explore menstrual experience at a granular level. Analysis of these testimonies bolsters Martin's and Young's claims that describing how it feels to menstruate can contribute to ending menstrual stigma. As one woman concluded:

I have really enjoyed this subject – a chance to reveal all those things I've never confessed to any but my best friend before [...] I feel I can write such things down now for M-O because I feel it will be met with sympathy and understanding. It's been a pleasure to get all these things off my chest, and maybe other women have felt the same too.⁴⁷

Acknowledgements

The research on which this chapter is based was conducted during a PhD studentship funded as part of the Wellcome Trust Investigator Award in the Humanities and Social Sciences, 'Body, Self and Family: Women's Psychological, Emotional and Bodily Health in Britain, c. 1960–1990', WT 208080/Z/17/Z.

Notes

- 1 For more on menstruation in popular culture today see Camilla Røstvik, *Cash Flow: The Business of Menstruation* (London: UCL Press, 2022), pp. 1–3.
- 2 For the Directive, see '47. Spring 1996', Mass Observation Project Directives: <http://www.massobs.org.uk/mass-observation-project-directives> (accessed 22 March 2020). Responses to the Directive can be accessed at the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex. According to the biographical information all respondents were cisgender. Trans men and non-binary individuals may also menstruate, but as these Directive responses deal only with the experiences of cis girls and women, throughout this chapter I use 'girls' and 'women' in relation to this testimony. The experiences of trans and non-binary menstruators require further investigation as menstruation studies gain traction. On researching menstruation beyond the gender binary see Sarah E. Frank, 'Queering menstruation: trans and non-binary identity and body politics', *Sociological Inquiry*, 90:2 (2020), and Klara Rydstrom, 'Degendering menstruation: making trans menstruators matter', in Chris Bobel et

- al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
- 3 David Bloome, Dorothy Sheridan, and Brian Street, 'Reading Mass-Observation writing: theoretical and methodological issues in researching in the Mass Observation Archive', *Mass Observation Archive Occasional Paper Series*, 1 (1996), 14, cited in Jill Kirby, *Feeling the Strain: A Cultural History of Stress in Twentieth Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. 20.
 - 4 Karen Houppert, *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo* (London: Profile Books, 1999), pp. 11–16.
 - 5 Sharra L. Vostral, 'Masking menstruation: the emergence of menstrual hygiene products in the United States', in Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (eds), *Menstruation: A Cultural History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 243; Sharra L. Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (Washington, DC: Lexington Books, 2008).
 - 6 Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie, "'Talking your body's language": the menstrual materialisations of sexed ontology', in Shail and Howie (eds), *Menstruation*, p. 1.
 - 7 Hannah Froom, 'Menstruation, Subjectivity and Constructions of Girlhood in Britain 1960–1980' (PhD thesis, University of Essex, 2022).
 - 8 Penny Tinkler, 'Girlhood and growing up', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (ed.), *Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education, 2001); Penny Tinkler, "'Are you really living?' If not, "get with it!" The teenage self and lifestyle in young women's magazines, Britain 1957–70', *Cultural and Social History*, 11:4 (2015).
 - 9 Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England, 1945–2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 3.
 - 10 Judy Giles, 'Narratives of gender, class and modernity in women's memories of mid-twentieth century Britain', *Signs*, 28 (2008).
 - 11 Chris Bobel, 'Introduction: menstruation as lens – menstruation as opportunity', in Bobel et al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, p. 1.
 - 12 Examples include Joan Jacob Brumberg, "'Something happens to girls": menarche and the emergence of the modern American hygienic imperative', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 4:1 (1993); Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Røstvik, *Cash Flow*; Shail and Howie (eds), *Menstruation*; Julie-Marie Strange, 'The assault on ignorance: teaching menstrual etiquette in England, c. 1920–1960s', *Social History of Medicine*, 14:2 (2001). A recent and notable exception is Bobel et al. (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*.

- 13 Claire Langhamer, ‘“Who the hell are ordinary people?” Ordinarity as a category of historical analysis’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), 194.
- 14 Kirby, *Feeling the Strain*, p. 22.
- 15 Until the late 2010s, Directive responses were filed under ‘male’ or ‘female’, meaning that it is difficult to trace trans or non-binary experiences in the archive. In 2016, 1 per cent of MOP respondents identified as trans or non-binary. See Mass Observation Archive Annual Report, 36 (2016), p. 11: http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/Directives/MOA_Annual_Report_15-16_final.pdf (accessed 12 December 2020).
- 16 James Hinton, *Nine Wartime Lives: Mass Observation and the Making of the Modern Self*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 7.
- 17 ‘Editorial: Oral history’, *History Workshop Journal*, 8:1 (1979) p. iii.
- 18 Mass Observation Archive (hereafter MOA), The Keep, University of Sussex, Menstruation (Spring 1996), SxMOA2/1/47/2, respondents P2765, W1918.
- 19 MOA, Menstruation, respondent S2581.
- 20 MOA, Menstruation, respondent L796.
- 21 MOA, Menstruation, respondents G2624, B736.
- 22 MOA, Menstruation, respondents A2212, A2685, A2751, T1843, T2713, W729, W1813.
- 23 MOA, Menstruation, respondent B2653.
- 24 MOA, Menstruation, respondents B2197, G2624.
- 25 MOA, Menstruation, respondents D826, H1705, H1745, L796, S2207, W1918.
- 26 Liz Heron, *Truth, Dare, Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p. 1.
- 27 Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney, and Daisy Payling, ‘Women’s voices, emotion, and empathy: engaging different publics with “everyday” health histories’, *Medical Humanities*, 48:4 (2022), 395.
- 28 Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 20.
- 29 Joanne Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the fleshy body: dress as embodied practice’, *Fashion Theory*, 4:3 (2000).
- 30 Umberto Eco, ‘Lumbar thought’, in his *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego, CA, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), trans. William Weaver, cited in Joanne Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the fleshy body’, p. 334.
- 31 Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the fleshy body’, p. 334.
- 32 Entwistle, ‘Fashion and the fleshy body’, p. 337.
- 33 Chris Bobel, *New Blood: Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

- 34 MOA, Menstruation, respondent K798. ‘Kathleen’ is a pseudonym, as are all names of Directive respondents in the subsequent discussion. I have allocated respondents a popular name from the decade they were born that corresponds with the letter accompanying their archival reference number, for example Kathleen = K798.
- 35 MOA, Menstruation, respondent K798.
- 36 MOA, Menstruation, respondent W2731.
- 37 MOA, Menstruation, respondent C41.
- 38 MOA, Menstruation, respondent B2197.
- 39 MOA, Menstruation, respondent B215.
- 40 MOA, Menstruation, respondent B2031.
- 41 For more on the lack of facilities for menstruators in schools in this period see Hannah Charnock, ‘Girlhood, Sexuality and Identity in England 1950–1980’ (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2017); Angela Davis, “‘Oh no, nothing, we didn’t learn anything’”: sex education and the preparation of girls for motherhood, c. 1930–1970’, *History of Education*, 37:5 (2008); Christine Farrell, *My Mother Said ... The Way Young People Learn about Sex and Birth Control* (Oxford: Routledge, 1978); Froom, ‘Menstruation, Subjectivity and Constructions of Girlhood in Britain’.
- 42 MOA, Menstruation, respondent A2685.
- 43 Emily Martin, *The Woman in the Body, A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, rev. edn (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 111.
- 44 Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: ‘Throwing Like a Girl’ and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 97, 102.
- 45 Young, *On Female Body Experience*, p. 102.
- 46 Young, *On Female Body Experience*, p. 410. See also Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp.1–51.
- 47 MOA, Menstruation, respondent P2795.