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Critical Phenomenology of Menstruation: Changes Within Lived Experience  
of Menstruating and Its Meanings

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## Abstract (de)

Menstruation ist nicht nur ein körperliches Phänomen. Der menschliche Körper ist keine in sich geschlossene Einheit, sondern geprägt durch eine Vielzahl an Eigenheiten, die über sein eigenes Wesen hinausgehen. Diese These integriert das kritisch-phänomenologische Projekt Günthers (2019, 2021) mit verkörperten, interaktionalen Bedeutungstheorien, um auf empirischer Basis zu erforschen, wie sich Menstruationserfahrungen und ihre Bedeutungen im Laufe der Zeit verändern. Obgleich eine umfangreiche Literatur existiert, die sich mit den Herausforderungen der Menarche sowie den allgegenwärtigen sozialen Stigmata, die mit der Menstruation verbunden sind, auseinandersetzt, ist ein Mangel an Forschung zu verzeichnen, welche das menstruelle Leben im zeitgenössischen Kontext untersucht. Die jahrhundertelangen Bemühungen feministischer Bewegungen sowie die zunehmende Zugänglichkeit von Menstruationsaufklärung gehen nicht spurlos an Menstruierenden vorbei. Die persönlichen Menstruationsgeschichten und ihre Bedeutungen wurden anhand von narrativen Interviews mit fünf cis-weiblichen Menstruierenden und einer nicht-binären menstruierenden Person, die alle deutschsprachig und Mitte zwanzig waren, sowie unter Berücksichtigung von Langdridge's (2007) kritischer Narrativanalyse untersucht. Das Studiendesign ermöglichte eine eingehende Auseinandersetzung mit den Leiberfahrungen im Leben von Menstruierenden und des zeitgleich bestehenden Kontexts. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Menarche im Alter von 11 bis 13 Jahren als eine Quelle der Scham und des Versteckens wahrgenommen wurde. In der Zeit zwischen dem 15. und 16. Lebensjahr erfolgte eine Verlagerung des Erlebens auf die Menstruation im Kontext der Sexualität. Im Vordergrund stand dabei die Übernahme von Verantwortung für die Verwendung von Verhütungsmitteln sowie für die Bewältigung der damit verbundenen Folgeerscheinungen der Menstruation. Gleichzeitig konnte eine Entstigmatisierung der Menstruation durch die gemeinsame Schaffung sicherer Räume beobachtet werden. Mit dem Eintritt in die 20er begann für die Mitforscher\*innen die Wahrnehmung der Menstruation als integralen Bestandteil des gesamten Menstruationszyklus, wodurch sich ihr Körperverstehen vertiefte. Letztendlich wurde die Menstruation während des gesamten Lebens der Menstruierenden als ein Akt der Annahme des Frauseins verstanden, was bei einer nicht-binären Mitforscher\*in zu erheblichen

Identitätskonflikten führte. Des Weiteren präsentiert die phänomenologisch fundierte Arbeit alternative Ansätze zur Unterstützung von jungen Erwachsenen bei der Bewältigung und dem Verständnis ihrer Menstruationserfahrungen. Diese basieren auf den Erfahrungsberichten der Mitforscher\*innen. Die dargestellten Ansätze verfolgen das Ziel, der Verheimlichung, Kontrolle und Verurteilung des menstruierenden Körpers sowie anderer körperlicher Identitäten, insbesondere derjenigen von queeren Menschen, entgegenzuwirken.

*Stichwörter:* Kritische Phänomenologie, Kritische Narrativanalyse, Menstruation, Leiberfahrung, Bedeutung, Erfahrungsbedingte Veränderungen, Verkörperung, Enaktivismus

## Abstract (en)

Menstruation is a phenomenon that extends beyond the merely physical. The body is not a self-contained entity; it inherits and exhibits much more than its being. By integrating the critical phenomenological project of Guenther (2019, 2021) with embodied, interactional theories of meaning, this thesis pioneers in an interdisciplinary empirical approach to understanding how menstrual meanings change over time. While there is a substantial corpus of literature examining the challenges of navigating menarche and the pervasive social stigmas associated with menstruation, there has been a paucity of research examining menstruators' lives in the contemporary context. Continuous efforts of feminist movements over centuries and the growing accessibility of menstrual education have not gone unnoticed by menstruators. By conducting narrative interviews with five cis-female menstruators and one non-binary menstruator, all of whom were German speakers in their mid-twenties, the menstrual stories and their meanings were elucidated through a critical narrative analysis of Langdridge (2007). The study design facilitated an exhaustive examination of the experiential primacies in menstruators' lives and the environmental circumstances affecting those experiences. The findings indicate that from the ages of 11 to 13, menarche was perceived as a source of shame and concealment. During the period between the ages of 15 and 16, menstruation was associated with sexuality, particularly the necessity to provide and navigate contraception. Concurrently, menstruation was de-stigmatized through the co-creation of shared spaces. As the co-researchers entered their 20s, they began to experience menstruation as an integral part of their entire menstrual cycle, which fostered their body literacy. Ultimately, throughout the menstruators' lives, menstruation was understood as an act of embracing womanhood, which presents significant identity conflicts within the non-cis menstruator. Through a critical turn, this thesis illuminates alternative avenues for providing institutional and non-institutional support to young adults as they navigate and comprehend their menstrual experiences. These avenues eschew the demand for the concealment, control, and condemnation of the menstrual body and its integrated other bodily identities, particularly those of queer individuals.

*Keywords:* Critical Phenomenology, Critical Narrative Analysis, Menstruation, Lived Body, Meaning, Experiential Changes, Embodiment, Enactivism

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*"There are many reasons to avoid or derail critical scrutiny, and yet the motivation to persist is also powerful, since the meaning and materiality of our lives is at stake."*

*(Guenther, 2019, p.15).*

*"Meaning is not only about things and it is not only a certain logical structure, but it also involves felt experiencing."*

*(Gendlin, 1970, p.561).*

## Introduction

Menstruation carries various meanings to each experiencer, yet little focus has been placed on how these meanings shift for individuals over time. The extant research consistently points to menstrual experiences as socio-culturally stigmatized and concealed phenomena across different times and cultures (Anderson & Nichols, 2022; Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Fennie et al., 2022; Koutroulis, 2001; McHugh, 2020; Seyed Hosseini, 2018). Additionally, the majority of public portrayals of menstruation are predominantly negative (Agnew & Sandretto, 2016; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Klein, 2021; Ussher, 2006). While the study of menstruation has attracted attention from different disciplines in cognitive science, particularly empiricists in fields such as biology, psychology, and neuroscience (Bancroft, 1995; Barbosa et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 1987; Dye et al., 1995; Roney & Simmons, 2017; Yao et al., 2022), it is predominantly cultural and political analyses that address menstrual meanings. Phenomenological approaches tend to remain at the theoretical level (Kelland et al., 2017; Young, 2005). An interdisciplinary empirical approach that aims to account for and traverse the figurative lines between subjective and social meanings of menstruation is still absent from the scientific literature.

As experiential meanings are not intrinsic to individuals but emerge within a context (Johnson, 1987; Gendlin, 1997; Merleau-Ponty, 2005), research on menstrual meanings must consider not only individuals' understandings of their own menstruation but also discourses and historical events. The existing socio-cultural studies have elucidated the recurrent negative experiences associated with menstruation. These include feelings of being unclean, untidy, and ashamed of menstruating (Donmall, 2013; Fennie et al., 2022;



Hennegan et al., 2019; Koutroulis, 2001; Lee, 2009; McHugh, 2020). In contrast to the negative experiences of menstruation that have been discussed, some women view their menstruation as a positive aspect of their lives. They perceive it as a normal female\*<sup>1</sup> occurrence and a sign of good health (Brantelid, 2014; Lee, 2002). It is notable, however, that such findings are relatively uncommon. The extant research overwhelmingly depicts menstruation as a stigmatized phenomenon, perpetuating narratives of shame and concealment across a multitude of cultural contexts. The concealment of menstrual blood is not solely a consequence of public shame and secrecy; it is also a response to the distress experienced by menstruators in their daily lives. The absence of acknowledgment of the menstrual cycle as a bodily rhythm, in contrast to the recognition of other bodily cycles such as the circadian rhythm, shapes the experiences of menstruators (Rodriguez-Muguruza, 2023). A fruitful starting point for addressing menstruation-related challenges and researching the experiences of menstruators is to understand menstruation as a situation and in a situation (Kelland et al., 2017).

Concurrently, there are indications that discourses and politics surrounding menstruation are undergoing a transformation. In 2023, Spain became the first country worldwide to adopt a nationwide menstrual leave policy. The recently enacted legislation permits menstruators to take a leave of absence for menstruation-related reasons for a period of up to three days, with the possibility of an additional five days if the individual experiences severe symptoms (Bello & Llach, 2023). Nevertheless, period management, which encompasses the provision of public facilities, access to menstrual products, and external responses to menstruation, in addition to period poverty, which denotes the lack of access to period products and education on their effective usage, are prevalent experiences for menstruators globally. In particular, in middle- and low-income countries, the management and affordability of menstruation-related blood flow in daily life represents

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<sup>1</sup> Although this thesis aligns with the latest scientific understanding of gender diversity and acknowledges the existence of more than two sexes (Miguel-Aliaga, 2022), it is noteworthy that a considerable number of studies continue to associate menstruation with the female experience and limit their scope to cis women. To indicate the inclusion of all non-cis female menstruators, this thesis employs the gender star symbol\* when reciting the insights of other studies on gendered experiences. For further elaboration, please refer to pages 22-23.

a significant public and financial challenge for menstruators (Hennegan et al., 2019). Additionally, in high-income countries such as Germany and Austria, menstrual products were previously subject to taxation as luxury items up until 2020 and 2021, respectively (Erdbeerwoche, n.d.). In response to demands from activists and progressive parties, public institutions in Germany and Austria have begun providing disposable menstrual products to address period poverty (Aerzteblatt.de, 2022; Gruene Hamburg, 2023; Schöner, 2023; Stadt Wien, n.d.).

It is currently unclear how menstruators' subjective experiences of menstruation may be subject to change. This study is interested in how menstruators experience their menstruating bodies in the present day and how the meanings attached to their experiences change over time. This is of particular relevance given that the inner and outer landscape of experience is in a state of constant flux (Gendlin, 1997). In a preliminary study, a research team at the University of Ljubljana, comprising Toma Strle, Maruša Sirk, and myself, observed notable shifts in the experience of menstruation and the meanings attributed to it (see subchapter "Pre-study: Method and Data", pp. 35-39). While our preliminary study identified positive and negative menstrual meanings as previously discussed, our preliminary study data also indicated that menstrual meanings are not a fixed phenomenon within individuals but are subject to changes in individuals' engagement with their menstruation and to changes within their environment. There is a paucity of research that has examined the longitudinal shifts in the menstrual experiences of individuals (Anderson & Nichols, 2022; Brantelid et al., 2014; Lee, 2002). The limited number of studies on this topic that have been published to date examine changes in menstrual experiences related to the following topics: sickness (Lee, 2002), self-knowledge and body perception (Anderson & Nichols, 2022), and the influences of work life, social life, family and partner, and body (Brantelid et al., 2014). These scientific undertakings lack a phenomenological interest in the lived body and the interactional dynamics of meaning. The phenomenological approach of this study permits the subjective experience of the menstrual body to emerge as it is lived, without any pre-established topic being imposed or encouraged.

The primary research question addressed in this thesis is as follows: **How do menstruators experience their lived body in menstruation over time and how do menstrual meanings emerging from these experiences change over time?**

Incorporating the legacy of phenomenology in feminist discourse—in particular, the contributions of Simone de Beauvoir (2010 [1949]) and Iris Young (2005)—this research integrates phenomenological methodology with critical theory through empirical investigation. The tenets of critical phenomenology facilitate a deeper understanding of the intertwining of subjective experiences with contingent historical and social structures. This interplay is aptly described by Guenther (2019) as *the quasi-transcendental way*. This approach eschews empirical inquiries that study experience as isolated instances. The method offers a distinctive perspective by challenging conventional notions of what constitutes "human nature" and examining the complex interplay between the "subjective" and the "social" (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). The objective is to prevent the normalization and naturalization of certain experiences while pathologizing or marginalizing others (Gallagher, 2022; Guenther, 2019). Furthermore, critical phenomenology incorporates the emancipatory focus of critical theory (Guenther, 2019). The investigation of the genuinely meaningful aspects of our experiences and the processes through which socially constructed meanings are negotiated is especially pertinent to the study of a stigmatized bodily phenomenon.

In an empirical advancement, this study employed a phenomenologically informed, narrative interview technique (McAdams, 1997) to elucidate the experiences of six menstruators from menarche to the present. The use of narratives is a crucial instrument in this process, offering insight into the individuals' engagement with their experiences while accounting for the meanings behind their statements (Langdrige, 2007). Of the interviewees, five identified as cis-female, and one identified as non-binary. All participants are native German speakers in their mid-twenties residing in Austria and have no medical diagnoses related to their menstruation. By employing critical narrative analysis, which builds upon Ricoeur's (Ricoeur, 1970, 1996) hermeneutic tradition in phenomenology, this study examines narrated experiences. This approach assumes that perspectives are always situated, implying that we invariably perceive things from a specific vantage point (Langdrige, 2007). The method permits an examination of both

the situatedness of the interviewees and the researcher's own positionality. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a comprehensive examination of menstrual experiences, with the objective of advancing our understanding of the complex and multifaceted meanings associated with menstruation.

The following two chapters are devoted to an examination of the theoretical foundations of this study. First, the fundamental tenets of critical phenomenology and the processual study of meanings in the body are delineated. The third chapter presents the empirical findings on menstrual experiences and their meanings. The fourth chapter presents the methodological framework of this study, incorporating the insights gained from the pre-study. Chapter Five provides a detailed examination of the findings of this study. It begins with a review of each case individually and then proceeds to a cross-subject analysis. The fifth chapter concludes with findings pertaining to the processual nature of menstrual meanings and a socio-critical proposal for alternatives. This thesis concludes with an overview of the findings of this study, a reflection on the approach taken in conducting the study, and suggestions for future research projects.

*“Your situation and you are not two things, as if the external things were a situation without you. (...) Your bodily ... is your situation.”*  
(Gendlin, 1992, p.347).

## **Critical Phenomenology and the Study of Meaning**

Engaging only with the subjective or the social in order to study experience is hollow endeavor. Stilted and deadlocked methods that forget that subtracting the social from the subject will never quite work just as the subject will always (re)construct its sociality. This study forges a bridge between a new form of social and political phenomenology, namely critical phenomenology, and psychosocial theories of meaning to research changes in menstrual experiences.

## **Critical Phenomenology, Pardon?**

A novel form of phenomenology has been gaining traction among researchers for some time. The concept of critical phenomenology was initially proposed by Welton & Silverman (Welton, 1987), but it has gained significant attention among scholars engaged in both phenomenology and critical theory, particularly in the works of Lisa Guenther (2013, 2019, 2021). Guenther conceives of her project as a method based on first-person approaches to experience, yet she also critiques transcendental phenomenology. Specifically, Guenther reproaches (1) the initial prior of first-person singular perspective over intersubjective and social experience, and (2) Husserl’s epoché to bracket presumptions when describing the personal experience and to be in the ‘natural attitude’.

“But where classical phenomenology remains insufficiently critical is in failing to give an equally rigorous account of how contingent historical and social structures also shape our experience, not just empirically or in a piecemeal fashion, but in what we might call a quasi-transcendental way. These structures are not a priori in the sense of being absolutely prior to experience and operating the same way regardless of context, but they do play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and manner of our experience.” (Guenther, 2019, p.12).

In critical phenomenology, the practice of "bracketing" and the study of the subjective nature of experience are inextricably linked with an analysis of the historic and social circumstances that enable and shape these experiences. While these social structures are not fixed or universally applicable, they are reproduced in our processes of world-making (Guenther, 2021). Guenther (2021) underscores the necessity of examining the experiential realm of the individual, emphasizing that the approach to the epochē is contingent upon one's position. Nevertheless, Guenther is not the sole individual engaged in this pursuit. The question of whether bracketing is a feasible undertaking, and a worthwhile pursuit is also posed by cognitive scientists. In 1991, Varela, Rosch, and Thompson observed that Husserl's approach to phenomenology, despite its emphasis on direct experience, overlooked two crucial aspects: the consensual and the embodied (Varela et al., 1991). Only in his final, unfinished work, "The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology", Husserl (1970) reflects on the interconnection between theoretical and practical engagements with the essentials between consciousness and experience and the role of the lifeworld (Lebenswelt) in these processes. Next to Husserl's late research on intersubjectivity and the lifeworld, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty represents an important foundation for critical phenomenologists. His research has been less contested and is regarded as an appropriate phenomenological approach that permits an embodied examination of an individual's experience (Guenther, 2019). In particular, Merleau-Ponty (2005) begins with the premise that the body is the medium through which the world is experienced. This places the focus on the lived body in its environment. Merleau-Ponty (2005) posits that the social world, much like the natural world, should be understood not as a mere collection of objects, but rather as a continuous field or dimension of existence. His concretization of this idea in the concept of body schema has gained considerable traction among phenomenologists, who also subject their analyses to social critique. For Merleau-Ponty, the theory of the body is a theory of perception. He understands the body as a natural self and as its own subject of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2005).

A few names are recited repeatedly when searching for representatives of critical phenomenology who have also pursued empirical projects as proposed by Guenther's (2013) study of solitary confinement. Frantz Fanon (1967 [1952]) presents an early

representative of combining a phenomenological analysis of the body with criticality regarding his anti-colonial analysis of a historical-racial body schema. Lisa Diedrich (2001) applied a critical discussion on the phenomenology of disability. Iris Young (2005), Sara Ahmed (2006), and Alia Al-Saji (2010) used Merleau-Ponty's (2005) insights to study gendered and sexual schemas. Eventually, the practice of critical phenomenology is not only a holistic scientific enterprise but also a form of political activism against the privilege and norm of certain experiences and the marginalization and discretization of others (Guenther, 2021). As Shaun Gallagher (2022) in his book chapter on critical phenomenology concludes projects such as Guenther's are particularly relevant for preventing social pathologies based on personal experiences.

### ***Young's Phenomenology of Feminine Embodiment***

Young's re-analysis of girls\*<sup>2</sup> habitual ways of throwing a ball is particularly relevant in view of the fact that socio-cultural problems are naturalized and biologized. In this context, Young makes reference to a study conducted by the phenomenological psychologist Erwin Straus (1952), in which the researcher analyzed the ways in which young boys\* and girls\* utilize lateral space when throwing a ball. Straus (1952) identifies a distinction from an early developmental stage onwards, which he characterizes as a biological phenomenon rather than an acquired one. Particularly, he addresses disparities in throwing techniques, postulating a "feminine" relationship to space that, in his view, has biological, rather than anatomical, foundations (Young, 2005). Young puts forth an alternative existential account of style variations in the use of lateral space, one that is based on Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the lived body and de Beauvoir's insights from feminism. In her 2005 work, Young discusses the situatedness of the individual, emphasizing the role of socio-cultural, economic, and historical experiences in shaping an

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<sup>2</sup> The researchers, Straus and Young, employ outdated terminology that is predicated on a binary understanding of gender and is limited to two biological sexes, male and female. The findings of both studies are presented in the same format as they were originally written. It is not the intention of the author of this thesis to reproduce binary perspectives; rather, it is to adhere to the established rules of academic recitations. To indicate this standpoint, all binary sex determinations have been indicated with a gender star (\*). For further elaboration, please refer to pages 22-23.

individual's identity and actions. Beauvoir's (2010 [1949]) insights on the lack of freedom in women\* and their experiences of objectification illustrate how women\* are denied their subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity (Young, 2005). Young (2005) proposes that contemplating this sense of comportment in the affected individual illustrates a constrained engagement with the body's spatial and lateral capabilities. She concludes:

“To be sure, any lived body exists as a material thing as well as a transcending subject. For feminine bodily existence, however, the body is often lived as a thing that is other than it, a thing like other things in the world. To the extent that a woman lives her body as a thing, she remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities.” (Young, 2005, p.39).

In this study, Young employs a feminist phenomenological approach to examine the ways in which socio-cultural factors influence the experience and embodiment of throwing for women\*. This account is politically astute in that it does not biologize or naturalize body perception and action. As Gallagher (2022) summarizes Young's analysis: “She highlights the culturally defined situation as a corrective to any phenomenological claim to universality.” (Gallagher, 2022, p.181). Her analysis presents a lesson for phenomenological examinations of the body.

### ***On the Quest for Critical Phenomenology***

The question of whether the addition of "critical" in front of phenomenology is relevant remains unresolved. In response to Guenther's reintroduction of the term in her analysis of solitary confinement, Gayle Salamon (2018) poses the question “What's critical about critical phenomenology?”, stating that phenomenology has been critical all along. In light of Merleau-Ponty's reflective and reflexive approach to the self in relation to the world, Salamon advocates for the continued relevance of phenomenology. In contrast, Mérédith Laferté-Coutu (2021) inquires, “What is phenomenological about critical phenomenology?”, proposing that the critique of the natural attitude as an impossible claim of objectivity is invalid, as it fails to account for the possibility of exploring a plurality of attitudes. In this way, Laferté-Coutu (2021) demonstrates that Husserl's work effectively addresses the objectives of critical phenomenologists, who seek to examine a



range of perspectives. Nevertheless, the articles collectively indicate the presence of a highly pertinent topic within the ongoing debate. They have been published in the recently inaugurated journal, *Puncta. Journal of Critical Phenomenology*. Despite the lack of consensus regarding the term "critical phenomenology," a consensus has emerged regarding the "critical turn," which involves a commitment to a practice with specific, situated ends, rather than merely describing phenomena. (Laferté-Coutou, 2021).

The evaluation of research conducted by and based on Merleau-Ponty, and phenomenology more generally, from a feminist perspective is diverse. In numerous instances, phenomenology is perceived as being constrained by a heterosexual male ideology (see, e.g., Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2006; Irigaray, 1993). This thesis, however, draws inspiration from Young's approach and aims to combine phenomenological perspectives on the body with a critical stance on the experiential upbringing of menstruators in relation to their body. The latter is informed by feminist empirical findings (see subchapter "The Menstrual Life: A State of the Art", pp.25-29), which present an original approach to researching the phenomena of interest.

The debate, regardless of whether the term "critical" is included in the designation of phenomenological research practice, encourages a sensitivity and reflexivity regarding the theories and research practices that are selected. In this thesis, critical phenomenology is of particular value in explicitly stating that the experience under study and the methodology employed must be guided by sensitivity, care, and reflection in order to refrain from normalizing or pathologizing menstrual experiences.

## **An Embodied, Interactional Approach to Meaning**

As this thesis is concerned with the study of menstrual meanings, it is essential to gain an understanding of the interrelationship between meaning, the body, and the environment. In critical phenomenology, the situation is relatively clear, as it identifies the source of meaning in social structures that have the potential to be oppressive and exert control through a process of "power-over." Guenther (2021) asserts that these structures influence the formation of meaning by normalizing specific patterns of perception, cognition, and behavior while pathologizing others. They operate not only as external

phenomena but also as subjective and intersubjective frameworks for sense-making<sup>3</sup> and interaction. This is not the sole avenue through which environmental conditions influence meaning. The body's boundedness into its world is a well-established finding among researchers who adopt an embodied perspective.

An increasing number of researchers are approaching meaning from a bodily perspective (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2010; Johnson, 1987; Merleau-Ponty, 2005; Varela et al., 1991). In contrast with objectivistic research traditions<sup>4</sup>, the concept of meaning is no longer conceived in terms of symbolic representations and abstractions from reality. In contrast, meanings are conceptualized as emanating from the body as an experiential source and from the interactive process between the experiencing body and its environment.

Mark Johnson, who, in collaboration with George Lakoff, was a pioneering figure in the development of embodied perspectives on metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), also advanced a theory of meaning that is firmly anchored in human physicality. Johnson's constructivist account of how image schemata and metaphorical projections establish the bodily basis of meaning understands experience as preconceptual and non-propositional.

“The centrality of human embodiment directly influences what and how things can be meaningful to us, the ways in which these metaphors can be developed and articulated, the ways we are able to comprehend and reason about our experience, and the actions we take.” (Johnson, 1987, p.xix).

As illustrated by the example of "understanding is seeing," which can be paraphrased as "I see what you mean," (Johnson, 1987, p. x). Johnson's theory presents a cognitive semantics approach to meaning based on the principles of embodiment, imagination, and understanding. Based on the principles of Gestalt psychology, he further outlines the interactive dimension of experience, which he refers to as the "forceful" dimension. Johnson's theory elucidates that the understanding of a concept is not merely an

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<sup>3</sup> The interested reader may consider De Jaegher & Di Paolo's (2007) seminal work on the enactive account of participatory sense-making.

<sup>4</sup> Those with an interest in the subject may find it significant to consider the philosophy of Ayn Rand (1966), an objectivist approach to epistemology, and its continuation in the works of Leonard Peikoff and Allan Gotthelf. Conversely, Philip N. Johnson-Laird (2010) offers insightful contributions to the field of cognitive science, particularly with regard to the translation of symbolic processes.

individual phenomenon, but rather a complex interplay between the individual's subjective interpretation and their cultural, communal, and historical context (Johnson, 1987). As Guenther (2019, 2021) asserts, an account of meaning must consider the public and intersubjective dimensions. Prior to delving into Eugene Gendlin's (2017) interactionalist explication of the synergy between body and environment, which allows for the emergence of meaning, it is essential to consider the insights gleaned from his earlier works (Gendlin, 1991, 1992, 1997) on the felt dimension of meaning. These works reinforce the notion that meaning is inherently embodied. Gendlin employs a similar lens to Johnson. The field of embodiment research is concerned with the consequences of the body-mind divide, which they argue has resulted in an overreliance on abstract, objectivistic analyses of meaning (Gendlin, 1997; Johnson, 1987). To Gendlin (1997), meaning arises in the interplay between felt *experiencing* and something that functions symbolically. An approach that fails to consider either of the two will inevitably result in an incomplete and inaccurate understanding. It is noteworthy that Gendlin employs the term "experiencing" in lieu of simply "experience." The term "experiencing" acknowledges that, while an experience is a concrete instance, it is also a raw and ongoing process in the experiencer, particularly during the act of reflection upon that experience. Also, it demands a reflective approach to the phenomena: "The relations to be examined will obtain in the very process of examining. Experiencing will play some of its roles in the process of speaking about – and with – them. This philosophy is therefore constantly reflexive." (Gendlin, 1997, p.xi). This understanding of meaning as an embodied, reflexive process is consistent with the existential ideals of critical phenomenology. Existential science is reluctant to conceptualize aspects of human life, concerned that doing so may compromise the integrity of the human experience (Gendlin, 1997). However, the concept of felt experiencing acknowledges that it is a subjective and ever-changing aspect of life. Rather than aiming to generalize experience, it allows for a multitude of interpretations. From this theoretical foundation, new insights and novel hypotheses can emerge. By incorporating both the subjective and the social into the study of meanings, Gendlin's process model provides a valuable foundation for examining the body as an experiential source and its intertwining with the environment.

## ***Gendlin's Process Model***

In "A Process Model," Gendlin provides a comprehensive analysis of the interactional aspect of felt experiencing. In his 1978 [1910] work, William James refers to the phenomenon he names the "much-at-once." Gendlin (2017, pp. xix-xx) characterizes this as the primal and immediate character of the body as "interactings." Gendlin identifies four distinct modes of interaction between the body and the environment. In the first environment, Gendlin (2017) delineates the external factors that may influence the organism under examination. The determining factors that construct this environment are identified by the external observer, rather than by the living body itself. Gendlin posits the existence of a second kind of environment; one that is unrecognizably identical to the ongoing body process. He refers to it as the "reflexively identical environment" (Gendlin, 2017, p. 4). The third manner in which the body and the environment are inextricably linked is that, in particular instances, the body itself becomes the environment in question. Gendlin (2017) posits that the second kind of environment can comprise another environment in which the body is an unfinished result of its surrounding world.

***"The life process (en#2) makes itself an environment in which it then goes on further."***<sup>5</sup>

(Gendlin, 2017, p.7). This is no termination state for body or world, but this kind of body-environment interconnection exemplifies how deeply both are rooted within one another. Gendlin (2017) identifies a final category of environment, designated as "Environment 0". This environment has not yet manifested in the life process, but it signifies its potential for emergence. It will only be definable in ways it processually unfolds; if ever.

Gendlin's (2017) conceptualization of the interconnection between the environment and the body is pertinent to this thesis in several ways. The application of these body-environment categories to the study of meaning offers insights into the socio-cultural and subjective construction of bodily meanings, while maintaining an awareness of the processual nature of the two. By synthesizing the insights of Johnson and Gendlin, it becomes evident that meanings can be discerned despite their potential bodily foundation. The subjective experience of these meanings is of paramount importance, yet

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<sup>5</sup> The quote is presented in its original formatting.

their origin remains elusive. It is erroneous to assume that meanings emerge within an individual who is isolated from the external world. Nevertheless, meanings are not fixed entities that are external to the individual and remain unchanged. Neither are they simply transferred to the experiencer, who is a passive recipient at the mercy of the process. This perspective is now regarded as somewhat outdated and as a distinction that may be somewhat arbitrary. Rather meanings have a processual character in which a Being-in-the-world constantly reflects its being in the world.

A close examination of how both are at play in particular instances a worthwhile avenue of enquiry. As previously stated, one end of critical phenomenology manifests in political activism, with the objective “to generate new and liberatory possibilities for meaningful experience and existence.” (Guenther, 2019, p.15). This is particularly pertinent to the existential experiences that individuals encounter throughout their lives: “Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005, p. xxii).

*"The feminine body is expected to be flesh, but discreetly so."  
(Beauvoir, 2010 [1949], p.323).*

## **Menstrual Experiences and Their Meanings**

The experience of menstruating and the meanings attached to menstruation have been a significant area of concern for feminists and researchers engaged in the social sciences. This chapter provides an overview of the feminist debates on menstrual experiences, recent empirical findings on menstruation and its meanings, and concludes with an examination of the few empirical attempts to study menstrual experiences over time. Moreover, the objective of this chapter is to integrate the critical phenomenological approach with the study of menstrual experiences, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying principles of this thesis approach.

Prior to embarking upon the subsequent subchapters, it is imperative to engage in a brief reflection on the language employed within the existing literature on menstruation. While the majority of literature published thus far continues to employ binary language in describing the menstrual experience as a "female" one that occurs in "women," this thesis strives to align with the emerging efforts to reframe the experience and the identity of the individual who experiences it. This is particularly relevant given that not all women menstruate, and not all individuals who menstruate identify as women. The outdated framing is problematic due to its heteronormative approach, which excludes individuals who identify as inter, trans, or genderqueer. While this issue has been acknowledged in several studies (Donmall, 2013; Frank & Dellaria, 2020; Holst et al., 2022; Medina-Perucha et al., 2020), it is frequently overlooked by researchers. Inclusive and descriptive language that refers to "people who menstruate (PWM)" and "menstruators" is becoming increasingly prevalent. As previously stated, this writing does not alter the language used by the researcher in the synthesis of prior arguments and findings from the literature. If binary gender logic is in place, this thesis adds the gender-star <sup>\*6</sup> to the terms to

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<sup>6</sup> The gender star (also: gender star or gender star) can be used to visualize gender diversity beyond a binary gender model. Symbolically, the rays of the star, which point in different directions, stand for the different gender identities (University of Bielefeld, n.d.).

acknowledge the diversity of gender and sex identifications that the literature (hopefully unintentionally) excludes by its very framing.

## **Feminist Debates on Menstruation**

Regardless of whether we go back 5 or almost 80 years, feminists posit: “Period is political” (Frei, 2020). One of the major feminist contributions<sup>7</sup> to literature is Beauvoir in “The Second Sex” (2010 [1949]), which illuminates the patriarchal conditions that shape women\*’s experiences of menstruation. Beauvoir’s “The Second Sex” continues to offer insights that are both profound and pertinent to the contemporary context. As an existential phenomenologist and feminist in the early days, Beauvoir was profoundly engaged with inquiries pertaining to the significance and worth of human existence in the pursuit of freedom. As her lifetime partner Jean-Paul Sartre (1946) elucidated, essences are not conceived as a priori categories; rather, existence precedes essences. This is at odds with the conventional phenomenological stance on experience; however, this ontological concept aligns with the objective of critical phenomenology to challenge the naturalization of experiences. In her book, Beauvoir develops the concept of the distinction between the subject and the other, demonstrating how men\* are regarded as subjects while women\* are defined in opposition to men\* as the other. Similarly, she shares her colleague in secondary school, Merleau-Ponty, interest in the lived experience. Beauvoir presents a detailed account of how the onset of menstruation, a significant event in a woman\*’s life, instills feelings of inferiority and shame about the body. This is not a complete transformation. Upon reaching menopause, women\* who have been wearing a “hidden costume” of a seemingly non-bleeding body to be accepted as women\* lose their status as women\* (Beauvoir, 2010 [1949]).

With this being only one of Beauvoir’s empirical phenomenological contributions, her work has been pivotal to feminist inquiries. Young’s analysis of menstrual experience (see

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<sup>7</sup> In “The Second Sex” (2010 [1949]), Beauvoir introduces the distinction between sex and gender. She posits that sex is a biological category that is assigned to an individual at birth, whereas gender is a social construct that is shaped by norms, values, and habits. This perspective on gender had not previously been discussed in such detail.

subchapter "Young's Phenomenology of Feminine Embodiment", pp.15-16), denotes: "My inexhaustive survey of contemporary expressions of women's experiences and attitudes appears to confirm that Beauvoir's is a common attitude that has changed little in the intervening half-century." (Young, 2005, p. 101). Young's theoretical account of the findings from the early 2000s, published in "Menstrual Meditations", remains a relevant and insightful perspective on menstrual experiences, as evidenced by the findings presented in the subsequent subchapter (see pp. 25-29). Omnipresent in Young's (2005) account are (1) the shame associated with menstruation alienates individuals from their bodily experience (2) the socially accepted and institutionalized body is one that does not menstruate, and (3) menstruation is often accompanied by psychological and physical distress. Young's (2005) analysis of menstruators' alienating experiences of their bodies and the incongruence of the menstrual body with patriarchal and capitalist expectations must be a consequence of social and cultural norms, rather than an inherent aspect of menstruation itself. Rather, menstruators are socialized into what Sophie Laws (1990) terms "menstrual etiquette." As with other social systems that reproduce etiquette in social interactions, menstruators are expected to follow menstrual etiquette by hiding and managing their menstruation through disciplining their bodies. Young (2005) is correct in characterizing these rules as oppressive. In contrast to other public situations that necessitate the regulation of bodily fluids and secrets, menstrual blood flow is not as readily controllable as it is expected to be, rendering its suppression an unjust demand (Young, 2005). The social treatment of menstruators is unjust and deeply institutionalized. Despite the fact that the public sphere is gradually striving to achieve gender equality, the notion of equality as a form of sameness does not resonate with the lived experiences of individuals. This is evident when examining the experiences of those who menstruate. The public sphere is designed for a "standard body with standard needs, and that body does not menstruate" (Young, 2005, p.113). A contemporary concern that Young previously identified is that even if menstruation becomes institutionalized—as exemplified by the implementation of day-off policies in Spain in the introduction of this issue—this forces menstruators to be vulnerable and intimate at work. Young (2005) posits that a crucial initial step is a profound transformation in how menstruation is perceived, emphasizing its mundane yet illuminating role in elucidating the interconnections between sex and



gender inequalities. Her analysis culminates in a perspective akin to Guenther's, underscoring the necessity for experiences that resonate with the individual to be cultivated. This underscores the imperative for a collective effort, rather than placing the burden of responsibility solely on menstruators. The weight must be carried and transformed by the oppressive culture, too. "There is a positive female experience of the processes and meanings of menstruation, I supposed, covered over by patriarchal biases and interests." (Young, 2005, p.97). A comprehensive understanding of menstruation as a situational phenomenon is a valuable avenue for fostering menstruators' active involvement in their life projects and for anchoring public health measures (Kelland et al., 2017).

"Given that we live as embodied agents, our situation in the world is to some extent determined by our bodies, their functions, manifestations and limitations, the symbolic associations made with our bodies, and the socio-material conditions within which we live." (Kelland et al., 2017, p.34).

In response to the critical phenomenological call, it is imperative that menstruation be studied holistically. For this reason, sociopolitical arguments, such as those put forth by Beauvoir and Young, are pertinent, as they highlight the environmental factors that negatively impact the experience of menstruation. However, these factors are not immutable and must be subject to change, so that the experience can be *meaningful* again for the experiencer and not *meaningless (than)*.

## **The Menstrual Life: A State of the Art**

In considering more recent empirical publications on the subject of how people experience menstruation, a similar picture emerges as in the feminist debate. The literature on menstrual experiences reveals a tendency to portray them as experiences of feeling unclean and untidy (Donmall, 2013; Koutroulis, 2001; Seyed Hosseini, 2018). The meanings that have been revealed indicate that menstruation is socially constructed as something to be hidden, managed, and ashamed of (Donmall, 2013; McHugh, 2020). To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, the application of shame theory and its relation to secrecy and silence has proven to be a valuable avenue for exploring menstrual

shame (McHugh, 2020). This exploration has also revealed the presence of stigmatizing social discourses on menstruation and the existence of negative public portrayals of the menstrual cycle in both online and offline contexts (Chrisler & Gorman, 2015; Klein, 2021; Lese, 2016; Thornton, 2013). However, research indicates that period shame/shaming is not only expressed in public discourse, but menstruators themselves report experiencing it. In a poll conducted in the United States (Siebert, 2018): 42% of menstruators reported experiencing period shaming, including in friendships; 73% of menstruators reported hiding their menstrual products on their way to the bathroom; 62% of menstruators report feeling annoyed when using the term "period," opting instead to use alternative terms such as "time of the month"; and 51 percent of men\* indicate that it is inappropriate for menstruators to openly discuss their menstruation in the workplace. Two systematic literature reviews provide compelling evidence of the pervasiveness and gravity of negative experiences associated with menstruation. Hennegan et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive review of 75 studies from diverse geographical regions, including 45 from Africa, 21 from South Asia, eight from East Asia and the Pacific, five from the Middle East and North Africa, and one from Europe and Central Asia. The situation was unambiguous. The management of menstruation has been a topic of concern for participants across the globe, including the perception of such management, as evidenced by the presence of taboos against the visibility of menstrual blood (Hennegan et al., 2019). Furthermore, the themes of containment, confidence, shame, and distress were identified as salient aspects of the menstruation experience. As might be expected, these negative experiences have been reported as having a significant impact on physical and psychological health, as well as on participation in school, work, and in private interactions (Hennegan et al., 2019). A review of 35 articles by Fennie et al. (2022) similarly indicates that menstruation is often accompanied by secrecy and shame among young girls, which can result in absenteeism from school. As Hennegan et al. (2019) indicate, research on the menstrual experiences of girls and adolescents is extensive. However, research on adults' experiences of menstruating is notably absent from the existing literature.

This may be partially attributed to the pivotal role that menarche, or the first menstruation, plays in the lives of menstruators. A substantial body of research has been dedicated to elucidating the nuances of this inaugural menstrual experience (Adegbayi,

2017; Al Omari et al., 2016; Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Donmall, 2013; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Lee, 2009; Seyed Hosseini, 2018). A common method employed in these studies is the use of narrative interviews. To illustrate the nuances of this debate, a qualitative, narrative study by Donmall (2013) revealed that the mother plays a pivotal role in navigating the first menstruation. This includes addressing the challenges posed by irregular periods, accompanied by fears that something might be internally "wrong," and the association of menstruation with notions of mess, dirt, and shame. These experiences may reflect broader feelings about sexuality. Once more, negative perceptions of the body are at the fore. While this is not the focus of this thesis, it is nevertheless relevant to consider the empirically proven significance of this phenomenon when studying the menstrual lives of people.

Despite the identification of diverse experiences related to menstruation worldwide, studies have largely failed to incorporate phenomenological means into their approaches. The few studies that incorporated phenomenological perspectives (Kelland et al., 2017; Koutroulis, 2001) or used phenomenologically informed interview techniques (Alkhatib et al., 2023) have also focused on the social and cultural context of menstruators' experiences. However, few have also addressed the embodied meanings of menstruation. In discussing the experience of menstruation, Roberts (2020, p. 177) notes that: "we inevitably experience menstruation through the body, which is always situated within specific social and cultural narratives." (Roberts, 2020, p.177). The examination of menstrual experiences within the framework of embodiment has gained significant support (Kelland et al., 2017; Koutroulis, 2001). In a memory-work study involving eight women in Australia, Koutroulis (2001) explored the ways in which menstruation is embodied and how cultural interpretations shape its social consequences. Koutroulis (2001) discovered that menstruating women are frequently perceived more negatively than non-menstruators within cultural contexts. The group of participants highlighted the symbolic classification of menstrual blood and other fluids as either clean or dirty, which they identified as leading to an embodied perception of a "soiled identity" among menstruators (Koutroulis, 2001). Kelland et al. (2017) also identify a significant gap in existing research by examining the philosophical aspects of embodied subjectivity concerning menstruation. Their work seeks to integrate feminist theory with modern

research in this field, offering a feminist phenomenological view on menstruation. This approach is centered on the shared physical experiences of women and considers how social and cultural structures either support or hinder personal freedom. In doing so, it emphasizes the complex relationship between individual bodily experiences and the larger social context, presenting menstruation as both a deeply personal and socially embedded experience.

### ***Changes in Menstrual Experiences***

The findings of the limited number of studies conducted in recent years on menstrual experience over time corroborate the previously discussed findings (Anderson & Nichols, 2022; Brantelid et al., 2014; Lee, 2002). The qualitative studies revealed that the central experiences of the interviewees were self-objectification, the concealment of menstruation, and the portrayal of the menstrual cycle as negative, with a few exceptions. These exceptions included the perception of menstruation as an indicator of health and the resolution of negative menstrual experiences later in life.

In their study, Anderson and Nichols (2022) examined the bodily experiences of women related to reproduction, beginning with menarche and encompassing menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. In their thirty-minute interview, the researchers posed fifty questions based on a study by Emily Martin (1987) to gain insight into the interviewees' self-knowledge and perception of their reproductive lifespan. This phenomenon lacks substantial phenomenological substance; however, it is noteworthy that self-alienation and denial are prevalent experiences not only during specific periods but also throughout menstruators' lives. Similarly, Brantelid et al. (2014) explored women's experiences of menstruation across a lifespan using a narrative approach, with a particular focus on the interconnections between menstruation and various aspects of women's lives, including work, social life, family and partner, and body. The researchers discovered that while menstruation is perceived as an intimate and private phenomenon that the interviewees attempted to conceal, it eventually became integrated into their understanding of what it means to be a woman. It is noteworthy that the interviewee descriptives reveal that all interviewees are “women”, presumably cis female. This leaves aside whether and how such changes are present in genderqueer, trans, and inter people who menstruate.

Additionally, the interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 48, with a median age of 35.5. This indicates that changes occurred during the 20s and 30s, and excludes experiences related to menopause (Brantelid et al., 2014). Another paper also indicates that negative experiences tend to dissipate in adulthood. In a study spanning two years, Lee (2002) examined women's knowledge and understanding of menstruation and premenstrual syndrome (PMS), with a particular focus on the individual meanings attributed to these experiences through the use of a narrative approach. She examined the narratives from a medical anthropological perspective, with a particular focus on how experiences pertaining to health and illness are understood. Lee (2002) discovered that the majority of interviewees accepted the negative labels associated with PMS and viewed changes in the menstrual cycle as indications of illness. Conversely, a small number of interviewees exhibited "highly positive" conceptualizations of their cyclical changes. Once more, the notion that menstruation is a typical, female biological process was elucidated (Lee, 2002). As indicated in the subsequent chapter on methodology, our preliminary investigations, conducted prior to this study, suggest a potential transformation in the experiences and meanings associated with menstruation among young adults. The shifts, regardless of whether the underlying meaning is negatively or positively connoted, underscore the dynamic nature of menstrual meanings and highlight the necessity for a comprehensive examination within contemporary contexts. Accordingly, this research aims to address this gap by examining the subtle shifts in menstrual meanings over time, contextualized within the contemporary socio-cultural milieu and analyzed through a critical phenomenological framework. By elucidating the subjective experiences of individuals and their engagement in the processual character of meaning, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how menstrual experience and their meanings change over time. In addition to offering valuable insights into the nature of menstrual meanings, this approach provides a foundation for potential avenues for empowering menstruators to understand their experiences without naturalizing or marginalizing them. The manner in which this interest is translated into an empirical endeavor will be discussed in the following chapter.

*"There is a point where methods devour themselves."*

*[Il y a un point où les méthodes se résorbent]*

*(Fanon, 1967 [1952], p. 5).*

## Methods

In order to empirically investigate the lived experiences of menstruators, this study employs a qualitative research methodology. In comparison to quantitative study designs, qualitative research can facilitate the generation of comprehensive descriptions of experiences and narratives, which may subsequently provide insight into the recurring themes that shape individuals' lived experiences. Qualitative interviews prioritize the subject and their constructions of meanings (Misoch, 2019).

Narrative interviews are a common method in health and social sciences. However, they also have interest for phenomenologists due to their sensitivity to subjective meaning-making and their lower threshold for participating in phenomenological research (Mortari et al., 2023). Narrating is a more straightforward process than describing, yet it offers a wealth of detailed information (Mortari et al., 2023). Moreover, narratives are instrumental in elucidating the experiences that individuals ascribe meaning to and the manner in which they organize and articulate those experiences (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). A narrator links experiences "in both in time and in meaning" (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016, p. 632), thereby furnishing additional context and insightful details about the actors, relationships, goals, and beliefs involved. Consequently, the analysis of narratives not only provides an opportunity for individuals to engage with meanings on a personal level but also allows for an examination of the social and cultural environment in which they are situated. This study employs McAdams' (1997) narrative interview method, which provides subjects with sufficient guidance on how to engage with their past and present experiences of menstruation without imposing specific life themes. This is significant because narrative interviews typically adhere to a rigorous set of guidelines, primarily focusing on an initial inquiry without the interviewer interjecting or prompting additional questions unrelated to clarifying the subject's statements (Küsters, 2009). The objective of analyzing such qualitative data is to comprehend, identify and reconstruct the subjects' lived experience and their meanings (Misoch, 2019).

In order to fulfill the study's objective, namely to examine menstrual meanings and their evolution from a critical phenomenological standpoint, the implementation of Langdrige's (2007) critical narrative analysis represents a distinctive combination of methodologies. While subject-centeredness is a hallmark of qualitative research, the analysis method proposed by Langdrige (2007) allows for a more nuanced examination of insights pertaining to social theories such as feminism and queer theory. As evidenced by feminist discourse and empirical research, menstrual experiences are shaped by the conditions of patriarchy and heteronormative values. The methodological endeavor to examine evolving menstrual meanings from a phenomenological and social vantage point endeavors to operationalize Roberts' (2020) perspective: "The menstrual body is a complex reality that refuses simplification" (Roberts, 2020, p.177). By tackling the complexity of the phenomenon empirically, this study aspires "to create as accurately as possible the prerequisites for a phenomenon *to show itself* in ways that enable it to be inquired" (Öhlén & Friberg, 2023, p.3). As a reminder, this thesis research question is: **How do menstruators experience their lived body in menstruation over time and how do menstrual meanings emerging from these experiences change over time?**

## Narrative Interviews

The technique of narrative interviewing has its roots in the linguistic-sociological premises developed by the sociologist Fritz Schütze (1976, 1977). Methodologically, he combined phenomenologically oriented sociology after Alfred Schütz, the Chicago School, George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, conversational analyses, and grounded theory after Strauss and Glaser (Küsters, 2009). These theoretical and methodological endeavors are based on the assumption that communicative interactions must be analyzed in a meaningful way to examine and reconstruct social reality from the perspective of the subject (Küsters, 2009). In accordance with the phenomenological convention, the emphasis is on the "how" rather than the "what" in the study of experiences. While narrative interviews have a long history in the social and health sciences, phenomenologists and those working in a phenomenologically oriented manner also gather data through the use of narrations (Dahlberg, 2006; Mortari et al., 2023; Van

Manen, 1984). The empirical phenomenological method, as outlined by Mortari (2022) and Mortari et al. (2023), allows phenomenologists to collect concrete, singular data that is necessary to empirically investigate the specificities of people's lived experiences. Moreover, as previously mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the act of narration has been found to be both more straightforward and more detailed than phenomenological modes of description. However, it is essential that narrative interviews align with the research interest, focusing on subject-oriented and processual life themes (Küsters, 2009). As discussed by Anderson and Kirkpatrick (2016), the narrative interview is centered on individuals' accounts of their experiences, affording primacy to the meanings they ascribe to these accounts. The narrative method is an appropriate approach for this thesis, which is interested in changes in menstrual experiences and their meanings.

In light of the ongoing scientific debate surrounding the relationship between embodiment and narratives, this study design adopts a nuanced perspective, as put forth by Kjøster (2017), which recognizes narrative as a graded attribute intricately intertwined with embodied experiences. While some researchers are critical of the narrative account (Blattner, 2000; Lamarque, 2004) or argue for a detachment of narratives from the body (Atkins, 2008), others defend the narrative integration in embodiment based on the premise that narratives cannot be separated from the bodily experiences but are mediated by those (Brandon, 2014; Mackenzie, 2009, 2014). It should be noted that this study design does not represent a scientific commitment to all premises of narrativism. Rather, it acknowledges the intertwined nature of individuals' bodily experiences and their associated narratives. The narrative interview allows for the exploration of inexperience in descriptive interviewing from a phenomenological perspective, while also providing subjects with the opportunity to delve into and narrate their experiences within the research context. The objective of this research is not to explore menstrual narratives per se, but rather to elucidate the meanings that underpin them.

The use of developmental questions allows researchers to gain insight into the meanings and experiences associated with specific life stages (Frost et al., 2014). McAdams' (1997) technique for conducting narrative interviews has been identified as a valuable approach, particularly in contexts where free narration may pose challenges and in situations where



interviewees may require guidance in exploring their experiential life. The entrance question for narrative interviews, as proposed by McAdams (1997), is presented in the subsequent subchapter on the interview process. The metaphor of a book provides the interviewee with a means of returning to past experiences and offering hypothetical guidance regarding memory. Moreover, the interviewees themselves could investigate whether and when their experiences and meanings associated with menstruation have changed over time, without prompting them to reflect on specific experiences or life themes.

### ***Interview Process***

After reiterating the data privacy and security policy of the study to each co-researcher<sup>8</sup> (see Appendix pp. 126-128), I, the interviewer, provided a brief overview of the research interest, which pertains to the interviewee's menstrual experiences up to the present. In order to avoid priming the interviewees on specific topics, lengthy introductory explanations were eschewed in favor of allowing their experiences and narratives to emerge organically. It was of the utmost importance to establish a trusting atmosphere from the outset, which was then maintained throughout the course of the interview. This was achieved by demonstrating active listening skills and refraining from interrupting the interviewee (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). As required by the method, it was also made clear that the interviewer would have minimal involvement in the conversation, with the aim of preparing the interviewee to take the role of the primary speaker (Küsters, 2009). It was also observed that this absence of verbal input on the part of the interviewer is not indicative of boredom, disinterest, or a perception that something is "going wrong." Rather, it is an integral aspect of the methodology, facilitating attentive listening and comprehension on the part of the interviewer.

Although Schütze's narrative interview technique requires the interviewer to refrain from asking questions about the phenomenon before the "big question," which allows the

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<sup>8</sup> Given the intensive involvement and work required of the individuals participating in this phenomenologically oriented research project, referred to as "participants" or "research subjects," the term "co-researchers" will be used to acknowledge their indispensable role in the research process.

interviewee to delve into their experiences (Küsters, 2009), this approach has not been deemed effective for this study. As previously tested in the preliminary study (see pp. 35-39), the interview commenced with seven brief quantitative inquiries pertaining to the co-researchers' menstrual cycles. These included their age at menarche, the duration of their menstrual cycles and blood flow, as well as the regularity of their menstruation, contraceptive usage, experiences with period pain, and any medical diagnoses related to their menstruation. This approach has proven to be as effective as the topic is intimate and sensitive to many individuals. At this juncture, it is deemed more crucial to facilitate an accessible and reassuring environment than to adhere rigidly to the methodological framework. Subsequently, the interviewer posed the guiding question to the interviewee. McAdams' (1997) narrative interview question was adapted from the original to align with the specific research interest of menstrual experiences. The additions are indicated by italics and square brackets: [...].

“I would like you to begin by thinking about your *[menstrual]* life as if it were a book. Each part of your *[menstrual]* life composes a chapter in the book. Certainly, the book is unfinished at this point; still, it probably already contains a few interesting and well-defined chapters. Please divide your *[menstrual]* life into its major chapters and briefly describe each chapter. You may have as many or as few chapters as you like, but I would suggest dividing it into at least two or three chapters and at most seven or eight. Think of this as a general table of contents for your book. Give each chapter a name and describe the overall contents of each chapter. Discuss (...) what makes for a transition from one chapter to the next.” (McAdams, 1997, p.256).

Once more, the interviewee was instructed to allow for sufficient time for formulations and to refrain from feeling constrained to adhere to a linear narrative structure. It was explicitly stated that jumping in time and going back and forth were acceptable in order to minimize constraints on the interviewee (Küsters, 2009). It is noteworthy that several interviewees proactively provided unsolicited feedback on the question, which was adapted from McAdams (1997), indicating that it was imaginative and creative.

## **Pre-study: Method and Data**

In a previous study, a research team at the Centre for Cognitive Science of the University of Ljubljana consisting of Assistant Professor Toma Strle (BA in Philosophy, PhD in Philosophy and Cognitive Science), Maruša Širk (BSc in Psychology, MSc in Cognitive Science, and myself (BSc in Public Governance across Borders, student in MSc Cognitive Science) studied the daily lived bodily experience of menstruating in the scope of an ERASMUS research project. Together with eight co-researchers who were recruited by me and gave their informed consent on the data privacy regulations for this research and motivated to drop out anytime without consequences. Also, the consent for using the data could be withdrawn anytime. Further, I took over the role of the sole contact person and interviewer for data privacy reasons.

### ***Pre-study Sample***

The interdisciplinary and international research collective can be succinctly delineated as follows: The participants in this study ranged in age from 24 to 41 years at the commencement of the research project, with an average age of 27.6 and a median age of 25.5. Two of the participants were residing in their country of origin at the time of the study, whereas the remaining six were living abroad. The participants' geographical backgrounds were diverse, including two individuals born and raised in Germany, one in Kosovo, one in Slovakia with upbringing in both Slovakia and Germany, one in Slovenia, one in Romania, one in Hungary, and one in Greece. All participants had obtained a bachelor's degree, with two having completed a master's program and the other six currently enrolled in a master's program. One participant had considerable experience with phenomenological research, while four others were engaged with phenomenology through their academic programs. The remaining three participants had no prior exposure to phenomenology or its methodologies before participating in this study. All eight participants identified as cisgender women. With regard to matters pertaining directly to menstrual experiences, one participant had either given birth or was planning a pregnancy. It is noteworthy that none of the participants were using hormonal contraceptives during or immediately prior to the study period.

### ***Pre-study Method and Adaptations in This Study***

In three data phases, we employed two distinct research methods to gain insight into the experiences of our co-researchers. In the first phase, we conducted semi-structured interviews inspired by Anderson and Kirkpatrick's (2016) narrative technique to gain an understanding of their period history. In the second phase, we used the Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) method by Hurlburt and Heavey (2006) to gain insight into their daily lived body experience during the menstrual cycle following the first interview. In phase three, an in-depth qualitative interview, informed by Petitmengin's (2006) micro-phenomenological interview method, was conducted based on the sample material with a specific interest in the interviewees' understanding of the onset of their menstrual cycle. In order to ensure transparency regarding the researcher's prior knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation and to align with the research interests of this thesis, a reflection on the initial data phase and its findings is presented herewith. The semi-structured interviews commenced with seven quantitative questions, which addressed various aspects of the participants' menstrual cycles. The questions addressed a number of topics, including the age at menarche, the duration and regularity of menstrual cycles and periods, the use of contraceptives, experiences of period pain, and any medical diagnoses related to menstruation. Subsequently, the interviews were structured around a central question: how have the co-researchers' menstrual experiences, and specifically their lived bodily experiences of menstruation, unfolded up to the present day?

Following the presentation of the participants' primary accounts of their menstrual experiences, we proceeded to inquire further about their attitudes and beliefs regarding menstruation and the act of menstruating. While the initial set of quantitative questions has been deemed relevant and has been incorporated into this study, the central question has been perceived as too abstract by individuals with limited experience in qualitative research and by interviewees who are not accustomed to extended uninterrupted discourse. Accordingly, an alternative approach has been adopted for this study (see p. 38). In addition, the subsequent inquiries regarding menstruators' beliefs and attitudes have not been deemed essential to the research. In all cases, beliefs and attitudes could be effectively derived from the preceding data. Nevertheless, the data provided clear indications of the interviewees' diverse connections to and identifications with religion

and spirituality. Accordingly, a concluding inquiry concerning the interviewees' relationship to religion and spirituality has been incorporated into the final interview guide of this thesis (see Appendix pp.129-131).

### ***Findings of the Pre-study***

The data from the preceding study, conducted as part of the ERASMUS research project at the University of Ljubljana, addressed the guiding question of *what the lived bodily experience is like during menstruation*. As discussed, the method and data of the first data collection presents a basis for this thesis study. Seven specific meanings of experiences were identified in the data using thematic analysis and the software Atlas.ti (ATLAS.ti, 2024) for supporting the analysis process. The seven meanings of experiences which the eight co-researchers in our previous study identified are: being a woman, a state of concealment, time for myself, a burden, a clean(s)ing, being healthy, and not being pregnant (see Figure 1)



*Figure 1. Findings Pre-Study: Meanings Of Menstruation And Menstruating.*

A significant finding of the pre-study is that those meanings do not exist as fixed and unchanging entities. Instead, the interpretation of the interviewees' experiences and the terminology used to describe them evolved over time, with changes occurring even during

the course of the interview itself. This novel insight into changes in menstrual experiences and their meanings represents a significant focus of this study. In order to provide transparency regarding this research finding and assumption, as well as this thesis, an original excerpt from the data of the previous project is presented with the consent of the respective interviewee:

“But with these cacao sessions or just women getting together and discussing what it actually means to menstruate, that was really helpful to just be appreciative of menstruating and be happy that your body has these capabilities but also maybe see it as a - I don't like this word but - cleansing, cleansing ritual. I don't really see it as a cleansing thing anymore but I think it has a ... [What do you mean by cleansing?]. I don't like the word because it is too much related to religion or spirituality which like a cleansing thing. And I am not that religious or spiritual but I think for a lot of people it is helpful and it is also nice to see it as a cleansing ritual or stuff like that. So, I think it is very nice that people get energy out of this. But overall, I appreciate that more and more education and people are coming forth with cycle sinking and just to know what to do when your cycle is where.” (Lisa<sup>9</sup>, 26, Germany).

The formulations of Lisa indicate an ongoing reflection on her experiences of understanding menstruation as a cleansing of the body. Although she was reluctant to dismiss the significance of the term, Lisa observed a growing unease regarding her interpretation of the word "cleansing" and how this perception shifted over time. The evolution of her conceptualization of menstruation as a process of bodily cleansing was subjected to introspective examination. Moreover, Lisa proposed an alternative interpretation of this experience, namely that menstruation represents one aspect of the cyclical process. In the excerpt, the meaning of menstruation as a cleansing process appears to be superseded by the notion of menstruation as a component of the cyclical changes that occur within the body. This data suggests an intriguing dynamic of menstrual

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<sup>9</sup> All names within the data of the previous study as well as of this thesis study are changed to protect the identity of the interviewees.

meanings undergoing change as a result of individual efforts to comprehend their own and others' bodily experiences.

## **Critical Narrative Analysis**

As outlined by Küsters (2009), the analysis of narrative interviews employs text-interpretative and hermeneutic methods. In terms of the paradigm of this study, critical phenomenology, the critical narrative analysis (CNA) proposed by the phenomenological psychologist Darren Langdridge (2007) is an appropriate fit. The CNA by Langdridge integrates a subject-centered approach with the imaginative hermeneutic method for interpreting qualitative data. The paradigm and the analysis method are both concerned with examining the lived experiences of marginalized groups or marginalized experiences in research, while also demonstrating a sociocritical sensitivity to such experiences. The CNA methodology is based on the works of Paul Ricoeur on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and social theory. In his 2007 work, Langdridge builds upon Ricoeur's hermeneutic of suspicion to develop the imaginative text interpretation:

“That is, by employing specific hermeneutics, the analyst aims to gain an alternative way of seeing: not a way that reveals the truth hidden beneath the surface, but rather a way of taking up an alternative position – recognizing that we always have a view from somewhere (Ricoeur, 1996), within existing ideological structures – and, therefore, enabling a critical move beyond the apparent.” (Langdridge, 2007, p.136).

This approach to hermeneutics differs from more in-depth readings of text, which often pursue a psychoanalytical interest in the genesis of meanings within an individual (Langdridge, 2007). In contrast, the focus of this approach is on the subjective experience of the phenomenon under study and on the ways in which these experiences are conceptualized and related to prevailing social theories.

The CNA comprises six discrete stages. However, Langdridge (2007) and other researchers who have employed the method in their studies (see, e.g., O'Donoghue & Crossley, 2020) have adopted a more flexible approach, combining or omitting stages according to the specific research question under investigation. While all stages are recommended to be

included in the analysis process, findings can be presented and discussed collectively or not at all if they are deemed irrelevant. The initial stage of the process entails a reflection on the concept of the "illusions of the subject." This step is based on the prominent discussion of the researcher's position in the research process and the necessity for reflexivity in qualitative data collection. As this discussion is of significant importance, a brief subchapter is devoted to its origin at the end of this methods section. A discussion of my position as a researcher and my relationship to the subject matter can be found in the initial subchapter of the results chapter (see pp. 47-49). The second stage is concerned with the identification of the principal narratives and the tone and rhetoric employed by the interviewee in the narration of their stories. This practice facilitates the formation of an understanding of people's experiences and experiential lives. A presentation of each co-researcher's menstrual experiences over time can be found in the subchapters two to seven of the results chapter (see pp. 50-80). In the third step, the analyst engages with the narratively constructed identities of the subjects. The focus is on the manner in which a specific self is constituted within a narrative framework (Langdridge, 2007). This step is included in the presentation of each co-researcher's menstrual experiences in the subchapters two to seven of the results chapter. It has been pertinent for the researcher to refrain from disclosing personal information that is not pertinent to the research interest and to focus the work on the topic of menstrual experiences. Subsequently, the researcher identifies themes and their relationships within the text. This also entails organizing the themes in accordance with their inherent meaning. This step is implemented in subchapter on the changes of menstrual meanings, which addresses the recurrent themes in the co-researchers' menstrual experiences and their changes, as well as the meanings underlying these experiences (see pp. 83-96). While the preceding steps may be familiar to those engaged in narrative analysis, step five represents a distinctive critical juncture, wherein the researcher directly engages with the text in the form of a political critique (Langdridge, 2007). Moreover, it entails the acknowledgment of the researcher's situatedness within the research context. Langdridge (2007) posits that a phenomenological project that posits the existence of a transcendental subject and researcher that are uninfluenced by surrounding ideologies is a simplistic and unproductive endeavor. In lieu of attempting to disassociate themselves from their lived



experiences, researchers may instead consider incorporating their situatedness within a particular sociocultural and political context into their analysis (Langdridge, 2007). This critical step is implemented in the last subchapter of this study's results section, entitled "Developing Alternatives: From Isolation to Integration," which can be found on pages 105-109. The final stage is a synthesis of the findings, including a summary of the key narratives and themes, an analysis of the tone and rhetoric used, and a discussion of the subjects' narrative identities. This involves the critical imaginative text interpretation regarding prevailing social theories. However, it is essential to exercise caution to prevent the participant's subjectivity from being eclipsed by that of the analyst or the particular social theoretical framework being utilized (Langdridge, 2007). Although this final stage may appear to be a discrete step, it is more logical to integrate it into the preceding stages in this thesis. Therefore, subchapter "Changes in Menstrual Meanings" (see pp. 83-96) as well as the subchapter on this study's findings in the light of existing literature (see pp. 99-104) discuss the relationship between this study's findings, dominant theories of meaning, feminist perspectives on menstruation, and empirical findings on menstrual meanings. In the conclusion chapter (see pp. 110-113), the findings of this study are presented in a summary form, fulfilling the overarching and synthesizing function of the final step.

Ultimately, critical narrative analysis permits a comprehensive engagement with primary data from subjective texts and discourse, elucidating the discourses and ideologies that subjects draw upon, the constraints imposed upon their statements, and the very experiences under examination (Emerson & Frosh, 2004).

### ***Technicalities of the Analysis***

Following the transcription of interviews, ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti, 2024), was employed to code the interviews in accordance with the narratives, tones, rhetoric of the interviewees, and reoccurring themes within the data. The themes of interest were the meanings and understandings of menstruation as reported by the co-researchers.

## Sample

The particulars of this study's sampling methodology and the sample itself are delineated in the following sections.

### *Recruitment*

The recruitment process commenced with an open call for individuals who menstruate and who would be willing to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. The call was formulated in a way that not only cis-female menstruators feel addressed but also menstruators whose sex and gender identification are diverse, in order to ensure that all individuals who menstruate are included in the recruitment process. As previously stated, menstruation is not exclusive to women. Consequently, the invitation was extended to individuals who experience menarche and those who identify as menstruators. To ensure maximum visibility, a flyer was created for the express purpose of publicizing the call for participation (see Appendix p.131). The flyer was distributed to acquaintances and friends. Furthermore, authorization was granted to those who wished to disseminate the flyer to their acquaintances. Consequently, the flyer was disseminated to a minimum of three WhatsApp group chats and several individuals. Furthermore, the call for participation was included in the presentation of my master's thesis project in a seminar at the University of Vienna. A total of 14 menstruating individuals responded to the call. Individuals who responded to the call were sent an invitation letter (see Appendix pp. 133-134) and brief preliminary inquiries based on the sample criteria (see pp. 42-44). In addition to the aforementioned sample criteria, it was ensured that the individuals receiving the call were contacted by different people, maximizing the possibility to interview people with different backgrounds and perspectives. It was advantageous that those expressing interest came from a variety of disciplines and work environments. In addition, the speed of response and scheduling were also relevant factors, as some interested parties were traveling for an undetermined period, and it was not guaranteed that an interview could occur within the time limits of this thesis' study.

### ***Sample Criteria***

In light of the findings of the preliminary study and other pertinent research publications on menstrual experiences, a number of sample criteria were identified and agreed upon. Given that the interviews were conducted in Vienna by myself, a German speaker, it has been decided that the interviews will be conducted in German to ensure optimal mutual understanding. The preceding study has demonstrated that conducting and participating in interviews in a second language (in this case, English) can result in unforeseen challenges in communication and comprehension, even among individuals who are proficient speakers of both languages. As previously stated, the study encompasses all individuals who experience menstruation. The critique of studying menstruation only in cisgender women has been a prominent topic in recent years, as it reproduces binary understandings of gender identifications and has been argued to be highly exclusive (Donmall, 2013; Frank & Dellaria, 2020). With regard to the menstrual experiences of the subjects, it was essential that the interviewees had not been taking hormonal contraceptives during the period of the interview and in the time immediately preceding it. This was done to ensure that they were experiencing the menstrual cycle that occurs naturally. Additionally, it was essential that the co-researchers did not have any diagnoses related to their menstruation, such as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCO) or endometriosis. While research on menstrual experiences in adolescence is well-developed, with studies of menarche and menopause emerging as areas of interest for researchers, perspectives of menstruators in their 20s and 30s remain underrepresented in the scientific literature. Moreover, the preliminary study indicated that the interviewees in their mid-twenties exhibited superior recall of specific menstrual events compared to their older counterparts. For instance, one subject from the preliminary study who was in her early forties could scarcely recall her twenties, instead referencing experiences from her school years and more recent times. It was thus decided that the study should focus on menstruators in their twenties, a period of significant personal and social development. The objective of this study is to present a range of menstrual experiences. In addition, the project aims to facilitate discussion and comparison of specific experiences and their changes. It was thus determined that it is pertinent that the interviewees do not encounter markedly disparate life circumstances. This was a significant factor in the

decision not to include menstruators who are planning or trying to conceive, as this event has the potential to alter the experience of menstruation and therefore merits its own dedicated research project.

### ***Final Sample***

The final sample is comprised of six menstruators. A total of seven interviews were conducted, with one participant ultimately declining to participate further in the study. Five of the co-researchers self-identify as cis female, while one co-researcher identifies as non-binary. In the Results section of this thesis, a pseudonym was randomly assigned to each co-researcher, with the exception of those who identified as non-binary, for whom a gender-neutral name was selected. The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 27 years, with a mean age of 25. Three of the interviewees were born and raised in Austria, while the remaining three were born and raised in Germany. The interviews were conducted in April and May of 2024. The shortest interview took 00:38:27 (hh:mm:ss) minutes and the longest one was 01:28:59 (hh:mm:ss) minutes with an average of 00:53:16 (hh:mm:ss) minutes. All interviews were conducted in German, the native language of all subjects. However, three co-researchers from Austria grew up speaking Austrian German. All co-researchers possess a comparable middle to high socio-economic background and have been engaged in academic studies during the period of the interview. One co-researcher was pursuing a bachelor's degree, while the other five were enrolled in a master's program. Three of the six co-researchers were engaged in concurrent employment. All interviewees study and work in different disciplines including music, art pedagogy, law, cognitive science, architecture, and journalism. Other natural sciences besides cognitive sciences were not represented. One co-researcher who had participated in the preliminary study was interested in participating once more. This request was granted, as the decision to re-participate did not present any advantage or disadvantage to the interviewee or other interviewees.

## Position of the Researcher

The final subchapter of this section is devoted to the examiner's position in the research process. In qualitative research, the researcher becomes an integral part of the phenomenon under investigation due to the interactive and communicative process of data gathering (Misoch, 2009). In particular, narrative work requires researchers to demonstrate reflexivity in order to clarify the perspectives from which interpretations are derived (Patnaik, 2013). While traditional phenomenology is commonly known for its aim to bracket assumptions based on Husserl's idea of *epoché*, reflexivity, and the principles of situated knowledge that are focal points of sociological and feminist research have gained significant attention in recent decades. Contemporary phenomenologists explicitly practice and communicate their subjectivity and the contributions they make to their research (Finlay, 2008, 2009; Langdridge, 2007; Moustakas, 1990). It is imperative to refrain from making any false promises or claims regarding the production of value-free and objective knowledge. It is also imperative to embrace feminist standpoint theory (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004), which demands and promotes the positioning of the female researcher and subjects, in order to ensure the rigor and reliability of this thesis. This necessitates the development of critical reflexive abilities on the part of the researcher, enabling them to identify potential subject influence and their own positions on the topic under investigation. Ultimately, posing and addressing such epistemological critical questions are standard practices in social constructivist and feminist research, as well as in phenomenology. As postulated by the selected analytical method for this research project, my reflection on and situatedness regarding the study phenomenon serve as the initial point of analysis (see pp. 47-49).

*“Beauvoir's insights remain fundamental to contemporary feminism. But she analyzed the world she lived in. We need to analyze our own world.” (Moi, 2006, p.1739).*

## Results

As put forward by Moi (2006), this empirical endeavor analyzes and discusses how menstruators experience their lived body in menstruation up to today and how these experiences have changed over the course of their menstrual lives. The discussion will focus on the menstrual meanings derived from the narratives of this thesis' co-researchers. Further interest lies in a critical engagement with the experiences and meanings attached to promote a sociopolitical debate on how menstrual circumstances must be considered to enable meaningful experiences for all menstruators.

The initial subchapter (see pp. 47-49) is devoted to contextualizing my role as a researcher, outlining my research interests, and offering a personal reflection on the subject matter of this thesis. This serves to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of my approach and perspective. The subsequent six subchapters (see pp. 50-80) present the findings of each co-researcher's narrative interview. A summary of the narrations of all menstrual chapters as reported by the co-researchers is provided. Moreover, a brief excerpt that suggests the underlying menstrual meanings is included with each menstrual chapter. It should be noted that the excerpts included here are indented to indicate the interpretative perspective of the researcher, rather than that of the narrator. It should be noted that these indentations are distinct from the quotations, which are interspersed throughout the text. These, however, are identifiable due to the quotation marks that encase the quotes. In a second step, which can be found in subchapter eight (see pp. 83-96), the menstrual chapters with their respective meanings are presented and discussed from a cross-subject perspective. This includes an examination of similarities and differences in the co-researchers' menstrual lives. A comprehensive overview of the menstrual experiences, their changes, and meanings can be found in the tables 1 (see pp. 81-82) and tables 2 (see pp. 97-98). In subchapter nine (see p. 99-104), the results are interpreted in light of existing literature on the nature of meanings and empirical findings on menstrual experiences. The final subchapter of the results section is dedicated to the critical analysis of the data (see pp. 105-109), which

elucidates the emancipatory potential of menstruation and the formative social factors that must align with it to support menstruators' freedom of experiencing their menstruation.

## Situating Myself

This analysis commences with a reflection on my own positionality within the research process and in relation to the research interest. I am a 27-year-old cisgender female master's student in cognitive science, currently pursuing my master's degree with this publication. My academic background also includes an interdisciplinary Bachelor of Policy and Public Administration, as well as engagement in an honors program on science and participation in a research training program that focuses on critical embodied thinking and understanding<sup>10</sup>. My research interests during my undergraduate studies primarily encompassed discriminatory practices in public contexts, with a particular focus on ageism and critical discourse theory. In pursuing my master's degree, I have concentrated my research efforts on the areas of emotions, social cognition, and hierarchical cognitive abilities. The majority of my research has been conducted within the 4E<sup>11</sup> paradigm, particularly in the domains of enactive and embodied cognition. As detailed in the Methods section (see Pre-study subchapter), I have designed and implemented a research project at the University of Ljubljana on the phenomenology of menstruation, which serves as the foundation for this empirical study. My interest in studying menstruation can be attributed to my perception of having a detached relationship with my own menstrual cycle prior to embarking on these research projects. I sought to establish a rationale for engaging with this topic in a more profound manner. Given my involvement

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<sup>10</sup> The embodied and critical thinking and understanding (TECTU) program, a European Erasmus+ initiative, offers an interdisciplinary research training. It was developed with input from experts across various fields, including philosophy, computer science, cognitive science, and environmental design (TECTU, n.d.).

<sup>11</sup> Those who espouse the tenets of 4E cognition posit that the cognitive phenomena of spatial navigation, action, perception, and emotional understanding are inextricably linked to the specific morphological, biological, and physiological attributes of an agent's body. Furthermore, these cognitive processes are contingent upon the structure of the surrounding natural, technological, or social environment, as well as the agent's active, embodied interaction with it (Newen et al., 2018).

in activism against oppressive structures, including feminism, anti-ableism, anti-racism, anti-fascism, and anti-capitalism, as well as my long-standing political engagement with the Green party in Germany, a sociopolitical perspective on research topics has consistently been of significance to me. While this may have led me to the overarching theme of this master's thesis, over the course of my studies and my ongoing engagement with phenomenology, I developed a keen interest in observing changes in experience and changes in experiencing an experience. While phenomenology allows for the examination of subjective experiences, the phenomenological research methods currently available appear to impose constraints. In particular, recent developments in the study of highly specific, such as those explored through micro-phenomenology<sup>12</sup> or descriptive experience sampling<sup>13</sup>, appear to offer significant value when the research interest does not encompass the genesis of the experience and its significance to the participant. The pursuit of specifically portraying these perpetuations of personal and intersubjective meanings of experiences is not only less susceptible to the potential biases and limitations of objectivity inherent in traditional research methods. Furthermore, if one is interested in the societal conditions and circumstances of experience and the act of experiencing, such a reflective undertaking has the potential to portray patterns that interact with people's experiences, thereby informing us more about their very nature. It seems outdated to draw a strict line between the understanding of experience in cognitive disciplines and social sciences, especially when viewing the research successes of the 4E paradigm or more recently, embodied approaches to predictive processing<sup>14</sup>.

It should be noted, however, that my identity extends beyond that of a researcher with specific research interests and perspectives. Also, I am a menstruating individual. To facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the researcher's perspective and to contextualize the research, it is valuable to provide a brief description of the researcher's personal perspective on menstruation.

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<sup>12</sup> The interested reader particularly considers the works by Claire Petitmengin (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Those wishing to pursue this topic further may wish to consult the works of Russel T. Hurlburt and Christopher L. Heavey (2006).

<sup>14</sup> It would be of significant interest to those involved to examine the seminal works of Karl Friston (2010) and Andy Clark (2017) in greater detail.



The subject of menstruation, the menstrual cycle, and the diversity of menstrual experiences is of personal interest to me as it illustrates the diversity of social and subjective experiences among people, while also demonstrating the interaction between bodily understanding and environmental conditions. This is of particular relevance to me, as we, as menstruators, are all menstruating under the conditions of patriarchy, capitalism, ableism, racism, and other discriminatory systems that assume people are living in a high-functional, young, cis-male body that does not menstruate. The disclosure of personal experiences with the body, particularly those related to menstruation, provides an opportunity to identify the types of bodies that are permitted to thrive in a given society and to examine the ways in which the flourishing of certain bodies is constrained or even diminished by prevailing social and political practices. It is of the utmost importance to engage with and understand our own bodies in order to establish and maintain connections to our physical selves and our senses of Self, thereby promoting our overall well-being and bodily freedom. It is therefore imperative that we promote an understanding of each other's daily lived experience. Despite the growing interest in menstruation research among scientists worldwide and the well-established evidence that sociopolitical circumstances stigmatize menstruation, there has been limited exploration of how research subjects can elucidate the ways in which this phenomenon has shaped their lives in a continuous and pervasive manner, rather than being confined to specific periods, age groups, or subject matters. While it is understandable that such comprehensive qualitative research endeavors that focus on people's life stories are inherently laborious and entail a reduction in the sample size, a master's thesis may be an optimal venue for undertaking such a project. My personal and scientific focus is on amplifying the voices of my peers who menstruate, thereby demonstrating the diversity and depth of our lived experiences. Maintaining or even thriving with a menstrual body in the context of male-oriented, ableist circumstances is a significant challenge. This perspective is becoming increasingly prominent in recent years, as evidenced by its presence in activism, progressive political debates, and new forms of communication such as social media. The following section of this master's thesis presents the findings of the research, with a particular focus on depicting and understanding the lives of menstruators, both in the private realm and in the context of scientific inquiry.

## **Anna's Menstrual Life**

Anna was 24 years of age at the time of the interview. She identified as cisgender female and used the pronouns she/her. Anna was born and raised in Austria. Anna's menstrual cycle was regular, occurring every 29 days, and lasted approximately five to six days. On the first two days of her menstrual cycle, she typically experienced severe pain, which at times necessitated bed rest and the use of analgesics. Anna had never utilized hormonal contraceptives; however, she had a copper intrauterine device (abbreviated as a copper IUD) inserted at the time of the interview. Anna was under surveillance for endometriosis, but the diagnosis was negative; thus, she has no medical diagnosis related to her menstrual cycle. With regard to her overall health, she reported occasional depressive episodes but did not have any specific health diagnoses. With respect to the ideologies and belief systems that may be relevant, Anna described herself as spiritual but did not feel related to any specific religion or ideology.

### ***Anna's Menstrual Chapter 1***

In the interview, Anna delineated three principal phases in her menstrual life. In Anna's view, the initial phase of menstruation commenced with the onset of menstruation at approximately 12 years of age. Although she was well-educated and aware of the physiological process, she experienced feelings of shame and discomfort surrounding menstruation. Anna provided a detailed account of her experience of menarche. She recalled being at home with her brothers and father, but without her mother, who was absent due to work obligations. After observing the presence of menstrual blood in her underwear, a period of psychological adjustment ensued. She was aware of the location of her mother's menstrual supplies but felt insufficiently mature to utilize them. The menstrual pads appeared to her to be similar in appearance to diapers. Anna sought assistance from her grandmother, who resided in the same household. Anna indicated that although her grandmother provided her with care and assistance, she observed that her grandmother seemed uneasy and uncomfortable. This discomfort was later observed by Anna in her interactions with her mother, father, and brothers, who were also reported to have made some "stupid" comments. Anna indicated that her mother provided her

with support and defense if someone at home made dismissive comments, which she perceived as helpful. In the broader social context, she recalled experiencing feelings of shame and secrecy regarding menstruation. To illustrate, at school, her classmates were concealing their menstrual products, and she did not believe she could openly request assistance if she forgot hers at home. For Anna, this was accompanied by a lack of openness regarding her experiences of period pain, given the limited scope for discussion about menstruation. She expanded on her inability to acknowledge the pain, as she perceived it to indicate a lack of strength. Additionally, Anna indicated that she continues to experience these sentiments in the present. Anna related this to her mother's apparent inability to demonstrate any vulnerability or acknowledge the experience of pain. Despite her mother's apparent support, Anna described her mother as uneasy about discussing menstruation with her daughter and never shared her personal experience with her.

In Anna's menstrual chapter one, which marks her period of menarche and her first social interactions related to menstruation, it is evident that menstruation and experiencing menstruation are associated with feelings of shame, secrecy, discomfort, and weakness. Anna recalled instances within her family that made her aware that menstruation and discussing it were causing discomfort or even providing justification for her relatives to harass her. Although Anna's mother offered her support, she observed that her brothers and father were less respectful. Anna also highlighted the lack of communication about menstruation with her mother, perceiving this as a sign that menstruation was something to be handled discreetly and that open and vulnerable discussions about menstrual experiences, particularly in the context of period pain, were seen as a sign of weakness. Additionally, during these school years, menstruation was largely concealed.

## ***Anna's Menstrual Chapter 2***

For Anna, the transition to chapter two coincided with a change in educational institutions at the age of 14 or 15. In the upper school that she visited from that age onwards, Anna was enrolled in a class that was predominantly female, with only one male student. Anna indicated that menstruation was a topic that was consistently discussed. The subject

noted that the openness about menstrual experiences began to emerge, particularly with the formation of friends' groups and the intensification of individual friendships. Anna mentioned that colleagues brought warm water bottles to school and that their friends group shared a blanket in the back of their classroom to provide warmth. Furthermore, Anna indicated that at approximately 16 or 17 years of age, she and her peers commenced discussions about sexuality, including their first sexual experiences and relationships. Additionally, she observed that these discussions were frequently accompanied by conversations about hormonal contraceptives, particularly the contraceptive pill. Anna indicated that the emergence of these topics and interests prompted her to reflect on her own sexuality, sexual orientation, and physical appearance, noting that she was the only one who had not yet experienced sexual intercourse. Furthermore, Anna indicated that her siblings' and father's attitudes improved significantly during her second chapter. Additionally, she indicated that she was aware of similar experiences among her friends, including instances of mobbing. Similarly, Anna observed that she became aware of causing discomfort to her family when she engaged in excessive discussion about menstruation. Anna's frustration and sense of being constrained in her communication led her to discuss the matter further. Additionally, Anna indicated that during the second chapter, she initiated a course of study on scientific literature pertaining to menstruation. This was undertaken with the objective of enhancing her ability to respond to prejudices related to hormonal imbalances, among other topics. Furthermore, Anna discussed her intensified engagement with her instrument, the violin. She observed that her menstrual cycle has a significant impact on her performance level. Anna reported that she experienced severe menstrual pain to an extent that prevented her from continuing her practice or from performing adequately during her violin lessons. Moreover, Anna reflected that in this second chapter, the pressure to achieve and to perform constituted a novel addition, one that had not been present in chapter one. Additionally, Anna indicated that she had occasionally considered the possibility of ceasing menstruation, although this notion had only manifested for a brief interval. In general, Anna indicated that her experiences with menstruation were less challenging than in the previous chapter.

In the second chapter of Anna's menstrual life, the narratives revolve around menstruation, underscoring its perceived normality and commonality, as well as the stigmatization, performance constraints, and sexuality associated with it. In her school environment, Anna reported that her menstrual experiences were becoming normalized in relation to the female-dominant setting, where her peers and she were beginning to openly discuss and live out menstruation, having previously concealed their experiences. Consequently, menstruation became a common experience among her peer group. Similarly, Anna delineated discussions among her peers regarding the phenomenon of "mobbing" in relation to menstruation. Through these conversations, she gained insight into the stigmatized nature of menstruation. Anna's engagement with menstruation as a stigmatized phenomenon became even more pronounced when she discussed her engagement with scientific literature on menstruation in order to be better equipped to confront dismissive conversations on the subject. Confronting the stigmatization of the menstrual experience became a pivotal aspect of her family life. Moreover, as a result of Anna's rigorous training in her musical instrument and her experience of menstrual discomfort, she associated menstruation with performance limitations and her struggle with performance pressure. In addition, Anna's initial experiences with her own sexuality and discussions with her peers about sexual experiences and contraception suggest that menstruation was also associated with sexuality and the necessity for contraception.

### ***Anna's Menstrual Chapter 3***

In the case of Anna, chapter three started around the age of 19, marking the period when she relocated from the parental residence and commenced her studies in an alternative metropolis. She stated that her menstrual cycle remained unaltered during this period. However, she also indicated that her internal processes associated with becoming an adult were particularly salient. Anna related this specifically to her first sexual encounters, living in an independent residence, and engaging in a more profound and intimate relationship with her body. In regard to her sexual life, Anna observed that her perception of menstruation shifted to become a means of determining whether or not she was

pregnant. Additionally, she stated that the notion of abstaining from menstruation through the use of hormonal contraceptives ceased to be a source of interest for her. Anna reported noticing that she experiences sexual desire only during specific phases of her menstrual cycle. She also reported engaging with her feelings of sexual obligation to provide in a relationship. Additionally, she stated that she no longer believes it is an entitlement for the partner to be okay with having sex during her period. Furthermore, she mentioned that she stopped allowing her boundaries and personal needs to be crossed during menstruation. Anna also related this to her current partner, with whom she lives, who is highly engaged and interested in supporting her in her menstrual experiences to the extent that he is able. Furthermore, Anna expanded on the notion that her initial experience of menstruation in a state of solitude, with the responsibility of self-care and nutrition, and with a heightened awareness of her physical self, represented a significant shift in her understanding of this process. Anna indicated that her perception of menstruation had undergone a notable transformation. For example, she observed a correlation between her nutritional intake and her menstrual cycle, noting that her dietary preferences vary depending on her phase of the menstrual cycle. Additionally, she perceived differences in her digestive processes during menstruation compared to other phases of her cycle. Additionally, Anna began incorporating supplements into her regimen during menstruation, including iron and magnesium. She expanded on this, suggesting that it may be related to her decision to allow menstruation to occur without hindrance. Furthermore, Anna would take a day of respite from her studies or lectures and refrain from engaging in physical activity if she experienced severe discomfort or emotional distress in relation to her menstruation. During the course of the interview, Anna noted that she currently encounters these challenges to a greater extent in her efforts to balance her academic pursuits, occupational responsibilities, and personal affairs. Additionally, Anna observed that her relationships with others deepened, as she was better able to acknowledge her vulnerabilities and engage with her menstrual cycle. Likewise, Anna reported that she does not feel this way at work. She stated that menstruation is too private to be discussed at the workplace and that she is unable to adjust her workload in relation to her menstrual cycle. Anna further elaborated that she is uncertain as to whether women should be permitted to take days off from work, or whether this would

merely serve to create an additional distinction between women and men in the workplace. Therefore, Anna indicated that she attempts to modify her personal life when she is unable to reduce her workload during menstruation. This involves engaging in activities such as yoga, walking, consuming more coffee and less tea, and other methods of self-care. Likewise, Anna indicated that she has not yet formed a definitive opinion regarding the interactions between work and menstruation. Moreover, she reported a more profound engagement with literature on the menstrual cycle. Anna observed that her education on the menstrual cycle was primarily chemical and biological in nature, and that she began to associate her experiences and emotions with the menstrual phases.

In Anna's chapter three, it becomes evident that she predominantly conceptualized menstruation as an indicator of non-pregnancy, a state of diminished libido, with a pronounced correlation to sexuality and contraception, as body literacy, as a component of the menstrual cycle, and as a means of regulating fertility. As a result of the onset of Anna's shared sexual experiences, menstruation remained closely associated with sexuality and the necessity for contraceptive measures. In particular, menstruation became a marker for the absence of pregnancy and a reduction in libido relative to her (male) partners. Moreover, as Anna began to prioritize her physical needs, including nutrition, exercise, and rest, her menstruation also became a domain of heightened body literacy. In particular, Anna's engagement with the menstrual cycle and menstruation as one phase of it led to an enhanced understanding of her body's needs. Ultimately, Anna's account of the expectations at her workplace to perform and function despite her menstruation and to conceal the phenomenon at work suggests that menstruation was still perceived as a performance constraint and a need to manage her body in private.

## **Bea's Menstrual Life**

Bea identified as a cisgender female, with the pronouns she/her, was born and raised in Austria, and was 25 years of age at the time of the interview. Her menstrual cycles were regular, with a length of 26 to 33 days, and exhibited fluctuations in accordance with her subjective stress levels. Bea reported experiencing period pain, which she described as "not too strong." The pain was primarily present on days one and two and was tolerable with the use of one pain medication. Bea did not use hormonal contraceptives during the time of the interview but took the hormonal contraceptive pill between the ages 18-19. Moreover, there was no history of medical conditions related to menstruation or general health in Bea's medical history. Bea self-identified as neither religious nor spiritual.

### ***Bea's Menstrual Chapter 1***

For Bea, the onset of her first menstrual chapter preceded the advent of her menarche at approximately 12 years of age. The subject of menstruation was addressed in the context of the school curriculum and among her peers. Bea and her peers engaged in conversations about their own experiences with menstruation, first and foremost, whether they had already begun menstruating. She recalled that the discussions were "embarrassingly intimate." Moreover, Bea delineated that at the onset of her menarche she was uncertain regarding the nature of the blood she observed in her underwear. Bea sought counsel from her mother, who provided guidance on navigating the onset of menstruation and demonstrated the proper use of menstrual pads. Bea recalled that she did not 'feel like wanting to menstruate at all'. Additionally, the subject expressed feelings of shame and discomfort related to both the onset of menstruation and the use of menstrual pads, which she perceived as a reminder of infantile diapers. Additionally, she indicated that she transitioned to tampons at some point, which afforded her a degree of comfort compared to pads. Bea reported experiencing significant distress and discomfort associated with menstruation. Bea inquired, "(...) as if all women do this all the time? How annoying is that?". Additionally, she indicated that although her friends and she engaged in discussions about menstruation, they did not address their personal sentiments regarding the topic. In her educational setting, she observed that discussions about



menstruation and the display of menstrual products were considered taboo. In sum, Bea described this chapter as a process of self-discovery regarding her own approach to menstruation, the challenges of navigating menstruation in a way that does not perpetuate shame, secrets, and perceptions of normativity, and the multifaceted ways that these dynamics manifest.

In her opening chapter, Bea presents a compelling account of the complex emotions and experiences associated with menstruation. She explores the feelings of shame, uncertainty, discomfort, and unfairness that often accompany the onset of menstruation, as well as the engagement with menstruation as a secret, a burden, and a source of self-discovery. Bea's narratives revolve around her initial social interactions with menstruation, which revealed that this natural process was often perceived as shameful and kept secret. For Bea, the discomfort and annoyance associated with menstruation were particularly pronounced, as evidenced by the quote presented earlier. Additionally, she viewed menstruation as an opportunity to gain self-knowledge and understand her menstrual body, despite the negative sentiments often associated with this topic.

### ***Bea's Menstrual Chapter 2***

For Bea, the transition to upper school signified a change in the focus of her menstrual book, moving from chapter one to chapter two at approximately 15 years of age. Bea indicated that she had her first romantic relationship at approximately 16 years of age, which prompted her to initiate discussions about menstruation with both her partner and her mother. Moreover, Bea began experimenting with various analgesics due to her experience of period pain on the first day and her reluctance to continue experiencing discomfort in bed on that day. In addition, Bea stated that she does not dwell on menstruation in general and instead accepts it as a natural occurrence. She handles it effectively and does not ruminate on it during other phases of her menstrual cycle. She indicated that while she was not preoccupied with her menstrual experiences, they became a normalized aspect of her life. Furthermore, Bea discussed her initial visits to a gynecologist, conversations about hormonal contraception, and her experience residing with a host family in the United States. She described her stay with the host family as

highly enriching, noting that she lived with five host sisters and that the family was generally open about the experience. Bea stressed the host father's openness towards menstruation. Upon returning to Austria, Bea found herself in a class with only two boys and twelve girls, where menstruation was discussed with much greater openness. She observed that menstruation had become a new reality for her friends and herself.

In Bea's second chapter, she described how menstruation evolved into a common topic of discussion among women experiencing it, as well as with her peers. This shift in dialogue coincided with the advent of her sexual life and the need to contracept. Bea highlighted the role of her female-dominated everyday life as a key catalyst in her normalization process of menstruation. The remainder of her narratives revolve around her initial sexual experiences and her engagement with contraception, including a visit to a gynecologist and discussions with her peers about the topic.

### ***Bea's Menstrual Chapter 3***

Bea reported that she began using a hormonal contraceptive at approximately 18 years of age. She was uncertain as to whether this represented a new phase but was aware that her menstrual cycle had undergone significant changes during this period. Bea recalled that her primary concern was ensuring the pill was taken at the same time and on each day. For her, this meant a heightened level of engagement with her body and menstruation. Additionally, Bea relocated to Germany for a year to reside with her partner at that time and observed that hormonal contraceptives were not a suitable option for her. Bea reported a decline in her sense of well-being and libido, along with a notable increase in mood swings, emotional volatility and weight. She related these experiences to her unnatural menstrual cycle at that time. Approximately one year later, Bea ceased taking the contraceptive pill.

In the third chapter of Bea's account, the narratives on menstruation predominantly revolve around her experience with hormonal contraceptive use and the consequence of not having a menstrual cycle. In the chapter in which Bea addresses menstruation, it is primarily framed as a phenomenon that necessitates the use of contraceptive measures.

#### ***Bea's Menstrual Chapter 4***

In her fourth chapter, Bea recounts the period following her cessation of hormonal contraception at approximately 19 years of age, during which she became reacquainted with her menstrual cycle. Additionally, she indicated that her experience with menstruation was less stigmatized, less taboo, more open, and value-free than her initial encounter. Bea reported engaging in several conversations with colleagues and new roommates who exhibited a high degree of openness and interest in the subject of menstruation. Moreover, she became aware of the existence of the menstrual cup for the first time and began utilizing it, which she perceived as an "extreme game changer." In Bea's view, the menstrual cup represents a significant departure from the necessity for prior planning and contemplation in the context of menstruation management. In addition, a few friends in Bea's peer group were diagnosed with PCO or endometriosis. This highlighted to her that the health of the menstrual cycle is not a given. Additionally, Bea recently began monitoring her own menstrual cycle and identified indications of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) as well as a correlation between her emotional and physical stress levels and subsequent delays in the onset of menstruation. Moreover, she described experiencing the sensation of ovulation with notable intensity during several recent menstrual cycles, at times accompanied by discomfort. This sensation represents a novel experience for her. Bea further elaborated that this kind of perception and feeling of the menstrual cycle is a recent phenomenon. Moreover, she indicated that these topics are generally more familiar to gynecologists than to patients. Additionally, Bea discussed the influence of social media on her understanding of the menstrual cycle. She observed that she consumes content on social media that informs her about cyclic shifts and characteristics of menstruation, which she described as overall educational.

The fourth chapter of Bea's account marks the beginning of her reconnection with her menstrual cycle, following the cessation of her use of hormonal contraceptives. The accounts of her menstrual experiences primarily revolve around the idea that menstruation is a normal and widespread phenomenon, even though it has historically been a stigmatized one, and a battleground for bodily literacy, overall health, and an engagement with the full spectrum of the menstrual cycle. Bea delineated several peer discussions that enhanced her perception of

and openness to her menstrual experiences. These further heightened her awareness of the importance of cycle health and initiated her engagement with the full spectrum of menstrual cycle symptoms. It became evident that Bea associated her menstruation and experiences of the menstrual cycle with her knowledge and comprehension of her body. In addition, menstruation became a topic of public debate to Bea.

## **Caty's Menstrual Life**

Caty was the co-researcher who had already participated in the preliminary study and expressed interest in joining the current study. Caty was a 26-year-old cis female who used the pronouns she/her. She was born and raised in Germany. Caty experienced a regular cycle of 30 days length. Caty had no medical history regarding menstruation and overall health. However, she had undergone a back injury and subsequent surgery a few years prior, which resulted in increased pain in that area during menstruation. Caty was not using hormonal contraceptives at the time of the interview. However, from the age of 15 to 18, she was using such contraceptives. Furthermore, from the age of 21 to 26, she had a copper IUD inserted, which is a non-hormonal form of contraception. Caty self-identified as an atheist with no history of religious or spiritual beliefs. However, more recently, she began to engage more profoundly with her relationship to spirituality, noting an emerging interest in faith and its perceived benefits.

### ***Caty's Menstrual Chapter 1***

Caty designated her inaugural menstrual chapter "Aunt Rose" (the original "Tante Rosa"), a metaphor she had acquired in school for discreetly discussing menstruation with approximately 11 years of age. To illustrate, if she were menstruating, she could state, "My aunt Rose came to visit me today." Caty highlighted that these were 'weird' metaphors. Moreover, Caty reported that she had attended a camping trip where she observed the presence of blood in her stool, which she presumed to be a menstrual occurrence. Caty contacted her mother, who provided assistance and guidance during this experience. However, Caty drew parallels between this experience and how the chapter felt like to her. She characterized it as the inaugural dialogue among girls and women regarding the subject of menstruation. Among her peers in school, she further noted that mostly shame and fear were present in the few conversations they shared that time: "So because, of course, there was a bit of education at school, but most of the education was done together in the schoolyard. But of course, nobody really had a clue. And the people who used to have a period were kind of ashamed because they used to have a period, those who didn't have a period yet were also ashamed."

In her initial discussion of menstruation, Caty characterized it as a shameful experience that must be concealed and as one that is fraught with uncertainty. Caty delineated this in her account of an educational event at school, during which she was instructed to utilize a covert metaphor to refer to her menstruation. Secondly, the confusion between a digestive issue and menarche emphasized the ambiguity surrounding menstruation for Caty.

### ***Caty's Menstrual Chapter 2***

Caty indicated that the second chapter commenced with her menarche, which occurred at the age of 13. Caty described her initial experience of menarche, which occurred while she was on vacation with her family. She reported experiencing severe pain, which caused her distress. Caty recalled experiencing concern that she might be pregnant or have cancer and noted that she was previously unaware that menstruation is often accompanied by such intense pain. Moreover, Caty indicated that her sister and mother provided emotional support, yet she predominantly endured the experience independently. Caty recalled that her brothers and father were absent from the experience, despite their physical presence. Additionally, Caty indicated that her menstruation was not celebrated

In Chapter two, Caty recounts her initial experiences with menarche as a period of distress and uncertainty. Once more, her lack of knowledge regarding the specifics of the menstrual experience and the social discretion observed within her family further reinforced these perceptions of menstruation.

### ***Caty's Menstrual Chapter 3***

In her menstrual book, Caty devotes a brief section to a period of her adolescence, spanning from the age of 14 to 15, during which she grapples with the question of how to navigate the complexities of "that". Caty commenced her discussion by recounting her experiences of trialing various menstrual products, which she found to be unsatisfactory.

For Caty, chapter three represented a process of understanding menstruation as a phenomenon that occurs over time. This understanding was closely tied to the

development of personal literacy regarding one's own body, needs, and the ability to navigate these aspects.

#### ***Caty's Menstrual Chapter 4***

Caty stated that her discussion of menstruation in chapter four concentrated on the initial sexual experiences and discussions with friends and family about contraceptive measures, which commenced approximately at 15 years of age. She further elaborated that she had never previously considered taking the contraceptive pill, but that her sister was strongly advising her to do so after she learned that Caty had engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time. Caty subsequently described her initial gynecological appointment and the subsequent prescription of contraceptive medication, which she commenced at that time. Furthermore, she recalled that the gynecologists she consulted were highly professional and accommodating, encouraging her to inquire about matters pertaining to her body, particularly her uterus. Caty highlighted the educational value of the visit. Additionally, she indicated that numerous acquaintances were utilizing hormonal contraceptives and contemplating the possibility of continuous administration, with the objective of achieving a state of complete amenorrhea (the absence of withdrawal bleeding). Caty observed that this approach did not align with her personal values, as it would halt a natural process. Moreover, Caty switched from oral contraceptives to transdermal contraceptive rods (typically applied to the arm) due to her tendency to forget to take the pills. She indicated that she discontinued the use of hormonal contraceptive methods following the dissolution of her first relationship.

In chapter four, Caty discussed menstruation, primarily in the context of sexuality and initial sexual experiences. She gained insight into menstruation as an engagement with one's own body and body perception, as well as the necessity to care for contraception.

#### ***Caty's Menstrual Chapter 5***

Caty was unwavering in her declaration that she had no intention of resuming the use of hormonal contraceptives at approximately 18 years of age. She attributed this decision to

the significant impact these contraceptives had on her sense of self during that period. In this chapter, Caty states that she has few memories of this period and that she experienced severe depressive symptoms. In a brief interlude, Caty expanded on her assertion that she was largely indifferent to the passage of time during that period, and that her menstrual cycle also seemed irrelevant to her.

In chapter five, Caty primarily addressed her experience with depressive symptoms and feelings of indifference towards various aspects of life, including menstruation, equalizing menstruation to the rest of her bodily health.

### ***Caty's Menstrual Chapter 6***

Caty indicated that from 21 until 25, a new chapter commenced as she became more introspective regarding her physicality, sexuality, and contraceptive practices. She observed that the topic of menstruation arose primarily due to her desire for sexual intercourse, rather than as a result of her personal interest in the subject. Caty elected to insert the copper IUD, which resulted in a transformation of her menstrual patterns. She observed that her menstruation became significantly more intense, characterized by increased blood loss, heightened discomfort, and a constellation of 'weird' symptoms, including diarrhea and back pain. Moreover, Caty provided further insight into her experience of attending a so-called menstrual circle with other menstruators. During the event, the participants engaged in discourse pertaining to menstruation, its actuality, and its significance to them. For Caty, this marked the inaugural occasion on which she engaged in discourse pertaining to menstruation and partaken in festivities celebrating it alongside other menstruators. She additionally observed that not only did menstruation become more beautiful, but women in general also became more beautiful as a result of this experience. Additionally, Caty observed that many of her acquaintances adopted more spiritual perspectives on menstruation following the experience, though she herself remained unconvinced. Likewise, Caty observed that she found it instructive to observe the practices and beliefs of other women and to understand how they derive strength from them.

In Chapter Six, the topic of menstruation became relevant to Caty once more due to her increased sexual activity and its concomitant relevance to interactions with



menstruation. The concept of menstruation was interpreted by Caty in terms of sexuality and the necessity to utilize contraception. Additionally, she participated in a collective event centered on the celebration and discourse surrounding menstruation, which fostered her comprehension of menstruation as a woman and instilled a sense of positivity regarding the phenomenon.

### ***Caty's Menstrual Chapter 7***

The seventh chapter begins with an account of events occurring approximately 25 years ago and continues to the present day. However, Caty has divided the chapter into two sections, with the second section comprising a subchapter. For Caty, chapter seven represents the beginning of her engagement with the menstrual cycle as a whole, rather than solely with menstruation in isolation. She indicated that she had become aware of a considerable number of workshops on the subject of "designing" the menstrual cycle through the consumption of specific foods and the practice of certain sports, as well as through media coverage and conversations with friends. In these contexts, the menstrual cycle emerged as a topic of growing interest and discussion. Caty highlighted that the prevailing social and cultural context is not conducive to the natural rhythms of the menstrual cycle. She expanded on this by stating that she encounters significant challenges in allocating time to understand her own menstrual cycle. While some of her friends possess extensive knowledge about their own cycles, she has not yet developed this understanding and is still in the process of identifying the various phases. Additionally, Caty observed that she remains astonished by her menstruation and has a tendency to overlook the fact that certain emotional fluctuations are a natural consequence of her cyclical changes. Moreover, she stated that it is intriguing to her that the process appears complex from an external perspective, yet it is not. It is merely presented in a more intricate manner than is necessary. Caty also considered it important to educate girls\* about the menstrual cycle and the various stages of the menstrual cycle.

In a brief subchapter, Caty addressed her removal of the copper IUD approximately three months prior to the interview. Furthermore, she observed that this phenomenon coincides with the onset of menstruation and a subsequent alteration in sexual activity. Caty reported that her initial menstruation following the cessation of contraceptive use

was delayed, which was highly unusual for her, given her previous regular menstrual cycle. She observed that she experienced feelings of anxiety and panic. Moreover, Caty described the experience of that menstruation as particularly noteworthy, noting that the initial day was especially exhausting. This was perceived as more exhausting than other days when the copper IUD was in place. She reported that her body was entirely immobilized, exhibiting a lack of motivation to leave her residence or engage in any physical activity. Additionally, she experienced severe back and lower abdominal discomfort. Moreover, Caty observed that these symptoms had largely abated by the following afternoon. Additionally, she reported experiencing less pain over the subsequent menstrual days than she had during her previous menstruations with the copper IUD.

In chapter seven of Caty's menstrual life, she primarily recounted experiences pertaining to her menstrual cycle, body literacy, and contraceptive methods. Caty indicated that her comprehension of menstruation evolved from a singular event to a phase within the menstrual cycle. She posited that this shift would augment her body literacy. Moreover, Caty addressed alterations in her menstrual experiences resulting from a change in contraceptive method. She once more linked her menstruation to the necessity of contraceptive measures.

## **Denny's Menstrual Life**

Denny employed the use of they/them or no pronouns and identified as non-binary. At the time of the interview, Denny was 25 years of age. Denny was born and raised in Austria. Denny reported experiencing period pain on days one and two but described it as manageable with the assistance of one analgesic on each of the two days. Denny was not using hormonal contraceptives at the time of the interview. However, from the 14th to the 21st, they were using such contraceptives. Additionally, Denny exhibited no medical diagnoses related to menstruation or overall health. Denny did not identify with any particular religious or spiritual beliefs.

### ***Denny's Menstrual Chapter 1***

The initial awareness of menstruation among the Denny cohort commenced at the primary school level, approximately seven years of age. Denny observed that they were unaware that menstruation is a biological process exclusive to women. They were under the impression that menstruation was a universal phenomenon. Denny described that their family did not engage in discourse on the topic, but that they acquired a modicum of knowledge regarding menstruation in secondary school. Furthermore, they indicated that their classmates and friends began menstruating at some point, which led to an increased focus on menstruation in the school environment. Denny recalled that they did not aspire to commence menstruation, given the potential for awkward family interactions. When Denny initially informed their mother of their first experience of vaginal discharge, the situation was marked by discomfort on both sides. Denny indicated that they sought counsel from their grandmother at the time of their menarche, as she is a more trusted figure and also resided with them. Denny only briefly mentioned the topic to their mother, who responded in a manner that was not supportive. Denny proceeded to discuss the topic of menstruation with their closest friend, who provided a stabilizing and reassuring presence. Denny observed that some individuals express pride upon the onset of menstruation, as though achieving womanhood, yet they did not experience this sentiment. Denny reported experiencing feelings of annoyance and perceived the phenomenon of menstruation as unfair and peculiar, particularly given the notion that

something comes out of the body. Denny then elaborated that menstruation is strongly related to the construct of woman\* and that they never had, nor always felt, any sense of weirdness about that. Moreover, Denny encountered significant irregularities in their menstrual cycle and was uncertain about whom to consult regarding this matter. They stated that they conducted online research and discovered that irregular menstrual cycles are a common occurrence among young individuals. Moreover, Denny had their inaugural appointment with a gynecologist, who prescribed the contraceptive pill to regulate menstruation. In a subsequent reflection during the interview, Denny revisited that particular moment: "And then he was like, yes, then I have to take the pill too. And for me it was like, okay, yeah. Like when I go to the doctor for a sore throat, for example, and the doctor says, yes, just take sore throat pills, then it goes away. And that's how it was for me, okay, that's how I do it now.". From that point onward, Denny indicated that their menstrual period was essentially absent and irrelevant, given that they were experiencing minimal bleeding and no associated discomfort. Additionally, the utilization of tampons contributed to the perception that menstruation was largely imperceptible. In conclusion, Denny asserted that menstruation was a trivial matter that they rarely discussed with peers or family members. Denny further specified that they did not associate menstruation with womanhood, as they did not identify as women.

In their chapter one, Denny primarily discusses menstruation in regard to feelings of discomfort and unfairness. Initially, they understood menstruation as a universal phenomenon. However, they later learned that menstruation signifies being a woman, the necessity for contraception, and secrecy. As Denny could not find themselves within binary gender constructs, they did feel particularly uncomfortable with this meaning. Further, their engagement with their family revealed that menstruation and related discussions were causing discomfort and fostering negative attitudes within the family unit. In recounting the details of a gynecologist's appointment, Denny highlighted the role of hormonal contraceptives in regulating menstrual irregularities, emphasizing the necessity of contraceptive measures by the menstruating individual.

## ***Denny's Menstrual Chapter 2***

For Denny, their experience with hormonal contraceptives resulted in an "empty" phase that commenced at the age of 14 and was characterized by the utilization of contraceptive pills, hormone injections and intrauterine devices (IUDs). Denny described this period as a positive one, citing the absence of any issues or discomfort. However, at a certain point, they experienced a sudden realization that this was not a natural process. The subject indicated that they felt like being able to anticipate the onset of menstruation even though they were on hormonal contraceptives. Nevertheless, at some point, they opted to cease using hormonal contraceptives. Denny noted that they did not have a male partner and did not engage in penetrative sexual intercourse during that period. Additionally, Denny experienced bladder infections and found the costs to be prohibitive, particularly given that they were no longer necessary.

The second chapter of Denny's menstrual narrative primarily concerns their perception of hormonal contraceptive methods. In this chapter, menstruation was once again primarily associated with the necessity of contraception and the importance of reconciling this with one's personal circumstances.

## ***Denny's Menstrual Chapter 3***

The chapter commenced with 21 years of age, during which Denny predominantly delineated the typical experiences associated with such a cycle. In chapter three, Denny delineates a detailed account of the menstrual cycle, emphasizing the importance of engaging with one's body. This includes recognizing the onset of ovulation, the occurrence of menstruation, and the manifestation of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms. Denny reported experiencing depressive moods, abdominal discomfort, breast tenderness, acne, and spotting from approximately three days prior to the onset of menstruation until the onset of menstruation itself. These symptoms ceased with the onset of menstruation; however, they subsequently began experiencing heightened period pain and an augmented blood flow during the initial two days. Denny described the increased pain as somewhat daunting and unsettling. Additionally, Denny observed that the body's response to stress can impact menstruation. For instance, stress can delay the onset of menstruation. Denny concluded that they still conceptualize menstruation as

an inconvenience and that they would prefer not to menstruate. However, they are engaged in feminist arts in which menstruation is often a topic of discussion. Furthermore, Denny noted that menstruation is a topic about which they advocate for others but not for themselves. Denny explained this by mentioning their two identifications, one as themselves and one as a menstruating person, which they perceive as being incongruent: “Yes, for me it's really just such an annoying symptom of my female sexual characteristics. Like I said, I can't really identify with it. I would rather have it any other way than to have it. But of course, I can fully understand why some people feel such power behind it.”.

In chapter three, Denny commenced an examination of the menstrual cycle and proceeded to investigate the concept of binary gender constructs. Denny's understanding of menstruation evolved from a perception of it as a singular phase to a recognition of it as one phase within the broader menstrual cycle, which is characterized by a range of symptoms. This newfound knowledge regarding the menstrual cycle also signified an enhanced body literacy and awareness of the menstrual body. Understanding menstruation as being a woman continued being a particularly relevant and disrupting challenge to Denny who does not identify as cis female.

## **Ela's Menstrual Life**

At the time of the interview, Ela was 23 years of age, identified as cisgender female, and used the pronouns she/her. Ela was born and raised in Germany. Her menstrual cycle was regular, with a length of 33 to 34 days, although the onset of menstruation was delayed during periods of stress. Ela previously experienced menstrual pain, which she described as 'not too heavy'. Ela did not utilize hormonal contraceptives during the period of the interview; however, she has been employing a non-hormonal copper IUD since she was 21. At the age of 19 or 20, she did, in fact, employ hormonal contraceptives. Additionally, Ela described herself as spiritual, associating her spirituality with yoga and mindfulness practices. She additionally stated that she lacked the words to provide a more detailed description.

### ***Ela's Menstrual Chapter 1***

Ela recalled that numerous acquaintances of hers had already begun menstruating, and she anticipated the onset of her own menstrual cycle with a sense of longing. Ela reached menarche at the age of 15, yet her menstrual cycle remained highly irregular. Ela indicated that she had discussed menstruation with her mother, focusing on practical matters such as how to manage menstruation. Furthermore, she observed that apart from these practical matters, there was not much discourse surrounding menstruation. Her mother accompanied her to a consultation with a gynecologist, during which the specialist provided an in-depth explanation to Ela. Ela stated that she did not inquire further about her menstruation. Similarly, Ela recalled that she commenced monitoring her menstrual cycle from an early age: "Simply out of interest, I think. And that's when I realized that it's a relatively long time for me, from reports or somehow, what you're supposed to learn. But I didn't have the feeling that there was something wrong with me, I just accepted it.". Additionally, Ela indicated that she experienced minimal discomfort and menstruated for approximately three to four days. Ela reported that she had been travelling extensively for approximately 18 years and that her menstrual cycle had been very irregular, and menstruation was often absent during that period. She observed that this phase was characterized by a lack of significant concern about menstruation. Similarly, Ela indicated

that it was a period of self-discovering menstruation, as the majority of information was not openly discussed. For instance, she noted the lack of awareness regarding the influence of hormones on emotional well-being. It was a period of simply adapting to the new reality, during which Ela noted a lack of introspection regarding her menstruation, viewing it merely as a natural aspect of her life.

Ela's first menstrual chapter marked her understanding of menstruation as belonging, as body literacy and normal event that is part of the menstrual cycle. Ela articulated a desire to menstruate, given that the majority of her peers had initiated menarche at an earlier age. Moreover, she delineated her engagement with the menstrual cycle and her interest in acquiring knowledge about her body in that regard. In general, menstruation was regarded as a normal aspect of her life, and she did not perceive it as a particularly noteworthy phenomenon.

### ***Ela's Menstrual Chapter 2***

For Ela, the transition to hormonal contraceptive pill use marked the beginning of a new chapter in her menstrual history, coinciding with the advent of her first romantic relationship. The chapter persisted from approximately the age of 19 until the advent of the 20s. Ela reported feelings of discomfort with the rapidity of her transition to the pill, as it felt to her like she was forcing her body into a specific regimen, including the regular occurrence of menstruation. Furthermore, she stated that she had not questioned her decision to take the pill at the outset and that she had not considered the possibility of using an alternative contraceptive method. Additionally, Ela recalled that she was reluctant to discuss her menstruation with their partner, which contributed to her frustration with the process: "Because I had to talk about it now, which I no longer see as something negative, but as something good and something super necessary. But I think in my early 20s it was still like that, nobody talks about it, how should I talk about it now... also that I'm met with a certain level of acceptance.". Additionally, she observed that she experimented with various menstrual products, such as menstrual cups and tampons, due to her previous reliance on pads. Ela continued to utilize tampons as a method of menstrual management, a practice she continues to this day, as it represents the optimal solution for her needs. The use of the hormonal contraceptive was discontinued when the



relationship came to an end. In conclusion, Ela stated that the hormones had a significant impact on her overall well-being.

In the second chapter of her account, Ela primarily reflected on her initial sexual experiences, the necessity for contraceptive measures, and her ambivalent sentiments regarding the discussion of menstruation with her initial partner, given the absence of discourse on the subject. As a result, menstruation was shrouded in secrecy within public discourse. For Ela, menstruation was inextricably linked with the necessity of contraceptive care and the establishment of an open dialogue about it within her relationship. Moreover, Ela was tasked with identifying a product that would meet her specific needs.

### ***Ela's Menstrual Chapter 3***

In chapter three of Ela's account, she stated that she ceased using the hormonal contraceptive pill and had a copper IUD inserted at approximately the age of 21. Ela indicated that it took a considerable amount of time for her menstruation to resume a regular pattern. Moreover, Ela reported an increase in the intensity of her menstrual symptoms, including a greater level of period pain and a higher volume of menstrual blood. Ela described her menstrual cycle as occasionally inconvenient due to the effort required to manage the blood flow. For instance, on the second day, she must set an alarm at night to change her tampon, and at work, she is unable to leave the premises to use the bathroom. Nevertheless, Ela observed that the benefits of discontinuing hormone therapy outweighed the disadvantages. Moreover, Ela began to acknowledge the influence of her menstrual cycle. Ela reported that she commenced training for a half marathon, adhering to a training schedule aligned with her menstrual cycle, and observed notable improvements in her performance. In the initial phase of her menstrual cycle, Ela engaged in training with the objective of enhancing her speed. In contrast, during the subsequent phase, she concentrated on developing her endurance. During the menstrual phase, she took rest periods and only engaged in activities that demanded the energy she had available. Ela stated that this had a significant impact on her perception of her body's capabilities and that she had adopted a highly mindful approach to her body in her daily life. She observed that she has a profound sense of bodily awareness that has remained

consistent over time. Additionally, Ela stated that her practice of mindfulness has fostered a sense of gratitude for her body's capacity to menstruate, despite occasional frustration with the process. Ela described this appreciation and menstrual time of the month as an opportunity for self-care. Additionally, Ela perceived this process as being in alignment with her own biological rhythms and as an indicator of overall bodily functionality, given that her body was able to produce menstruation on a regular, predictable basis. Moreover, Ela indicated that she had begun to experience symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) approximately one year prior. For Ela, engaging with her symptoms before menstruation onset led to greater awareness of the reasons behind her emotional states. Ela characterizes her involvement with PMS as an inner process. Additionally, Ela observed that she became more introspective, identifying her personal values and contemplating the essence of womanhood. In this phase, Ela perceived menstruation as a positive aspect of womanhood, recognizing its significance as a natural process. In conclusion, she observed that this heightened awareness and inclination to explore these subjects in greater depth coincided with a growing sense of acceptance and willingness to engage in discourse about menstruation with other menstruators. Ela indicated that she began discussing menstruation with friends and other menstruators approximately two years ago and that she had also been consuming content on social media that increasingly reported on menstruation.

In her third chapter, Ela further develops her understanding of menstruation in relation to contraception, the management of menstrual symptoms, and begins to perceive menstruation as a source of power and strength that coincides with an increase in body literacy and knowledge of the various phases of the menstrual cycle. Moreover, menstruation became an integral aspect of her self-identification as a woman and was gradually accepted as a normal biological process. In particular, Ela's account of her training for a half marathon in accordance with the menstrual cycle demonstrates her intimate engagement with the resources of her menstrual body, which she observed to enhance her body literacy. Through her engagement with her personal values and the heightened public discourse on menstruation, menstruation became a signifier of her womanhood and a normal part of life.

## **Fine's Menstrual Life**

Fine was the seventh interviewee, aged 27, who identified as cisgender female and used the pronouns she/her at the time of the interview. Fine was born and raised in Germany. Fine reported a regular menstrual cycle of 30 days' duration and described period pain as "not too much." Fine had previously used a hormonal contraceptive from the age of 22 to 24 and from 25 to 26. However, she was not using it at the time of the interview. Despite the absence of a medical diagnosis related to menstruation, Fine reported a history of depressive episodes. In describing her personal beliefs, Fine indicated that she did not identify as either spiritual or religious.

### ***Fine's Menstrual Chapter 1***

Fine recalled her initial experiences with menarche with remarkable clarity, noting that her onset of menstruation occurred at a later age than is typical. Fine experienced menarche at the age of 16, and she observed that her mother exhibited considerable concern about the delayed onset of menstruation in the years preceding this event. Fine described her mother as being prone to worry and as holding strong opinions about what constitutes a normal body and what does not, given her background in medicine. Prior to menarche, Fine had a visit with a gynecologist at her mother's insistence, during which the mother sought to ascertain the general state of Fine's body. For Fine, this was not a significant issue and she did not experience distress due to her delayed menarche. She observed that she was highly satisfied with her life and did not perceive a lack of fulfillment. However, Fine reported that her initial gynecological visit was an intense experience. She was unprepared for the intravaginal examination and the presence of a third party examining her vulva, a part of her body with which she had not yet formed a connection.

In her initial discussion of menstruation, Fine presents it as an indicator of overall health and a typical occurrence. This is primarily based on her mother's experience, who was concerned about Fine's menarche at the age of 16. Additionally, she delineated her menstruation in relation to the establishment of

a connection with her vulva, as exemplified by her initial gynecological examination.

### ***Fine's Menstrual Chapter 2***

Fine begins the second chapter by describing her own menarche, which occurred at the age of 16. Prior to this, menstruation was not considered a significant topic, although the onset of menstruation marked a new beginning. Fine described the experience as one of profound discomfort, characterizing it as "extremely bad." Fine stated that she was already aware from her social circle that menstruation would entail bleeding and the use of tampons and pads. However, she recalled a sense of unease and a desire to avoid these physical changes. She found it peculiar and unsettling to observe her peers celebrating her menarche, as it evoked a sense of unease within her. On the day of her menarche, Fine observed that the only available form of menstrual products at home was tampons, which intensified her discomfort. This recollection evoked memories of her initial gynecological examination, during which she was examined with a speculum. Additionally, Fine reported experiencing pain and a generally unfavorable experience. Furthermore, Fine observed that her menstruation commenced with remarkable rapidity and that she did not experience significant discomfort. She came to accept this as a natural aspect of her physiology. A particularly salient topic was that menstruation was not permitted to be visibly observed in public settings. For instance, if an individual exhibited signs of spotting while at school, the display of menstrual fluids in one's clothing was perceived as a highly embarrassing occurrence, and menstrual products were often concealed. Fine observed that she was predominantly surrounded by women, including in the educational setting, yet menstruation remained a highly stigmatized subject.

Fine's menstruation continued after she relocated to another city following her graduation from high school at approximately 18 or 19 years of age. Fine began to engage with political issues and to challenge the taboo status of menstruation. Further, she observed a shift in her approach to her body. While Fine observed that this process was not yet complete, it represented a significant turning point in her life. Moreover, Fine initiated her first romantic relationship and commenced the use of hormonal

contraceptive medication. In the interview, Fine reflected that it was simply a common practice among those in relationships who require contraceptive measures.

She did not engage in any significant reflection on the matter; it was, in her view, the most straightforward method. Fine subsequently ceased menstruating due to the contraceptive pill and recalled that she preferred not to menstruate. Nevertheless, at some point, the contraceptive pill began to impact her mental health, which prompted her to abstain from its use. After discontinuing hormonal contraceptive use, Fine reported experiencing a markedly elevated blood flow, accompanied by severe pain and a general sense of distress and apprehension. Moreover, she was concerned about the potential for infertility, which she regarded as an implausible concern in the context of the interview. Fine observed that she did not feel adequately prepared for these changes in her menstrual cycle, as her gynecologist did not discuss such potential subsequent changes. In her social environment, Fine recalled feeling isolated in her experience, as she primarily interacted with male friends and only had male roommates at the time. She did not feel that her experience was understood by those around her, nor was she taken seriously. At some point, Fine initiated discussions with her female friends about her menstrual experience, which provided her with a sense of relief and a sense of being understood. Additionally, she began utilizing analgesics that she typically refrained from taking, and her mother instructed her on the importance of not taking them. However, Fine's friends and gynecologist provided her with the necessary support and guidance to utilize these medications, when necessary, which she found to be a positive and reassuring experience. In her relationship, the topic of sex and intimacy during menstruation was considered taboo, and Fine and her partner did not engage in open communication about it. Fine recalled that the taboo evoked a sense of disgust directed at her body, particularly in relation to the perceived association between menstrual blood and the menstrual body. She observed that the prohibition against physical contact and intimacy during menstruation caused her sense of shame and disgust to intensify. In conclusion, chapter two encompassed these experiences until the age of 24, as there was engagement with the body and menstruation, albeit not in a curious manner.

In her second chapter, Fine delineates her personal experiences with menstruation, situating them within the broader context of the discomfort and

shame often associated with this natural process, as well as the concealment and stigmatization of menstruation in general. Additionally, Fine observed that the onset of her sexual life necessitated the use of contraceptives due to the presence of menstruation. Fine's accounts of her menarche, the social secrecy surrounding menstruation in school and in her shared residence, and her first relationship later in life illustrate how menstruation was perceived as a shameful and secretive experience. In some instances, for example, her roommates' lack of support and understanding and her ex-partner's taboo against being intimate with her during her menstruation made these experiences even more severe, resulting in notions of isolation and disgust from her menstrual body. Moreover, Fine indicated that menstruation necessitated the use of contraceptives, as did other menstruators. Similarly, Fine recounted her experience of moving to a new city, becoming politically engaged, and learning about the stigmatization of menstruation, indicating that she viewed menstruation as a stigmatized phenomenon. In later life, Fine engaged in more open discussions with female friends about menstruation. This led her to grapple with the idea that menstrual experiences, including pain, should be regarded as normal and common.

### ***Fine's Menstrual Chapter 3***

Chapter Three of Fine's menstrual life begins with the age of 24 and the end of her first long-term romantic relationship. In this chapter, Fine observed that a multitude of significant events were occurring in her life, prompting a shift in her perspective on her body in general and the external factors influencing it, as well as her own actions and behaviors.

In Fine's short third chapter, she did not report on her menstrual experience but engaged more in-depth with her physical and psychological health and habits.

### ***Fine's Menstrual Chapter 4***

A new chapter commenced for Fine a year later, marking 25 years of age and the adoption of the symptothermal method for contraception. In Fine's view, this represented a shift

toward a new understanding of oneself and a more loving relationship with one's body and menstruation. She observed that she began to develop a curiosity about observing her body. This involved a shift in perspective, whereby she ceased to suppress any aspect of her experience and instead embraced it, learning to accept, adapt to, and understand her body's natural processes. In particular, Fine reported that the symptothermal method facilitated a sense of excitement and beauty in the process of data collection. Additionally, it enabled her to gain deeper insight into her psychological states, allowing her to relate them to her current phase of the menstrual cycle and hormonal status. Fine stated that observing her body's regular processes is simultaneously enjoyable and exhilarating. In comparison to her previous approach to menstruation, Fine's current perspective is markedly distinct. She observed that while she previously attempted to disregard her menstruation and perceive it as a discrete entity, she currently exhibits a profound fascination with the cyclical nature of her menstrual process. Additionally, Fine fostered a sense of trust in her body as a result of embracing this novel approach, particularly due to the regularity of her menstrual cycle. Two pertinent anecdotes were recounted by Fine. Firstly, she described a recent incident in which she was wearing white trousers and was menstruating. Fine's menstrual blood had permeated her pants, prompting her to consider the potential benefits of being comfortable with leaving the house in this state and being at ease with others seeing her blood. However, she also recognized that she was not entirely at ease with this prospect. Despite her increased openness about menstruation, Fine observed a pervasive sense of shame and secrecy surrounding the topic, particularly in public settings. Secondly, Fine described how her menstruation is experienced differently in her current relationship. To illustrate, menstruation is regarded as a normal topic and is not perceived as an unseemly subject. However, Fine observed that: "And in my relationship now, my menstruation is somehow so different, so it's no longer associated with such disgust and somehow I'm annoyed... that I didn't have the self-confidence in my old relationship to ... to say, yes, that's okay, that's completely normal, so moderate, ... but that it also somehow ... then needed a counterpart, which also reflects a bit that it is so completely normal and not disgusted by it.". In conclusion, Fine stated that the new knowledge she had gained about the relationship between her body and her psyche was both informative and helpful to her.

In Fine's third chapter, menstruation was primarily associated with feelings of excitement, curiosity, and beauty, and thus constituted a form of bodily literacy for Fine. Similarly, menstruation persisted in conjunction with the necessity for contraception. In public, Fine observed that menstruation remained associated with feelings of shame and secrecy. In recounting her experience with the symptothermal method of contraception, Fine's narrative illuminates a transformation in her perception of menstruation, which became markedly positive. The menstrual cycle, in this context, assumes an intriguing quality, becoming a subject of interest as she endeavors to gain a deeper understanding of her body. As menstruation was still perceived as a contraceptive necessity, it continued to coincide with the need for contraception. In conclusion, Fine's account of her aspiration to muster the courage to venture outside the home in her menstruating state illustrates that feelings of shame and secrecy remained closely associated with public spaces.



| <i>Sample // Chapters</i>           | <i>Anna</i>                                                                                          | <i>Bea</i>                                                                   | <i>Caty</i>                 | <i>Denny</i>                                                                         | <i>Ela</i>                                                                                                                    | <i>Fine</i>                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Age</i>                          | From 12-16                                                                                           | From 12-15                                                                   | From 11-13                  | From 7-14                                                                            | Until 18                                                                                                                      | Until 16                                                                                                                         |
| <i>Menstrual Meanings Chapter 1</i> | Shame, Secrecy, Discomfort, Weakness                                                                 | Shame, Secrecy, Distress, Unfairness, Being A Woman Engagement With The Body | Shame, Secrecy, Uncertainty | Commonality, Secrecy, Discomfort, Being A Woman, Contraception, Unfairness, Distress | Belonging, Menstrual Cycle, Engagement With The Body, Normality                                                               | Health                                                                                                                           |
| <i>Age</i>                          | From 16-17                                                                                           | From 15-16                                                                   | From 13-14                  | From 14-21                                                                           | From 18-21                                                                                                                    | From 16-24                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Menstrual Meanings Chapter 2</i> | Normality, Commonality, (De-)Stigmatization, Performance Constraint, Sexuality                       | Sexuality, Commonality, (De-)Stigmatization                                  | Distress, Uncertainty       | Contraception, Sexuality, Distress                                                   | Sexuality, Contraception, Secrecy, Shame                                                                                      | Distress, Normality, Being A Woman, Secrecy/Isolation, Shame/Disgust, (De-)Stigmatization, Sexuality, Contraception, Commonality |
| <i>Age</i>                          | From 19 Onwards                                                                                      | From 18-19                                                                   | From 14-15                  | From 21 Onwards                                                                      | From 21 Onwards                                                                                                               | From 24-25                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Menstrual Meanings Chapter 3</i> | Not Being Pregnant, Sexuality, Body Literacy, Menstrual Cycle, Performance Constraint, Being A Woman | Contraception                                                                | Engagement With The Body    | Body Literacy, Menstrual Cycle, Distress, Discomfort, Being A Woman, Public Debate   | Sexuality, Contraception, Body Literacy, Menstrual Cycle, Performance Enhancement, Being A Woman, Commonality, Public Debate, | Health                                                                                                                           |

Table 1. Overview of the Menstrual Chapters, Their Meanings, and the Respective Age per Co-Researcher Is Presented Herewith.

| <u>Sample // Chapters</u>           | <u>Anna</u> | <u>Bea</u>                                                                    | <u>Caty</u>                                                | <u>Denny</u> | <u>Ela</u> | <u>Fine</u>                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Age</u>                          | -           | From 19                                                                       | From 15-18                                                 | -            | -          | From 25 Onwards                                                                     |
| <u>Menstrual Meanings Chapter 4</u> | -           | Normality, Commonality, Body Literacy, Menstrual Cycle, Health, Public Debate | Sexuality, Contraception, Body Literacy, Commonality       | -            | -          | Contraception, Body Literacy, Excitement, Curiosity, Menstrual Cycle, Public Debate |
| <u>Age</u>                          | -           | -                                                                             | From 18-21                                                 | -            | -          | -                                                                                   |
| <u>Menstrual Meanings Chapter 5</u> | -           | -                                                                             | Health                                                     | -            | -          | -                                                                                   |
| <u>Age</u>                          | -           | -                                                                             | From 21-25                                                 | -            | -          | -                                                                                   |
| <u>Menstrual Meanings Chapter 6</u> | -           | -                                                                             | Sexuality, Contraception, Being A Woman, Beauty            | -            | -          | -                                                                                   |
| <u>Age</u>                          | -           | -                                                                             | From 25 Onwards                                            | -            | -          | -                                                                                   |
| <u>Menstrual Meanings Chapter 7</u> | -           | -                                                                             | Menstrual Cycle, Body Literacy, Public Debate, Uncertainty | -            | -          | -                                                                                   |

Table 1. Overview of the Menstrual Chapters, Their Meanings, and the Respective Age per Co-Researcher Is Presented Herewith.

## Changes in Menstrual Meanings

Although it is possible to infer from the data that the experience of menstruation underwent changes over time for the co-researchers, this subchapter is dedicated to a detailed examination of these experiential changes. Initially, the alterations in the meanings associated with menstruation are investigated from a cross-subject vantage point. This approach offers greater insight into the meanings attached to menstrual experiences during particular phases of the co-researchers' lives, and whether there are discernible trends that can be derived from the data. Table 1 on pages 81-82 provides an overview of the menstrual chapters, their respective menstrual meanings, and the ages of the co-researchers. Simultaneously, the respective subchapters elucidate the occurrences that the co-researchers identified as precipitating the change. This is a pivotal aspect of the analysis, as it sheds light on the interactive dynamics between the environment and individuality in the emergence of meanings and potential trends in the unfolding of menstrual meanings. An overview of the changes in the menstrual lives as indicated by the co-researchers' can be found in Table 2 on pages 97-98.

### *Menarche As Shame and Concealment*

A review of the narratives of the co-researchers reveals that at the outset, menstruation is predominantly perceived as a source of shame and secrecy, associated with feelings of distress, discomfort, and uncertainty. The co-researchers were between the ages of 11 and 16 in the respective narratives. However, two of the co-researchers also reported experiencing menstruation as an embarrassing and isolating event at an older age, between the ages of 18 and 24. A closer examination of the narratives shows that the initial discussions regarding menstruation constituted significant events, necessitating negotiation within the co-researchers' households. This process involved not only the subjects' own emotional responses to this new experience but also their family members' feelings about it. Denny, for example, noted:

“So, I just knew that I didn't want to have it, because I knew that it would just be an awkward moment between me and my family. And I kept having spotting before it. No, not spotting, but just increased ..., what's it called ..., this mucus,

which has no color yet. Yes, exactly. ... And I told my mother that at some point. And then I already knew that it was very uncomfortable. And she was like, yes, that can also be blood sometimes. Yes, that was it.”.

It is noteworthy that the role of the mother was identified as a particularly salient factor. The narratives of the co-researchers illustrate that their mother or another female relative—such as the grandmother in the cases of Anna and Denny—served as trustees in the navigation of menarche. Nevertheless, the experience was not without its shameful and secretive aspects, as the quote suggests. For five of the six co-researchers, menarche was a distressing event, primarily due to their perception of menstruation as an uncertain phenomenon or the presence of distressing emotions associated with the onset of menstruation. Bea discussed:

“And I went to my mom, who then also immediately went in the direction of ‘yes and oh, welcome to womanhood and here are pads and do that sort of thing’. And I can still remember that I didn't feel like it at all. It actually made me feel ashamed, somehow having to do it now. And I'm still not a fan of pads. Just that diaper feeling, really bad. At the beginning I was extremely unhappy with it and just annoyed, as if all women do it all the time. So how annoying is that?”.

For one co-researcher, Ela, menstruation and menarche represented a desired experience of belonging, as the majority of her peers were menstruating before her. Thus, not all menarche started off with distressing feelings. However, in Ela's narrative of her first relationship the concealment of menstruation and the constrained nature of communicating about menstruation became a stressor for Ela around the age 19. Fine who also had her menarche later in youth (at age 15 and 16, respectively) had a very different experience. Fine related to her first menstruation as a distressful event, similarly to the other co-researchers who menstruated ‘earlier’. Fine recounted her distress regarding menstruation and the insertion of the first tampon to a disturbing experience during her initial gynecological examination, which she found highly uncomfortable. In Fine's case, it became apparent that the taboo of menstruating in her relationship and her first shared flat resulted in severe isolation and disgust surrounding menstruation.

Other accounts from the co-researchers' menstrual experiences that illustrate the distress associated with menstruation and its connection to shame and secrecy include their experiences at school. Menstruation and menstruating were to be concealed, either through the use of secret metaphors, as evidenced in Caty's initial narrative, wherein menstruation is referred to as "Aunt Rose," or by concealing menstrual products and limiting private conversations with peers. The narratives indicate that what was most relevant was that menstruation was not a physically visible phenomenon. Fine reported:

"And what was a big issue was that menstruation shouldn't be visible, so it was really embarrassing if someone had pants at school that were somehow full of blood or something, that was just so important. In any case, it had to be hidden and if a tampon fell down, it was like, did anyone see that now? Although I also spent a lot of time in contexts where there were a lot of women, so there were almost only women at my school and yet it was such a taboo subject."

Also, Caty noted:

"So, because, of course, there was a bit of education at school, but most of the education was done together in the schoolyard. But of course, nobody really had a clue. And the people who used to have a period were kind of ashamed because they used to have a period, those who didn't have a period yet were also ashamed. So, it was all full of shame and all full of, oh God, fear and what is that?"

With regard to the co-researchers' understanding of menstruation as a burdensome experience, the narratives indicate that shameful and concealed conversations occur within their homes, schools, and relationships. The constraining meaning of menstruation as a source of shame and secrecy appears to be closely linked to feelings of distress, discomfort, and annoyance. These feelings seem to be shaped by social interactions in which the co-researchers learn that menstruation is a concealed phenomenon. Even if these factors were not present in the initial menstrual narratives of the co-researchers, as evidenced by the cases of Ela and Fine, they emerged later when the need to communicate or negotiate menstrual experiences in intimate relationships arose. Similarly, with regard to the initial experiences of menstruation among the co-researchers, the majority of respondents indicated that limiting educational events and ceased peer discussions at school, as well as brief conversations at home, primarily with

their mothers, constituted the primary sources of information. The initial exposure to menstruation among the co-researchers occurred at school or at home, marking the beginning of their menstrual experiences as shameful and concealed phenomenon. Menarche represented a secondary entry point, with the initial conversations being of primary relevance.

### ***Contracepting Menstruation***

The menstrual chapters of all co-researchers within the specified age range of 14 to 20, particularly the ages of 15 and 16, indicate that from these ages onwards, menstruation is understood in relation to sexuality and the necessity for (navigating) contraception. All co-researchers indicated that from the ages of 14 to 20, they commenced engaging with their own sexuality and taking contraceptives. Five of the co-researchers initiated the use of hormonal contraceptives during their adolescence or early adulthood, between the ages of 14 and 21. Only one of the co-researchers had never used hormonal contraceptives. Three of the five co-researchers indicated that it was perceived as a normative practice and did not reflect on the decision to take the hormonal contraceptive pill, citing its prevalence as a factor influencing this perception. For example, Fine outlined:

“And then I had my first real relationship and then I started taking the pill and then of course my period disappeared. And I also took the pill because somehow, yes, it was a bit like that, you do that, you have a boyfriend and then you take the pill because you want to use contraception somehow, so you don't think about it at all, that was the easiest method for me at that moment.”.

One of the five co-researchers, Caty, who had taken hormonal contraception reported that her sister had strongly advised her to take the contraceptive pill:

“Well, before I had first sexual interactions, I think I had never thought, that I should take the pill now or anything else and then I was sexually active for the first time and then I told my sister about it and she was really upset and said, yes, you really have to go to the gynecologist and take the pill now, because it doesn't work like that. You can't do this without the pill. Well, of course I had used a condom, but still (...)”.

The final co-researcher, who was among the five who used hormonal contraceptives, was prescribed the contraceptive pill from their gynecologist at their first visit due to irregularities in their menstrual cycle. Denny reported:

“And then he was like, yes, then I have to take the pill too. And for me it was like, okay, yeah. Like when I go to the doctor for a sore throat, for example, and the doctor says, yes, just take sore throat pills, then it goes away. And that's how it was for me, okay, that's how I do it now.”.

The remaining co-researcher, Anna, who did not use hormonal contraceptives still reported the relevance of their sexual lives in regard to their menstrual life:

“And things like that, that came at about 16, 17 and ... exactly I would also say that the beginning of talking about having a and that the first people are a bit like, ah the first boyfriend and the first time with someone, ... so someone so in this way ... so getting intimate with a person in some way ... and even if it wasn't sex yet or maybe just like that I would say that that also changed something. Exactly because of course with sexuality somehow that was that all of a sudden people were thinking about whether they take the pill.”.

In the narratives of the co-researchers regarding their menstrual experiences, it is notable that the topics of sexuality and contraception emerged as a significant area of peer discussion, perpetuating their ongoing dialogue about menstruation. Although some participants reported that they were advised to take contraceptives by a family member or gynecologist, other narratives suggest that this was simply perceived as the normal way to go. Interestingly, the co-researchers' decisions to commence or terminate specific contraceptive methods signified alterations in the co-researchers' menstrual chapters (see Table 1, pp. 81-82), thereby demonstrating the intertwined nature of menstruation and contraception. Additionally, as menstruation is suppressed during hormonal contraceptive intake and menstrual symptoms such as period pain and increased menstrual blood flow are exacerbated during non-hormonal options like the copper IUD, which the co-researchers also discussed in their narratives, it is unsurprising that this altered the menstrual experiences.

### *Destigmatization Through Shared Spaces*

In addition to the growing recognition of the interconnection between menstruation, sexuality, and the necessity for contraceptive measures, the narratives of the co-researchers also indicate that menstruation was increasingly accepted and discussed openly, and feelings of shame and secrecy diminished. Three of the six interviewees indicated that this change occurred between the ages of 15 and 16, while two other co-researchers noted that this process commenced at the beginning of their twenties. The narratives of one of the co-researchers, Denny, did not indicate this process of destigmatization and shared experiencing of menstruation. This observation is discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section on menstruation as a marker of femininity, which proved particularly challenging for Denny during their menstrual cycle.

For those co-researchers who were concerned with this destigmatization process, it was important to note that in the context of peer discourse and school settings, menstruation ceased to be a subject of shame and secrecy. As Anna reported:

“So, when you're in class with 29 other girls then someone's always having their [German original: ‘seine’, male plural] period, always having their [German original: ‘ihre’, female plural] period and that was just somehow then ..., so in the beginning I think there was still this barrier of course we didn't know each other that well yet and all newly thrown together and there was of course also a barrier ... but then also with the formation of the friend groups and the intensification of the friend groups and so on, I would say that's when this change started and that just people came to school with hot water bottles that we at some point in our circle of friends had a blanket in the back so that people could wrap themselves and things like that.”.

It is noteworthy that two co-researchers, one of whom perceived the normalization of menstruation to have commenced at approximately 15 years of age and the other of whom observed a gradual onset at 19 years of age, both articulated that they had discerned menstruation to be a stigmatized phenomenon at their respective ages and sought to engage with this phenomenon. For instance, Anna indicated that the stigmatization of menstruation within the domestic sphere had led to feelings of frustration and anger. This prompted her to engage with scientific literature on



menstruation, with the aim of confronting prejudices related to hormonal imbalances and mood swings within her family. Anna discussed:

“I was somehow the first one to do that [in the family] and then also through the new friendships, I just started more ... so just little by little ... actually bringing discomfort or this, to make someone uncomfortable by addressing topics that are perhaps socially taboo. I then simply did that on purpose because I felt a certain anger not being allowed to express my feelings. I think that was relatively normal at home then. So, we talked about it, and it was just like that.”.

Fine posited that following her departure from the family home, she began to engage in political activism, seeking to understand the rationale behind the taboo surrounding menstruation:

“And then I moved to Bremen after my A-levels, when I was 19 or 18, and that's when I somehow slowly politicized myself and that somehow went hand in hand with questioning why it [menstruation] was somehow such a taboo subject and somehow, I also took a different approach to my body.”.

The process of destigmatizing menstruation among the co-researchers occurred concurrently with the formation of new friendships, the transition from lower to upper school (which typically occurs between the ages of 14 and 15 in Austria), open peer conversations, and the realization that menstruation is a censured phenomenon. As illustrated in Table 2 on the pages 97-98, the co-researchers transitioned from secondary to post-secondary education and from their family residences to independent living between the ages of 15 and 20. During this period, they engaged in peer bonding and received further education on menstruation, for instance through books and public media. Similarly, this period coincided with the onset of the co-researchers' sexual lives, and discussions about sexuality and contraceptive methods were common in their narratives. The increase in open dialogue about menstruation and contraceptive methods, as well as engagement with menstruation from a social and political perspective, led to the co-researchers beginning to normalize and communicate their menstrual experiences, rather than concealing them.

## *The Menstrual Cycle As Body Literacy*

Despite the fact that a limited number of narratives among the co-researchers in early youth had already indicated that menstruation demanded an engagement with one's own body, the narratives provided by the co-researchers in their early and mid-twenties highlighted how involvement with the menstrual cycle also led to a comprehensive understanding of their body. The onset of the co-researchers' twenties signified a pivotal shift in their comprehension of menstruation as a cyclical process, thereby enhancing their body literacy. This phenomenon is discernible in the data, particularly in the final menstrual chapters of all six co-researchers.

For instance, Ela observed that with the commencement of her training regimen for a half marathon and her pursuit of enhanced performance through training in accordance with the menstrual cycle, she commenced a heightened awareness and mindfulness of her body's needs and the cycle's influence on her physiology across the various menstrual phases:

“And exactly, and I also engaged with what the power behind the cycle actually is. So, I started training for a half marathon and actively trained with my cycle and found it extremely impressive how really, I only did that during the training, but how it changed my performance when I really went more for speed in the first phase of the cycle and then more for endurance in the second phase and then also took a break during my menstruation or looked at how it really felt. And if I didn't have any energy, I accepted that and didn't push myself too hard. ... And that, it simply did a lot to my body ... yes, what I managed to do. And that was also reflected in the rest of my everyday life, that I was very, very careful with myself. And exactly, that's still the case today, so I now have a very good feeling about it.”.

Anna also observed that her understanding of her menstrual cycle and the bodily functions associated with it underwent a transformation during her twenties:

“We actually learned a lot about the menstrual cycle at school. But we only learned about these chemical, hormonal processes, so what about happens. But it was only in this third phase that I kind of started to deal more with why I feel the way I feel and why or how this is potentially connected to hormones, or how this can also be in the cycle. And that has definitely changed. Exactly. And just this awareness that

this is a cycle and not just a phase in which I'm feeling bad, but that the period then also becomes a better phase again, also sportier.”.

Likewise, Anna’s narratives over the course of her menstrual life indicated that menstruation as such goes hand in hand with performance constraints. Anna discussed already in her youth chapter that she connected indications of menstrual pain as weakness and that she struggled during her years of intense musical practice with her menstruation as she experiences severe pain on some days. In the same phase in which she outlined her new attitude towards her body, as indicated in the quote, she noted that performance constraints were still an issue to her was still relevant in her work life. Particularly, she mentioned that she cannot adjust her work according to her menstrual experiences. Bea indicated that her comprehension of the menstrual cycle was a recent development, emerging during her twenties. However, Bea indicated that she had not acquired knowledge about the menstrual cycle at an earlier age:

“Those were just topics, that my gynecologist might have known. So I still had one, that's right, I remember that, a little physical calendar, where I was supposed to enter exactly when I had my period. So, it's been a long time now via the app, but back then there was still this paper thing and then the gynecologist looked at it and so on, but that I would have somehow noticed it myself, actually not so much.”.

In the course of the interview, Bea provided a comprehensive account of her cyclical changes over the course of the month. She described her experiences of feeling when she is ovulating and noted that this often coincides with an increase in energy. Furthermore, Bea discussed her experiences of feeling drained and introverted on the days preceding her menstrual period, including her notions of the premenstrual syndrome (PMS). Fine also discussed her enhanced bodily awareness and the physical and psychological changes that occur during the menstrual cycle. Fine began utilizing the symptothermal method for contraception and developed a keen interest and enthusiasm for meticulous tracking of her menstrual cycle:

“And so, for two years now, I've been using this symptothermal method of contraception, so I've been dealing with my body a lot and collecting a lot of data. And that's somehow really nice and exciting, because I'm somehow developing a

different relationship to my psyche, so I can somehow categorize a lot more things, and they might still be shitty and exhausting, but I can still bring it together a bit more with what's happening hormonally and I'm no longer so overwhelmed by feelings, but can somehow categorize it... Yes, and somehow I also enjoy observing my body, what it's doing and also how blatant it actually is, what's happening. So for me, the kind of precision with which it happens.”.

Caty indicated that she has recently commenced monitoring her menstrual cycle in a more comprehensive manner, extending beyond the mere observation of menstruation. However, she revealed that, in comparison to her friends, she had not yet engaged in a significant degree of self-tracking of her menstrual cycle. This was also attributed to the constraints of available resources. Caty mentioned:

“What many friends in my circle also do and have done, which I think I would also do, but what is also always difficult for me, which is always difficult for all of us, to simply take the time for it and really, exactly, then to look and hear again and again, okay, where do you think you are right now and no idea. And this, I think, this knowledge, what other friends of mine have, about, ah yes, I think I'm in my ovulation phase now and I can see myself right now, I'm not really there yet.”.

Furthermore, Denny reported on the fluctuations in their experiences throughout the menstrual cycle. They discussed the sensations of pain that they experience during ovulation and the subsequent increase in energy. They also described their perceptions of premenstrual syndrome (PMS), which can be observed approximately a week before menstruation. This is characterised by painful, enlarged breasts, increased skin eruptions, cravings and a loss of appetite, as well as feelings of depression. Once menstruation begins, Denny reports feeling better despite the pain. Denny did not discuss working with the menstrual cycle, but their descriptions indicate observations of different phases throughout the menstrual month. It is noteworthy that at the beginning and end of the current last chapter, Denny reiterates their dislike of menstruation and the role of menstruation in identity formation for women. Finally, in a few of Bea's, Caty's and Fine's narratives, menstruation was also discussed as a signifier of their health or that it was simply like the rest of their health, sometimes even irrelevant during depressive episodes

or difficult times in their lives. Again, menstruation was a battleground for the co-researchers' body knowledge.

The emergence of this meaning coincides with the co-researchers' narrations of how they began engaging with their bodies in a more holistic manner due to various health issues, but also their engagement with performance improvements and constraints, the advent of new contraceptive methods, and how they had gained new knowledge about the menstrual cycle, particularly through peer discussions and the rise of menstrual education via public media, specifically social media. A summary of the aforementioned changes, as reported by the co-researchers, can be found in Table 2 on pages 97-98. While Ela discussed their new perceptions of menstruation based on their training for a half marathon, Bea, Caty, and Fine noted that either through their own health issues or the concerns of others, menstruation is also related to overall health. A more profound and detailed exploration of their personal physical and psychological conditions becomes evident in the later menstrual chapters of all the co-researchers, which commenced in their early twenties. Moreover, Fine initiated the use of the symptothermal method for contraception and discussed how this enhanced her understanding of her bodily awareness throughout the entire menstrual cycle. In sum, the co-researchers underscored the significance of recognizing that their heightened awareness of their menstruation is only one aspect of the menstrual cycle. They also highlighted the value of observing symptoms throughout the other phases of their cycle, emphasizing that this approach has been instrumental in deepening their understanding of their bodies' needs. Lastly, five of the six co-researchers also identified the role of public media and the increased discourse among peers about menstrual health and the understanding of menstruation in relation to the whole menstrual cycle as an emerging phenomenon in their twenties. In particular, social media was identified as a relevant educational platform during this period.

### ***Menstruation as an Act of Embracing Womanhood***

Another meaning of menstruation that can be read along the lines of the interviewees' narratives is that menstruation was experienced or communicated as an embracement of womanhood throughout their menstrual lives. While two co-researchers noted that this idea was communicated to them through friends and family in their youth, three other

co-researchers described menstruation as part of their femininity in the present day. One co-researcher grappled with this meaning throughout her menstrual life.

Bea mentioned that when she had her menarche, she told her mother about the event and she responded with 'oh, welcome to womanhood'. However, Bea did not elaborate on this response, nor did she return to the idea during the interview. Fine reported a similar incident with her friends, who reacted in a similar way to Fine's account of her menarche:

“And then it was even stranger to see how those around me reacted, because my friends were also like, oh how cool, you're a woman, so moderate and I couldn't accept that at all, so for me it was somehow completely, yes, strange at first.”

Fine, like Bea, did not pick up on this idea, but she also felt very uncomfortable with it.

For Denny, the meaning of menstruation as a signifier of being a woman has been a battleground for them at every stage of their menstrual life. In their youth, Denny said:

“And I don't know. But maybe it's also a bit like that, because it's so strongly equated with the construct of woman. And for me, I've always felt a bit weird about it.”

Denny, who identifies as non-binary, had further clashes with this idea:

“I've just dealt with menstruation a bit more simply because I do cool, so I do feminist art and it's often a topic there, of course. But more in relation to fighting for other people than for myself, because I somehow still can't quite reconcile these two, that is my identification and that and me as a menstruating person, that still doesn't go together for me.”

Denny's ongoing feelings of distress and discomfort about menstruation, which seem to be related to this meaning of menstruation, also suggest that Denny's normalization process of menstruation has not occurred. In contrast to the other five co-researchers, menstruation was not destigmatized during young adulthood (see pp. 88-89).

In contrast, understanding menstruation as being a woman was relevant for Anna, Caty, and Ela at the beginning of their twenties. In particular, Anna talked about wanting to embrace her menstruation more in terms of her femininity and womanhood. She mentioned that she is aware that not only women menstruate, but for her menstruation is part of her female identity and she would like to embrace it more (01:20:30-01:20:50).

Caty talked about a menstrual event with other menstruators that she attended when she was about 21 years old. For Caty, sharing insights into what it is like to menstruate with other women and menstruators strengthened her connection to other women, the celebration of menstruation, and the beauty of both:

“That I had a short menstruation circle with women back then, where I then also talked more or really for the first time with really adult women about what a period looks like, what you have there and so on. So of course, I kind of learnt things like that, but talking about it in a circle of women was really something completely different. Exactly, and also really from very different women, also from trans women, and that was really very incisive for my understanding of women. So not just periods, but also women ... and that also made a period more beautiful for me somewhere. So, the feeling of having a period, so the possibility of having a period, just became more pleasant and also simply, you could celebrate it more because it was celebrated at all.”.

Ela also reported that menstruation is an integral part of her womanhood and that it is very beautiful for her to be a woman and to menstruate.

The emergence of this meaning coincides with family and peer conversations on the initial experiences of menstruation, as well as public events that conveyed the notion of menstruation signifying femininity to the co-researchers. It is noteworthy that two co-researchers' narratives revealed that their intimate companions characterized menarche as an entrance into womanhood, despite the co-researchers' own perceptions of this transition. It is noteworthy that both co-researchers did not subsequently portray menstruation as a female experience. However, three other co-researchers demonstrated a more profound engagement with this concept during their twenties. While this was not narrated in the context of a specific experience for two of the participants, it was instead presented as a generalized account of their attitudes towards menstruation. One co-researcher did, however, refer to her attendance at an event that celebrated menstruation, and which was also situated within a discourse on womanhood. Lastly, one co-researcher reported a profound and sustained engagement with this meaning throughout their life, which was also connected to their gender identity as non-binary. Notwithstanding their involvement in feminist arts and a critical perspective on

menstruation as a sociopolitical issue, they observed that due to the association between menstruation and womanhood, they continue to grapple with accepting their menstruation. They also reported internal conflicts between their gender identity and their identity as a menstruator.

### ***Turning Tables***

As has been demonstrated, the meanings associated with menstruation are not fixed and enduring entities that persist throughout an individual's lifespan. To facilitate discourse on the evolution of menstrual meanings, a synopsis of the pivotal occurrences identified by the co-researchers as contributing to shifts in their menstrual chapters and respective meanings will be presented. The most salient events that marked the transition from one menstrual phase to another were educational milestones, changes in the everyday setting (such as a different school), first experiences (such as menarche, first relationships and first sexual intercourse), moving out from the parents' place, and changes in contraceptive methods. A detailed examination of the menstrual meanings and the changes these underwent in the lives of the co-researchers as identified in this data analysis in regard to the literature on menstrual experiences and the nature of meanings will be presented in the next chapter (see pp. 99-104).



| <i>Sample // Changes</i>           | <i>Anna</i>                                                                                                                    | <i>Bea</i>                                                                                                                    | <i>Caty</i>                         | <i>Denny</i>                                                                            | <i>Ela</i>                                                                                                                                          | <i>Fine</i>                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Change To Chapter 1</i>         | 11-13<br>Education On Menstruation, Menarche                                                                                   | 12-13<br>Education On Menstruation, Menarche                                                                                  | 11-13<br>Education On Menstruation  | 7, 13<br>Education On Menstruation, Menarche                                            | Before 15<br>Peer Talk About Menstruation, Menarche                                                                                                 | Before 16<br>Family Talk About Menstruation, Gynecologist visit                                                                              |
| <i>Changes From Chapter 1 To 2</i> | 15-17<br>Change From Lower To Upper School, Female-Dominant Class, Peer Bonding, Performance Pressure, Reading On Menstruation | 15-16<br>Change From Lower To Upper School, Female-Dominant Class, Stay Abroad, Peer Bonding, First Relationship, Sexual Life | 13<br>Menarche                      | 14-15<br>Use Of Hormonal Contraception, Start Of Sexual Life                            | 18<br>Use Of Hormonal Contraception, Start Of Sexual Life, First Relationship, Trying Out Different Menstrual Products                              | 16-20<br>Menarche, Start Of Sexual Life, First Relationship, Use Of Hormonal Contraception, Moving Out From Home, Politicizing, Peer Bonding |
| <i>Changes From Chapter 2 To 3</i> | 19-20<br>Moving Out From Home, Start Of Sexual Life, First Relationship, Focus On Health, Cycle Work, First Jobs               | 18-19<br>Use Of Hormonal Contraceptive Pill, Moving Out From Home, Focus On Health                                            | 14-15<br>More Menstrual Experiences | 21-22<br>Cessation Of Hormonal Contraception, Cycle Work, Public Debate On Menstruation | 20-21<br>Cessation Of Hormonal Contraception, Use Of Non-Hormonal Contraceptive, Focus On Health, Cycle Work, Peer Bonding, Reading On Menstruation | 24<br>Cessation Of Hormonal Contraception, First Relationship, Focus On Health                                                               |

Table 2. Overview of the Changes Within the Menstrual Chapters and the Respective Age per Co-Researcher Is Presented Herewith.

| <i>Sample // Changes</i>           | <i>Anna</i> | <i>Bea</i>                                                                                   | <i>Caty</i>                                                                                                  | <i>Denny</i> | <i>Ela</i> | <i>Fine</i>                                                                   |
|------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Age</i>                         | -           | 19-20                                                                                        | 15-16                                                                                                        | -            | -          | 25                                                                            |
| <i>Changes From Chapter 3 To 4</i> | -           | Cessation Of Hormonal Contraception, Peer Bonding, Cycle Work, Public Debate On Menstruation | Start Of Sexual Life And First Relationship, Use Of Hormonal Contraceptives, First Visit At The Gynecologist | -            | -          | Symptothermal Contraceptive Method, Cycle Work, Focus On Health, Peer Bonding |
| <i>Age</i>                         | -           | -                                                                                            | 18-19                                                                                                        | -            | -          | -                                                                             |
| <i>Changes From Chapter 4 To 5</i> | -           | -                                                                                            | Cessation Of Hormonal Contraception, Depressive Period                                                       | -            | -          | -                                                                             |
| <i>Age</i>                         | -           | -                                                                                            | 21-22                                                                                                        | -            | -          | -                                                                             |
| <i>Changes From Chapter 5 To 6</i> | -           | -                                                                                            | Active Sexual Life, Use Of Non-Hormonal Contraceptive, Peer Bonding                                          | -            | -          | -                                                                             |
| <i>Age</i>                         | -           | -                                                                                            | 25-26                                                                                                        | -            | -          | -                                                                             |
| <i>Changes From Chapter 6 To 7</i> | -           | -                                                                                            | Focus On Health, Public Debate On Menstruation, Cessation Of Non-Hormonal Contraception                      | -            | -          | -                                                                             |

Table 2. Overview of the Changes Within the Menstrual Chapters and the Respective Age per Co-Researcher Is Presented Herewith.

## Results in the Light of the Literature

While the preceding subchapters presented the findings of this study, this subchapter is dedicated to discussing the findings in the light of existing literature on menstrual meanings and the nature of meaning as such. The menstrual meanings that were of primary relevance based on their recurrence and intensity in the respective narratives were experiencing and understanding menarche in shame and concealment; menstruation as the need to be contracepted or to care for contraception; menstruation as a stigmatized experience; the menstrual cycle as promoting body literacy and as an act of embracing womanhood. The menstrual meanings that emerged from the explication of the co-researchers' narratives demonstrate how their menstrual meanings were shaped by experiences that were predominantly narrated in the context of their environmental circumstances and private relationships. In particular, feelings and approaches conveyed by their immediate social circle, whether at home or at school—the primary environments for young people—intersected with the process of menstruators assigning meaning to their novel experiences.

Initially, it became evident that menstruation was surrounding the notions of secrecy and feelings of shame. The data clearly demonstrates that feelings of shame and the tendency to conceal menstruation were recurrent experiences among the co-researchers during their teenage years, particularly in school and at home. This finding is consistent with existing research on the experience of menarche (Adegbayi, 2017; Al Omari et al., 2016; Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Donmall, 2013; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Lee, 2009; Seyed Hosseini, 2018) and feminist theoretical perspectives on menstruation in general (Beauvoir, 2010 [1949]; Laws, 1990; Young, 2005). Empirical studies have consistently elucidated menstruation as a phenomenon to be concealed, to be regarded with shame, and to be managed in this regard (Donmall, 2013; McHugh, 2020). In particular, during the teenage years, researchers have identified secrecy and shame as prevalent experiences among young menstruators in educational settings and in the homes of new menstruators (Donmall, 2013; Fennie et al., 2022). Similarly, this alienation has been identified as a significant factor in the experiences of menstruators in adulthood (Anderson & Nicols, 2022; Hennegan et al., 2019; McHugh, 2020). The data from this study demonstrates that such socially conveyed meanings were not only observed by the co-

researchers during their early menstrual years but also internalized, as evidenced by the narratives which illustrate individuals' perceptions of the need to refrain from open communication and display their menstrual experiences. In particular, the sentiments expressed by the caregivers regarding their own and their child's menstrual experiences were intertwined with the co-researchers' perceptions of menstruation as an encumbrance. From an embodied perspective on the emergence of meanings, this is a highly insightful observation. As embodied and interactionalist researchers have discussed (Gendlin, 1997; Johnson, 1987), a bodily experience is deeply ingrained the social world and must be made sense of. As Merleau-Ponty (2005) asserts, our corporeal existence in the world inevitably entails a sense of being "condemned to meaning" (p. xxii).

While Anderson & Nichols (2022) found that such self-alienation and denial perpetuate menstruators' lives and feminist theorists including Beauvoir (2010 [1949]) and Young (2005) also argue for the omnipresence of such bodily ingrained stigmatization, it is notable that this study explicates how menstruators actively engage and confront these alienations of menstrual experiences. As illustrated in the accounts of Anna and Fine, the co-researchers identified the stigmatization of menstruation at an early age and engaged in critical discourse to challenge these shame-inducing perspectives within their domestic environments and personal menstrual practices. In general, the narratives of all co-researchers demonstrated that their engagement with peer menstruators facilitated the creation of a destigmatized account of menstruation. This resulted in the disclosure of experiences of concealment and shame. It is crucial to recognize that the stigmatization of menstruation has been a pervasive issue for decades. As evidenced by the empirical studies previously cited, feminist discourse has challenged this injustice and advocated for a more open and emancipatory approach to menstruation in society. Notwithstanding the fact that not all individuals have internalized these progressive views, including the co-researchers' immediate family members, the call for change is gaining increasing attention and permeating the lives of young menstruators in the present era. In this regard, it is also noteworthy that the extant literature indicates a frequent association between menstruation and feelings of uncleanness and images of being unkempt. Nevertheless, this finding was not corroborated by the present study.

As evidenced by the studies conducted by Lee (2002) and Brantelid et al. (2014), despite the fact that menstruation is primarily experienced as a shameful and concealed experience during the formative years, menstruators also exhibit positive attitudes towards their menstruation in adulthood. Both studies elucidated their interviewees' comprehension of menstruation as a typical female\* experience that served as a positive menstrual anchor. While this study was able to replicate these insights—see, for example, the narratives by Anna and Ela on their interest in embracing their womanhood through menstruation—the findings of this study also demonstrate that this gendered portrayal of menstruation also contributes to the marginalization of individuals. As evidenced by the case of Denny, this menstrual meaning resulted in self-alienating and dissociative identity states, which were similar in nature to those resulting from other stigmatizing menstrual meanings. As previously discussed in this thesis, menstruation is not solely a female\* phenomenon; it is also an experience of the non-cis female community. In Denny's narratives, it became evident that despite their engagement with feminist critical art and advocacy for menstrual visibility, they still faced challenges in relating to their menstruation. This was due to a discrepancy between their gender identification and the portrayal of menstruation as a part of womanhood. This is unsurprising when one considers the embodied and interactional nature of personal and social meanings. If an individual is compelled to externalize their experience in a tangible manner and their internal understanding diverges from the externally constructed one, these two perspectives will inevitably diverge when they come into contact with one another.

A salient finding in both the Brantelid et al. (2014) study and this one is the transformation in the experience and comprehension of menstruation during the 20s. While this could only be inferred from the findings of Brantelid et al.'s (2014) study, which indicated that menstrual experiences were integrated into the normal, female\* life up to the age of 48 (the age of the oldest interviewee) prior to being primarily perpetuated by shame and secrecy, this study was specifically designed to investigate the changes in menstruation and their meanings up to the menstruators' 20s. This thesis' study demonstrated that menstruation became a common experience over the course of the co-researchers' young lives, with the age of the oldest interviewee being 27. From the age of 16 onwards, and particularly in the early 20s, menstruation was perceived as a normal experience, albeit

one is socially stigmatized. The narratives were centered on open discussions with acquaintances, friends, partners, and in the media. In sum, these narratives did not portray menstruation as either extremely negative or extremely positive; rather, they depicted it as a natural phenomenon that is stigmatized but must be negotiated. In this process of negotiation, open communication and the sharing of insights about new menstrual products, information about the menstrual cycle, experiences of stigmatization and isolation due to menstruation were recurring experiences for the co-researchers. This further illustrates the vital function of the everyday context and the freedom to accept bodily experiences as they are or were, while simultaneously striving to negotiate these experiences. It is not the intention to draw hasty conclusions; however, the significance and influence of these social experiences on the individual experience of menstruation suggest that menstruation is, to some extent, a social phenomenon in itself. It is of note that Gendlin (2017) presented a four-part definition of environment which included the concept that the features of an environment may be indistinguishable from those of a bodily process. Furthermore, he posited that there is the potential for a body to become its resulting environment. Recalling Gendlin's (2017) argument that ***"The life process (en#2) makes itself an environment in which it then goes on further."***<sup>15</sup> (Gendlin, 2017, p.7) indicates the necessity of menstruators to establish an environment in which menstrual experiences can flourish. The narratives of the co-researchers indicate that they (re)created particularly those themselves – amongst and for each other. This notion appears particularly pertinent in the context of the social stigmatization and concealment of menstruation, as well as the corresponding personal necessity to inhabit an environment that enables the body to fully engage with its experiences.

In the narratives of the co-researchers in their early 20s, it was evident that their engagement in peer and media debates had also informed them, to varying degrees, about the specifics of the menstrual cycle, including information that extended beyond the context of menstruation. It was a recurrent phenomenon that menstrual experiences and experiences related to the menstrual cycle were salient in the public lives of the co-researchers. Furthermore, it became evident that conceptualizing menstruation as a menstrual cycle was associated with a more profound engagement with and

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<sup>15</sup> The quote is presented in its original formatting.

comprehension of one's bodily needs and resources. It seems promising that empiricists and theorists who have hitherto focused on the study of menstruation take this step of zooming out of the specific phase of blood flow and consider what else the menstrual cycle may bring to the table. The co-researchers' newfound understanding of their bodies and the factors influencing their mental and physical health, as well as their relationship to the menstrual cycle, offers a valuable insight into this study. It is possible that this experiential insight of menstruators could serve as a replacement for outdated menstrual meanings, which is a promising prospect. It is also important to reiterate that the social and cultural context surrounding menstruation is undergoing a transformation, particularly as observed and reported by the co-researcher, for example, on their social media content and consumption. This evolving landscape, despite the persistent stigma surrounding it, must be viewed as a new environment in research on menstruation.

It is also notable that the existing literature has not addressed the extent to which menstruators' sexual experiences are integrated into their understanding of menstruation. The necessity for contraception was a pervasive theme, influencing the majority of the experiential changes documented in the menstrual chapters by the co-researchers. This underscores the pivotal role of contraception in their menstrual experiences. The narratives of the co-researchers from the age of 15 onwards revealed that menstruation became a phenomenon that marked their ability to reproduce and the need to manage the potential of reproduction, as well as the need to manage and navigate diverse experiences of (hormonal) contraceptives. While in some co-researchers, this understanding continued to be shaped within the context of shame and secrecy, which demanded that they hide and "contracept" their menstruation within their relationships, in other cases menstruation was simply concealed through the intake of hormonal contraceptives, which were often considered the normal or recommended way to navigate menstruation as a young menstruator. This new insight presents an intriguing addition to Law's (1990) concept of "menstrual etiquette," which requires menstruators to conceal and regulate their menstruation through the use of contraception.

In light of these insights into the evolving meanings of menstruation, it is of paramount importance to consider what these dynamics can reveal about the nature of meanings themselves. While it is not surprising that an individual's social environment and the social

meanings attached to menstruation play a significant role in how they experience and understand their menstruation, it is notable that the co-researchers of this thesis are actively engaged in navigating social contexts that seek to destigmatize and understand their bodily experiences. Although it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions, in five out of six cases, the changes in menstrual meanings appeared to have a *directional character*, pointing to a commitment to positively engage and understand the menstrual experience. In the sixth case of Denny, however, this was not the case. This is also a crucial insight, as Denny experienced severe and continuous identity conflicts between their identification as a non-binary person and the pervasive association of menstruation with female experience. As previously stated, this finding suggests the existence of an underlying interplay between bodily experience, bodily identity, and meaning. Finally, in order to facilitate a critical and productive discussion about the environmental factors and their multifaceted roles in a menstruator's life, the subsequent subchapter presents alternative perspectives to the dominant experiences in the lives of the co-researchers.



## Developing Alternatives: From Isolation to Integration

In order to incorporate an explicit critical momentum into this thesis, this subchapter further explores the potential for undertaking a critical examination of the results through alternative avenues, with a particular focus on the role of the environment in the emergence of menstrual meanings. The approach of critically engaging with menstrual experiences over time yielded not only a more nuanced understanding of how menstruation was experienced by the co-researchers at specific points in their lives but also insights into the contextual processes that shaped those experiences. In recognition of the limitations of this research in terms of identifying all the factors influencing the emergence of menstrual meanings, a number of key constituents emerge as crucial in the experience of menstruation and the process of understanding it. The role of the family, the gynecologist, the public sector, especially educational institutions, and peer bonds were discernible determinants in menstrual meanings and how they changed in the lives of the co-researchers, as discussed in the previous two subchapters of the result section (see pp. 83-104).

Firstly, the family played a pivotal role in providing support to those experiencing menarche, enabling them to navigate this new experience. The narratives revealed that negative or withdrawn attitudes within the menstruators' households influenced their menstrual experiences and understanding of the new experience, highlighting another aspect to be negated in addition to the experience itself. It is not sufficient for only female relatives, such as mothers and grandmothers, to create a supportive atmosphere; brothers and fathers must also play a role. It is of particular importance that family members refrain from bringing their own stigmatizing beliefs regarding menstruation to the attention of their children or siblings. This enables them to withhold and discern their own feelings associated with menstruation, as well as those of the individual who is newly menstruating.

Moreover, the school serves as an integral setting within the co-researchers' everyday lives, functioning as both a communicative space and a primary source of information regarding menstruation. The narratives of the co-researchers indicated that their initial exposure to menstruation was primarily through educational settings, if not at home. This initial introduction often entailed a cursory overview of the biological facts, with minimal

information about the full menstrual cycle and its actual experiencing. In the case of Caty and her narrative of "Aunt Rose" as a secret metaphor for menstruation, it is evident that menstruation was presented as an experience that should be concealed. It is imperative that educational institutions create an open and safe environment that addresses menstruation as a common and normal experience for half of the global population. This will prevent the perpetuation of negative menstrual connotations and bodily alienations. The majority of the co-researchers indicated that menstruation was an invisible phenomenon in their classrooms, necessitating the concealment of menstrual products and the avoidance of open discussions about menstrual experiences. It is unsurprising that young people internalize and act in accordance with the values and norms they are taught. The potential benefits of an open and holistic educational approach to the menstrual cycle are evident in the co-researchers' narrations of their knowledge gained through open peer discussions and engagement with their menstrual cycle, rather than solely focusing on the menstruation phase itself.

Peer education, whether institutional or non-institutional, appears to be a promising avenue for navigating and understanding menstrual experiences. The co-researchers indicated that identifying shared experiences with their peers was a significant source of support and encouragement as they navigated their personal journeys. For instance, Anna indicated that her participation in peer debates and the growing openness of the secondary school environment provided her with the courage to confront menstrual stigmatization at home and the comfort to embrace menstruation at school. Additionally, other narratives from individuals in late adolescence and young adulthood suggest that open discussions with peers and the formation of close relationships within the peer group can contribute to the destigmatization of menstruation. Fine's experiences of disclosing her severe menstrual symptoms and feelings of isolation to her female friends, and subsequently feeling understood and seen, further demonstrate the value of sharing personal experiences with other menstruators. It is evident that it is of the utmost importance for menstruators to feel a sense of solidarity and belonging within their own experiences in order to maintain overall well-being, both mentally and physically.

In light of the fact that it cannot be guaranteed that peers will be able to find and organize themselves in an environment that teaches young menstruators to conceal their

experience, it would be prudent for organizations in the educational and child protection spheres to foster the creation of private, protected spaces. Caty, for instance, described her profound experience of participating in a menstrual circle with other menstruators, which provided her with invaluable insights and a sense of belonging and understanding. During the menstrual event, attendees engaged in discourse pertaining to the physiological and experiential aspects of menstruation, as well as its personal significance. Moreover, the public sector can facilitate menstruators' comprehension and navigation of their menstruation by disseminating educational and awareness-raising content on social media platforms. A multitude of co-researchers in this thesis have attested to the invaluable insights gleaned from social media regarding the menstrual cycle and the physiological changes that menstruators may anticipate during the various phases of the cycle. As Bea outlined, this knowledge about the menstrual cycle was perhaps something that her gynecologist had, but it was not a common or widely disseminated topic among non-medical professionals.

Moreover, the co-researchers' accounts indicated that their initial experiences with gynecologists and their first visits to these professionals were pivotal in shaping their subsequent understanding of and approach to menstruation. While Caty described the educational value of her gynecologist visits for her menstrual and bodily knowledge, Fine experienced her first appointment at the gynecologist as highly disturbing and unmediated. Moreover, it was a recurring theme that the co-researchers began using hormonal contraceptives and subsequently encountered difficulties in negotiating the changes in their menstrual experiences, including the cessation of hormonal contraceptives. In the case of Denny, their menstrual irregularities were treated with the use of hormonal contraceptive medication. In light of the well-documented challenges within the medical field, including high workloads and limited resources, it is still crucial for gynecologists to acknowledge the significant influence they have on young people. It is common practice for gynecologists to conduct the first medical examinations of young people's most intimate and vulnerable body parts, particularly during the phase of puberty. In addition to being cognizant of the profound impact these experiences can have on young people, it is essential that gynecologists educate their patients about the effect of hormonal contraception on their bodies and emphasize a comprehensive

approach to contraception that extends beyond mere contraceptive maintenance. In particular, if menstrual experiences during the initial menstrual years are accompanied by discernible variations, such as irregular periods, the recommended course of action is not to simply instruct the menstruator to begin using a hormonal contraceptive. Although hormonal contraceptives may result in a regular occurrence of withdrawal bleeding, this does not constitute a menstrual cycle. Rather, it signifies its absence. Moreover, the consumption of artificial hormones has been demonstrated to have adverse effects on health, as well as to result in the loss of the opportunity to understand and meet the individual needs of the menstrual cycle. This, however, has been demonstrated to be of critical importance for a comprehensive understanding of menstruators' physical and mental health. As outlined by the co-researchers of this thesis, their engagement with the menstrual cycle led to an enhanced understanding of their own bodies. In light of the aforementioned findings, it can be proposed that hormonal contraceptive methods serve as a mechanism of social control over menstruating bodies, effectively managing and concealing personal menstrual cycles and reproductive capacities. This suggests that, contrary to the initial assumptions of feminist movements, these methods do not offer a liberating measure for all individuals with regard to sexual autonomy. As previously stated, the use of hormonal contraceptives results in the cessation of a menstrual cycle. While this may be of interest to a society that has historically sought to regulate the female body, it represents a loss for those who menstruate. In the case of the co-researchers, they were able to discern the cyclical resources and offerings of their bodies when engaging with their menstrual cycles. Likewise, it is evident that this is not merely a matter of dysregulation within the realm of women's health but also a pivotal educational concern pertaining to men's health. This is because not only do young menstruators require contraception, but young men also have a stake in this issue.

Finally, the societal portrayal and language use of menstruation as a negative phenomenon and one that exclusive to women must be reconsidered and aligned with new inclusive terminology. The burdensome portrayal of menstruation signifying weakness or dirtiness and the naming of menstruation as a female\* experience effectively dismisses the experiences of a significant portion of the population. As illustrated by the case of Denny, the misuse of language and the misidentification of individuals can give

rise to identity issues and, in some instances, may result in feelings of alienation or negative attitudes towards one's own menstruation.

As this thesis outlined in several places, menstruation is a phenomenon that is not contingent on gender, demanding to include all menstruators who identify as trans, inter, or non-binary and menstruate. It is imperative that we, as individuals, become aware of the influence we exert in our various roles, whether as mothers, fathers, siblings, friends, acquaintances, professionals, or even as strangers who interact with young people. We must recognize that young people's understanding of their own experiences is shaped not only by their own perceptions and interactions but also by the perspectives and contributions of those around them.

## Conclusion

This thesis sought to examine the evolving meanings associated with menstruation, with the objective of phenomenologically investigating the lived experiences of menstruating and how these were shaped by social experiences of youth and young adulthood. The phenomenon was explored through the lenses of critical phenomenology, which provides a deeper understanding of how experiences are contingent on sociopolitical structures (Guenther, 2019, 2021). The comprehensive critical narrative analysis, based on the work of Langdridge (2007), demonstrates that initially menarche was experienced as a shameful event that must be concealed. Furthermore, from the ages of 15 and 16 onwards, menstruation was experienced as the necessity to utilize contraceptive measures or to provide care for contraception, while simultaneously recognizing the stigmatized nature of menstruation. From the onset of young adulthood, typically around the age of 20, the menstrual cycle was perceived as a means of fostering body literacy and partly as an act of embracing womanhood. The narratives of the co-researchers in this thesis elucidate the profound and pervasive influence of the social worlds and intimate interactions with those closest to them on the bodily experiencing of menstruation. In particular, the emotional responses, attitudes, and approaches conveyed by the immediate social circle, including family, friends, and educators (such as teachers and doctors), which represent the initial environments in which new menstruators engage with their novel experiences, are intertwined with the process of menstruators assigning meaning to their experiences. In a critical momentum, this thesis explored alternative avenues through which menstruators could receive tangible assistance in navigating their experiences and integrating menstruation as an integral aspect of their embodied lives. In addition to the institutional support that menstruators require, the creation and promotion of private shared spaces for menstruators has the potential to foster personal and mutual understanding of one's own experience through peer discussion.

The findings of this thesis contribute substantially to the existing body of knowledge regarding the emergence and evolution of menstrual meanings over time. This thesis offers new insights into the process of destigmatizing menstrual experiences and the act of living with menstruation in the context of body literacy. It challenges the assumption that menstruation is inherently and always perceived and experienced negatively. While

the social portrayal and respective personal experience of menstruation as a shameful experience that menstruators must conceal remain a significant empirical insight and a pillar of well-justified feminist contributions to the field, it is novel and crucial to consider the ways menstruators engage with this burdensome meaning and end up understanding their lived experience of menstruating in other diverse ways. Particularly in regard to Gendlin's (2017) insight into the intertwined nature of body and environment, this thesis' insights point towards menstruation being a social phenomenon and environment in itself, given the nature of menstruators shared interactive experiencing and understanding of menstruation. As Gendlin (2017) outlined, "***The life process (en#2) makes itself an environment in which it then goes on further.***"<sup>16</sup> (Gendlin, 2017, p.7), postulating that the body can become its resulting environment and bear indistinguishable environmental features in its own physical processes. The findings of this thesis indicate that, over time, menstruators persist in environments and experiences in which their menstrual experience can flourish, rather than being diminished. The lived experience of the stigmatization of menstruation and subsequent experiences of destigmatizing menstruation in shared spaces indicate menstruators need to (re)create menstrual meanings by which they can thrive. Similarly, the emergence of novel menstrual meanings does not offer a universal solution, as evidenced by the discrepancy between the perspective of a non-binary menstruator and the understanding of menstruation as an act of embracing womanhood. It is of the utmost importance that research be conducted to uncover the lived experiences of queer and trans menstruators, as this information is fundamental to the advancement of knowledge in this field. Furthermore, it is imperative that this research be given a central role in heteronormative debates on menstruation.

In light of the emancipative interest of this thesis, it is noteworthy that menstruators appear to embody such a critical momentum in their lives. While this thesis is informed

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<sup>16</sup> The quote is presented in its original formatting.

by privileged perspectives and opportunities<sup>17</sup>, it imperative to recognize the evolving context of menstruation among Western, high-income populations. As this paper has demonstrated, “Beauvoir's insights remain fundamental to contemporary feminism. But she analyzed the world she lived in. We need to analyze our own world.” (Moi, 2006, p.1739). Although it is evident that feminist struggles remain a vital and pressing concern, it is crucial to assess the evolving landscape of collective action and the accessibility of information<sup>18</sup> through digital platforms, taking into account the sustained efforts of feminist movements over centuries. This phenomenon has significant implications for menstruators and their experiences. Naturally, the empirical evidence regarding the potential effects of social media and activist debates will ultimately determine this matter. Beyond the immediate focus on menstrual experiences and their meanings inherent to this thesis, the research speaks to broader trends in enactivist perspectives on meaning and growing debates on menstrual health and bodily awareness (see, e.g., Fleming, 2022; Rodriguez-Muguruza, 2023). The findings of this study indicate that individuals who experience menstruation do not merely passively navigate their lives; rather, they actively engage with their experiences, even when negative or burdensome meanings are pervasive in their stories. Notwithstanding these endeavors, meanings may nevertheless persist in functioning as a kind of metaphorical closet, confining individuals within the constraints of their own experiences. This phenomenon was exemplified in the case of one non-binary co-researcher whose menstrual and gender identity continued to present a persistent and conflicting dynamic in their life. This finding indicates the necessity of feminist empirical and theoretical contributions, whether in research or practice, to refrain from portraying menstruation as an experience exclusive to women. The role of practitioners, particularly those in educational and medical settings, has been pivotal in the narratives of this thesis' co-researchers, underscoring their pervasive involvement in

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<sup>17</sup> As a researcher, I acknowledge the highly privileged and niche experiences of menstruation depicted in this thesis. Amongst others, an anti-colonial focus on the experiences of menstruators living in diverse circumstances remains a pertinent approach to understanding the lived experience of menstruators across the globe (Fennie et al., 2022; Hennegan et al., 2019, 2020; Kelland et al., 2017).

<sup>18</sup> This thesis does not address the perseverance and severe impact of fake news. However, the presence and impact of misinformation in menstrual education merits further investigation and analysis.



menstruators' lives. The insights gained from the narratives on the intertwinedness of menstruation and contraception presented a novel and significant contribution with implications for those involved in the recommendation, prescription, and research of contraceptive measures for menstruators. In particular, hormonal contraceptives may offer an inequitable solution for effectively concealing and managing menstruation, or for shifting contraceptive responsibility solely to menstruators. However, they are not a viable solution for the management of health irregularities experienced during the menstrual cycle.

While this thesis offers valuable insights into the nature and alteration of menstrual meanings, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. These include the lack of greater diversity in and size of the sample, as well as the reliance on people's memory and one-time narration of their menstrual lives for data gathering. While these factors contribute to the particularities of the study and its findings, future research could further examine how changes in menstrual meanings are experienced in a sample that is less academically trained and heterogeneous with regard to educational and occupational background. Additionally, a more diverse range of genders and sexes in the samples used in studies examining menstrual meanings could facilitate the uncovering of a greater number of the nuances that this thesis has only been able to hunch at. Moreover, longitudinal studies that track menstruators' experiences over time through regular interviews offer a promising avenue for examining changes in meanings over time.

In sum, menstruation is much more than a purely physiological phenomenon. As the increasing bodily literacy and awareness of menstruators in regard to their engagement with their own menstrual cycle displayed, it encompasses a range of experiences and meanings. As discussed in the seminal work by Rodriguez-Muguruza (2023), socially recognizing the menstrual cycle as a fundamental regulatory bodily rhythm that is deeply embedded in the lives of approximately half of the global population is a crucial step to promote menstruators' attunement with their bodies and everyday life experiences. All practices that impede menstruators from engaging with and flourishing through their menstrual experience must be regarded as discriminatory against the menstrual body. Such practices warrant further critical feminist examination and acknowledgment within the scientific community.

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## Appendix

1. Data privacy consent form
2. Interview manual
3. Flyer
4. Email to co-researchers



## CONSENT OF THE PARTICIPANT\* TO TAKE PART IN THE RESEARCH

Research title: Critical Phenomenology of Menstruation

- I. You are invited to participate in the survey “Critical Phenomenology of Menstruation”. The research is carried out by [the main researcher]., under the supervision of [the main supervisor], within the master thesis of the MEi:CogSci program at the University of Ljubljana and the University of Vienna. The purpose of the research is a critical phenomenological approach to the lived experiences of menstruators.
- II. The tasks of the participants, hereafter named co-researchers, will be as follows: (a) participation in a narrative interview on their menstrual experience(s), (b) be contactable after the interview for queries.
- III. The data collection will take place between May and June 2024, depending on the dates of the interviews (one time approx. one to two hours). For participating in the research, you will not receive any financial or other form of compensation.
- IV. Participation in the research does not entail any specific risks. *If you anticipate any risks, or possible inconveniences for you or other participants due to participation in the research, please inform the main researcher as named above and, if applicable and/or feasible, write down ways you will deal with them.*
- V. Participation in the research does not bring material or other forms of benefits, with the exception of knowledge and experience you will gain as part of the cooperation.
- VI. Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary and you may end it at any time without any consequences. Co-researchers do not owe anything to the main researcher and shall be joining and participating only due to their personal and/or scientific interest in the phenomenon at hand. Every question can be skipped, stay unanswered or it can be specifically stated why the co-research doesn't want to answer the question.

- VII. The research team as named under I. will do everything we can to protect your privacy. Records of your experiences and accompanying demographic data (such as age, gender, education, etc.), will be stored under the research code. For the continuous research process, data is anonymized, and a pseudonym is given. Only the main researcher will know about your identity, the supervisor as named above, will only know the pseudonyms. Transcript only holds pseudonyms. However, the answers will stay in their original (only written) form. All data (interview recordings and their transcripts) will be deleted by the end of the data processing. Only group results will be publicly published and accessible. Your identity will not be revealed under any circumstances.
- VIII. If you have any additional questions, you can contact us via [Mail].

By signing, I certify that I have read the statement and that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research. I confirm my consent to participate in the described research and allow the results to be used for pedagogical and scientific research purposes.

---

Date, Location

Signature Co-Researcher

---

Date, Location

Signature Main-Researcher

I agree that in case the study “Critical Phenomenology of Menstruation” leads to a publication, I am willing that my pseudonymized data will be used and potentially abstracts will be quoted. I will be informed and asked for my consent again if a specific part of the transcript ought to be used as a quotation in a publication.

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Date, Location

Signature Co-Researcher

---

Date, Location

Signature Main-Researcher



## MA Thesis Interview Guide

### Semi-Structured, Qualitative Interview

#### Structure/ Struktur:

1. Study Information: explain the research interest.  
*Informationen zur Studie: Erläutern Sie das Forschungsinteresse.*
2. Informed Consent: explain the research design and study participation.  
*Einverständniserklärung: Erläuterung des Forschungsdesigns und der Studienteilnahme.*
3. Data Privacy: explain ensured anonymity and use of pseudonyms.  
*Datenschutz: Erläutern Sie die Gewährleistung der Anonymität und die Verwendung von Pseudonymen.*
4. Signing of the Informed Consent / Data Privacy Agreement.  
*Unterzeichnung der Einverständniserklärung/ Datenschutzvereinbarung.*
5. Quantitative questions on co-researchers' menstruation and menstrual experience  
*Quantitative Fragen zur Menstruation und Menstruationserfahrung der Mitforschenden*
6. Demographic questions  
*Demografische Fragen.*
7. Qualitative questions on the (experiential) history of menstruation, enabling the co-researcher's narration.  
*Qualitative Fragen zur (Erfahrungs-)Geschichte der Menstruation, die die Erzählung der Mitforscherin ermöglichen.*
8. Ask about consent to cite co-researchers in case of publicizing the work at hand.  
*Frage nach dem Einverständnis, die Mitforscherinnen zu zitieren, falls die Arbeit veröffentlicht werden soll.*

## Questions/ Fragen

### Start-off questions on menstruation/ Einstiegsfragen zur Menstruation:

- A. Are you currently using hormonal contraceptives?  
*Verwendest du derzeit hormonelle Verhütungsmittel?*
- B. Did you ever use hormonal contraceptives, if yes, when?  
*Hast du jemals hormonelle Verhütungsmittel verwendet, wenn ja, wann?*
- C. When did your period start?  
*Wann hat deine Periode eingesetzt?*
- D. Do you know how long your menstrual cycle is; if yes, how many days?  
*Weißt du, wie lang dein Menstruationszyklus ist; wenn ja, wie viele Tage?*
- E. Does your period come regularly or irregularly? (please quantify using days)  
*Tritt deine Periode regelmäßig oder unregelmäßig auf (bitte in Tagen angeben)?*
- F. Do you experience period pain during your menstruation?  
*Hast du während deiner Menstruation Regelschmerzen?*
- G. Do you have any other current medical diagnosis related to your period?  
*Hast du eine andere aktuelle medizinische Diagnose, die mit deiner Periode zusammenhängt?*
- H. Is there any other health condition that you currently encounter that is relevant to know about when researching your menstrual experience?  
*Gibt es andere gesundheitliche Probleme, die du derzeit hast und die für die Erforschung deiner Menstruationserfahrung von Bedeutung sind/ sein könnten?*

### Demographics/ Demografische Daten:

- I. Age/ *Alter*
- J. Sex and gender identification/ *Sex and Geschlecht Identität/en*
- K. Education/ *Ausbildung*
- L. Country of Birth & country of socialization, if different from country of birth/  
*Geburtsland & Land der Sozialisation, falls abweichend vom Geburtsland*
- M. Religious or spiritual beliefs/ *Religiöse oder spirituelle Überzeugungen*

**Narrative Interview questions (open, qualitative) on co-researchers menstrual lives /  
Narrative Interviewfragen (offen, qualitativ) zur Geschichte der  
Kowissenschaftler\*innen im Zusammenhang mit ihrer Menstruation:**

Adaptation from the Original:

“I would like you to begin by thinking about your *[menstrual]* life as if it were a book. Each part of your *[menstrual]* life composes a chapter in the book. Certainly, the book is unfinished at this point; still, it probably already contains a few interesting and well-defined chapters. Please divide your *[menstrual]* life into its major chapters and briefly describe each chapter. You may have as many or as few chapters as you like, but I would suggest dividing it into at least two or three chapters and at most seven or eight. Think of this as a general table of contents for your book. Give each chapter a name and describe the overall contents of each chapter. Discuss (...) what makes for a transition from one chapter to the next.” (McAdams, 1997, p.256).

*Translation:*

*„Ich möchte, dass Sie Ihr [menstruelles] Leben zunächst wie ein Buch betrachten. Jeder Teil Ihres [menstruellen] Lebens stellt ein Kapitel in diesem Buch dar. Sicherlich ist das Buch zu diesem Zeitpunkt noch unvollendet; dennoch enthält es wahrscheinlich bereits einige interessante und gut definierte Kapitel. Bitte unterteilen Sie Ihr [menstruelles] Leben in seine Hauptkapitel und beschreiben Sie jedes Kapitel kurz. Sie können so viele oder so wenige Kapitel haben, wie Sie möchten, aber ich würde vorschlagen, es in mindestens zwei oder drei und höchstens sieben oder acht Kapitel zu unterteilen. Betrachten Sie dies als ein allgemeines Inhaltsverzeichnis für Ihr Buch. Geben Sie jedem Kapitel einen Namen und beschreiben Sie den allgemeinen Inhalt eines jeden Kapitels. Erörtern Sie kurz, was den Übergang von einem Kapitel zum nächsten ausmacht. Dieser erste Teil des Gesprächs kann sich ewig hinziehen, aber ich würde Ihnen dringend raten, ihn relativ kurz zu halten, sagen wir, zwischen dreißig und fünfundvierzig Minuten. Sie müssen mir hier also nicht „die ganze Geschichte“ erzählen. Geben Sie mir nur einen Eindruck von den Grundzügen der Geschichte - den wichtigsten Kapiteln in Ihrem [menstruellen] Leben. (McAdams, 1997, p.256).*

## Flyer

**TEILNEHMENDE  
GESUCHT**

**Studie zur Leiberfahrung von  
Menstruierenden Personen**  
im Rahmen einer Masterarbeit von der  
Universität Wien & der Universität Ljubljana

Du bist:

- in deinen 20ern,
- nutzt aktuell keine hormonelle Verhütungsmethode &
- hast keine Diagnose im Zusammenhang mit deiner Menstruation und keine psychologische Diagnose vorliegen?

**Dann MELD DICH bei uns! Wir würden uns freuen mit dir ein Interview über deine Menstruationsgeschichte zu halten. Plane ca. 1-2 Stunden inklusive Vor- und Nachbereitung ein ❤️**

**unter**  
**oder SCAN HIER**



## E-Mail an Co-Researcher: Einladung zur Studie (Original)

Liebe XY,

danke nochmal, dass du dich für die Studie gemeldet hast! Endlich sind wir so weit und würden dich gern zum Interview einladen, bzw. einen Termin für ein Interview für die Studie finden. Du solltest zwei Stunden Zeit einplanen, so haben wir genug Zeit alles in Ruhe zu besprechen. Glücklicherweise sind wir zeitlich flexibel, sodass du gern sagen kannst, wann es dir - bestenfalls in den nächsten zwei Wochen untertags - gut passen würde. Anbei sende ich dir das Datenschutzblatt, welches wir aktuell nur in Englisch verfügbar haben. Sofern du Rückfragen hast, meld dich immer gern bei mir!

Zwei letzte vorab Fragen wären noch ob du eine Diagnose bezüglich deiner Menstruation wie z.B. Endometriose und/oder aktuell eine Diagnose bezüglich deiner psychischen Gesundheit vorliegen hast. Wir schauen uns nämlich in dieser Studie Erfahrungen von Menstruierenden ohne spezifische Krankheiten/Gesundheitsabweichungen an. Auch wenn dies sehr spannend und wichtig ist, umfasst diese Studie sie leider nicht.

Nur schon mal vorab ein kleiner Preview für das Datenschutzblatt: Ich werde das Interview leiten und auch nur ich kenn deine Kontaktdaten sowie deine Personalien. Die Daten sind und werden dann pseudonymisiert gespeichert; kurz gesagt: ich gebe dir einen falschen Namen, z.B. Lena. Auch in der Masterarbeit und anderen Verschriftlichungen taucht nie dein echter Name auf.

Ich freu mich schon darauf dich kennenzulernen und mit dir zusammen auch deine Menstruationserfahrungen.

Liebe Grüße

[Name]

## E-mail to co-researchers: Invitation to the study (Translation)

Dear XY,

Thank you again for registering for the study! We are finally ready and would like to invite you for an interview or find a date for an interview for the study. You should allow two hours so that we have enough time to discuss everything in peace. Fortunately, we are flexible in terms of time, so you are welcome to say when it would suit you - ideally in the next two weeks during the day. Please find attached the data protection sheet, which is currently only available in English. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me!

Two last questions in advance would be whether you have a diagnosis regarding your menstruation such as endometriosis and/or a current diagnosis regarding your mental health. This is because in this study we are looking at experiences of menstruators without specific illnesses/health conditions. Even though this is very exciting and important, this study unfortunately does not include them.

Just a little preview for the data protection sheet in advance: I will be conducting the interview and only I know your contact details and your personal details. The data is and will be stored pseudonymously; in short: I will give you a false name, e.g. Lena. Your real name will also never appear in my master's thesis or other written documents.

I'm looking forward to getting to know you and sharing your menstrual experiences with you.

Best regards

[name]