



A Qualitative Study on Menstrual Experiences in Assisting those Entering their Menarche Now?

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Abstract

This social sciences paper explored the experiences of young adult females attending the University of the Witwatersrand regarding menarche and the impact of societal influences regarding the understanding of menstruation. This paper aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how these female experiences menstruation and identified areas of improvement. The paper presents a qualitative study including 8-10 participants aged 18-25 who menstruate, used purposive non-probability sampling and semi-structured interviews. The sampling procedure included purposive non-probability sampling of the data instruments which included audiotapes of the semi-structured interviews. The data analysis was thematic analysis of the interpreted data. The anticipated outcome included anxieties and negative connotations towards menstruation, highlighting the lack of attention to and the need for further investigation into how to omit this problem around menstruation to ensure positive and effective experience around menarches.

Keywords

menstruation, menstrual preparedness, menstrual health, young, female adults

INTRODUCTION

“Society has placed a taboo surrounding periods and menstrual health as if we should be ashamed of this natural and miraculous process that ultimately kept the human species alive. said Tracy Lockwood” (Lockwood, 2022). This quote speaks to the topic of menstruation, and it was important to note that at least half of the population within the world (who are female) experiences some form of menstruation yet so many individuals in society are so unclear about what menstruation was or how it affects them. According to Statistic Times, the world population in 2021 showed 49.58% of the world population was female (United Nations, 2021). According to The World Bank collectors, South Africa has a 51,1% female population which was slightly more than half of the population (Trading Economics, 2023). Particularly access, education, and general awareness around menstruation are often reached at a surface level, especially within high school settings. This study focused on exploring the experiences of menstruation, including the knowledge around menstrual hygiene and sanitation for young adult females.

This lack of insight into menstruation has created a negative or uncertain environment for those who do menstruate, but it also created a taboo towards discussing the concept of menstruation, which was important as it impacts all of society.

The young females who have their menstrual cycles and grow up having to figure out how menstrual cycles work as they experience life are directly affected by these attitudes (LV et al., 2021). However, if there was a strong foundation knowledge set for the girls to understand their menstrual cycles, preparedness may assist these girls in how they experience menstruation. It was so important to have the education and insight around menstrual education, management, and hygiene as the beginning of the menstruation relates to the preparedness of the body for pregnancy which may well contribute to other factors such as teenage pregnancy (Mendle et al., 2019). Some studies show that low self-esteem

issues in young females who may be shunned or bullied in school at either a young age or at present for menstruating, leaving females anxious and resorting to the internet for misinformation around menstruation (Kaur et al., 2018).

Within this review the important themes discussed include menstrual cycles, menstrual education and overall awareness around menstruation was explored. Within the South African context it was evident that there has been an increase in local menstrual movements and awareness campaigns such as an introduction to menstrual cups and the benefits of reusing the cups (Beksinska et al., 2015). While menstrual cycles are biological and physical, they have been known to include psychological distress such as anxiety and may affect how menstruators (individuals who menstruate) internalize their experiences of having a menstrual cycle (Critchley et al., 2020).

Menstrual education

Other important aspects of this information include observing and tracking menstruation cycles to understand if there are any irregularities which may be a health concern and to understand how menstruation may affect a menstruator's life in a sociological way (Tellier & Hyttel, 2018).

Historical context

Unfortunately, the capacity and reception to education in the world on menstruation has been affected by the systemic inequality regarding menstrual education, access to menstrual products or care, and education around menstruation (Holst et al., 2022). This included the unequal treatment towards those who do menstruate as well as creating a taboo around the concept of menstruation and using it to create inferior individuals within society (Holst et al., 2022). Particularly within a study conducted in Spain, Barcelona which aimed to look at the female experiences of inequality in relation to menstruation (Holst et al., 2023).

This then resulted in women having the right to access menstrual products such as sanitary pads, which by law eliminates the idea of menstrual inequality (Newton, 2016). However, despite the laws and policies allowing this, there was still menstrual inequity from systemic injustices and inequality (Albert et al., 2020). Where females who require menstrual products, education regarding their menstruation, etc.

Menstrual awareness

Menstrual awareness is the educational and cognizant understanding of what menstruation is, the functioning around menstruation, and how individuals understand themselves in relation to menstruation (Langer et al., 2015). Thus, awareness was so important as it may adjust how all individuals view the concept of menstruation within society and the discourse of how menstruation is viewed within society (Koskenniemi, 2018).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS STRUCTURE

A theoretical framework was aimed at studying the structures that ensure theories or concepts are supportive of the research as a guide (Kivunja, 2018). The theoretical framework underpinning this study specifically looked at the person-in-environment perspective, the ecological systems approach and the intersectionality theory. Both the theory and the approach looked at the individual in relation to their external systems and aimed to holistically understand the intersectional relationships which resulted in the understanding of the young females' experiences.

The person-in-environment perspective was a common social work theory where the individual was being focused on, in relation to how the individual perceives themselves within society (Rooney et al., 2017). The general objective of using this perspective was to focus on the systems around the individual such as looking at how these young females experience menstruation in relation to their society.

The person-in-environment perspective related to the study and was important as it aimed to look at how these young females associate their menstrual experiences which could affect how they interpret themselves and their self-esteem. Another key feature of this perspective allowed for the individual's development, functioning, behaviours, thoughts, and experiences to be understood as a result of the simultaneous engagement with society and the individual. Which aimed to further break down and help understand various factors that may have contributed to the result of these various experiences in relation to menstruation.

This approach was important to be applied as it allows the researcher to be cognizant and understand the complex workings of the systems within which an individual was exposed to (Crawford, 2020).

The advantage of using intersectionality as a theoretical framework allowed for unique experiences to be explored and to understand the potential oppressions or biases which may have altered the direction of experience that an individual may face.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology presented in this paper includes the research approach of the study as well as the research design. This includes sharing the guiding research questions used for the interviews. As well as who is coding the names of the participants and details around data collection for this study.

The research approach was a simplified definition and description of the overall approach regarding the methodology section within a research proposal (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study used the qualitative approach as it was a subjective manner of gathering information regarding participant's experiences (phenomenologically) which was

viewed as rich data and assigned meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The qualitative approach which provided for in-depth insight into the subjective experiences of each participant that was interviewed as this was the rich data required and best suited for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The research design refers to the form of study or plan devised that was able to assess the data during the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research design was a case-study design which aims to gain insightful information around the experiences of a particular group of individuals within society and allows for insight into the phenomenon of menstruation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Population

The population within the study looked at the broader scope of the potential participants for this study. The target population refers to the specific demographic of individuals who have specific characteristics or elements which are of interest to the study (Sudheesh et al., 2016).

The reason for this demographic allowed for the researcher to gain insight into the participants menarche and to allow participants to share input regarding the potential of creating different experiences for future females who do menstruate. Participants were drawn from various backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, race, sexual orientation and within varied programs within the university from the accounting degrees to the humanities degrees.

Sampling and sampling procedure

Sampling refers to the method of recruiting study participants and the methods of intention around collecting data from this sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The sampling procedure was non-probability sampling, it was a qualitative method regarding the selection of participants within the sample of the given population (Neuman, 2014). Thus, there was a less specific selection of drawing individuals from a single sample. Thus, the specific non-probability sampling method that was used was the purposive non-probability sampling method which will allow for the researcher to look for potential participants who may fit the criterion regarding the target population (Neuman, 2014). This method of sampling was necessary for this study as it attained to participants who would have rich information regarding this particular focus.

The enrolment included contact via social media and messaging to set up a time, location, and space to meet for the interview as well as an email address to contact the researcher for further information. The venue was mutually agreed upon according to the best interests of the participant such as their campus setting, a community resident and use a room to privately conduct the interview.

Sample

In total, there were 11 participants who were interviewed for this study. These participants were selected through a poster requesting that the participants be students who attend the university of Witwatersrand, between the ages of 18-25, are female and menstruate.

Setting of the study

The interviews were held at the University of Witwatersrand, in specific locations closest to the participants and what was convenient for them. As a result, majority of the participants preferred to sit outside buildings such as the Chamber of Mines and felt more comfortable engaging within this setting.

Research instrument(s) and pre-testing of the research instruments

A research instrument was a tool used for data collection and provides a standard tool for efficient and effective collection of data (Sudheesh et al., 2016). The instruments to be used in this study were a semi-structured interviews schedule. The research instrument was a printed page of questions to ask the participant during the interview and was filled out by the researcher, accordingly. An advantage to engaging in semi-structured interviews allowed for further engagement and openness to in-depth exploration. Therefore, I was not bound to specific limitations but was still mindful of the general direction to be explored.

The pretesting was a trial to test the data collection instrument and adjust accordingly if there are any inconsistencies (Hu et al., 2014). The pre-testing was conducted on two participants; however, the data collected from the participants was not included in the data analysis. The feedback received from the pretesting was used to improve the data collection instrument.

Method of data collection

Research context and settings

The study's method of data collection took place within the location of the university of Witwatersrand as this was convenient for all the participants regarding accessibility and convenience. Participants requested meeting at a convenient location on either the West or East campuses within the main campus.

Data collection procedures

This study used qualitative methods to generate data this study, the method of data collection creating a standard form of collecting data, which allowed for accurately capturing data for the research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The data

collection method used was information shared by the 10 participants during in-depth semi-interviews with audiotapes, observation of the participant (verbal and non-verbal) as well as the participation of the participant during the interview. These observation methods confirmed the spoken engagement, being mindful of sensitivity to the subject matter and the researcher was able to respond appropriately within the interview. Participation was purely voluntary with no incentives.

In-depth interviews with participants

The in-depth interviews consisted of (1) Understanding the broader concept/ definition of the term menstruation. (2) Personalized menstrual narratives around when and where participants had their menarche, emotions and thoughts behind the experience as well as from family/ support systems. (3) Accessibility to sanitary products upon menarche and type of sanitary products used currently. (4) Challenges associated with menstruation, from physical through to emotional. (5) Perceptions of general experiences around menstruation and advice to younger individuals around their menarche. Semi-structured interviews are interviews with general questions used as a guideline to direct engagement with the participant but also allowed for the participant to share experiences or information outside of the questions as it allowed for more open-ended questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Which then invited open-ended responses. The data was collected on the researcher's password protected phone for a month until the data was moved to the password protected laptop for further data analysis.

Data analysis

The data was analysed through the thematic analysis which was a form of analysing data according to Braun and Clarke (Byrne, 2022).

Thematic analysis of data:

Familiarizing data

The researcher analysed the qualitative data according to the categories created through the thematic coding. Individual interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. After carefully compiling the transcription, the researcher went in and listened to the recordings aimed at identifying similarities within the data.

Creating initial codes

These transcripts were then further studied and divided into categories of general themes. pseudo initials were given to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. After carefully creating pseudo initials such as Interviewee A, the researcher put the recordings, transcriptions and raw data into a password protected computer. Initial codes were created from these recordings.

Searching for themes/ patterns

Themes were then further studied and categorised into sub-themes known as codes. The codes would then highlight verbatim statements made by interviewees. The thematic analysis allowed the researcher to thoroughly analyse the transcribed documents.

Reviewing collected codes

The researcher then grouped these codes into themes which created a broader topic for the codes to fall into.

Defining, naming and grouping codes

The data was then re-analysed to ensure that the key topics were covered such as conceptualisation of the term menstruation, informed knowledge, access to sanitary products and more.

Evaluating and revising themes for report

The researcher then went over the themes and sub-codes to ensure that the accurate identification and grouping was given and eligible for the report writing.

Further analysis

Question 1- Most participants had an idea of what menstruation was, as well as 6 out of 10 participants mentioning the time that it occurs within.

Question 2- Majority of the participants have stated that menarche are general around the ages of 12 to 13. There was one participant who had their first menarche at the age of 11.

Question 3-Regarding participants being informed of menstruation prior to menarche, it appears that 8 out of 10 participants were informed or had some sort of idea around what menstruation was

Question 4- 6 out of 10 of the participants had their menarche at home and 4 out of 10 participants have experienced their menarche in public spaces. The location of experiencing their menarche may influence the overall experience such as additional stress due to experiencing it in an unfamiliar location.

Question 5- 8 out of the 10 participants experienced a negative or uncertain emotion/ thought or feeling toward experiencing the menstruation. 4 out of the 10 participants stated that they felt excited and had positive associations prior to experiencing the menstruation

Question 6- Within the theme of family reactions there was generally a neutral reaction from the family members regarding the participants' menarche. However, there were 3 out of 10 participants who shared negative experiences. Some participants stated that there was a cultural factor as well as emphasis on how the family viewed menstruation.

Question 7 and Question 8- All 10 participants had access to some form of sanitary products when experiencing their menarche. 8 out of 10 participants used and currently use sanitary pads, however two participants use menstrual cups. One of the participants using the menstrual cup mentioned that it was more convenient and cheaper in the long-term.

Question 9- Regarding challenges, 7 out of the 10 participants experience some form of pain or cramping during their menstruation and 5 out of 10 participants have heavy flows or leaks when on their period.

Question 10- Within the theme of advice to others, most participants stated that there needs to be less stigma, half of the participants suggested that there was a need to develop an understanding that menstruation was a natural process, more open conversations need to be had, lessened stigma portrayed by society and re-enforced by the participants onto themselves and the sub-theme (code) of teaching or engaging with men around the topic came out during 3 of the interviews.

Question 11- Within this theme, 9 out of 10 of the participants view menstruation or perceive others menstruating from a negative perspective. Many participants have shown a negative relationship with menstruation or have been taught to hide or conceal themselves or the topic around menstruation. Interestingly, 1 out of 10 of the participants view their menstruation with a positive perception and were able to see it as a relief in relation to a religious connection.

Trustworthiness of the data

The trustworthiness of the data includes the four-dimension criteria created by Lincoln and Guba, within qualitative research which includes the methods of confirmability, transferability, credibility and dependability (Forero et al., 2018). Confirmability was the extent to which the results or findings of the study are accurate (Forero et al., 2018). Within this study, there was a close look into the similar studies in other contexts which demonstrate similar results and confirm the findings of the study. Transferability was used as the researcher was aware that the research can be extended outside of the context of the university and potentially to the district, provincial, national and international scales for results and in this case pertaining to the experiences of females regarding menstruation (Forero et al., 2018). The interview questions are straight forward and the room for additional open-ended questions, given the semi-structured interview style aids with transferring the study to most contexts with females who menstruate.

The credibility was generally the intended study or measure used as credible information (Forero et al., 2018). Which was seen through two pre-tested interviews which remained consistent with the rest of the data collected in relation to the average setting, interview techniques and overall credibility of the study itself. Regarding the dependability, this was where the findings of the study are in-line with the context and considerations of the participants input (Forero et al., 2018). Within this study, the results were found through a detailed thematic analysis which breaks down the formulation of getting to the codes and themes of the data which were identifiable through patterns and semantic codes.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are necessary as it ensured the general safety and protection of all parties involved within the study from a participant and a researcher's perspective. This research study went through ethical processes within the university such as submitting a research proposal within the social work department and the university's ethics committee which prompted clearance to conduct the research. Ethical considerations are an important component of the research as it ensured the correct protocols are followed.

Ethics committee review

This research study received ethical approval from the Department of Social Work, the registrar within the University of Witwatersrand, as well as the non-medical ethics committee within the university.

Informed consent

All participants were asked for verbal consent as well as written consent, which were signed by all participants involved. The researcher gave the interviewee the information participation sheet and ensured that the consent form was manually signed. At the beginning of each interview the researcher asked for verbal consent to record the interviewee, prior to recording. Participants' names remained within the consent form, for ethical purposes meaning that the researcher and the supervisor have access to this if need be. However, all participants' names and identifying details were removed from the study's results.

Confidentiality

Whilst anonymity was granted within the findings, confidentiality was tricky as the qualitative data requires the experiences and quotes from the interviewees which was highlighted by the participants. Respect for participants was highlighted through working around their schedules and times of convenience.

Voluntary participants

This research study was conducted on a voluntary basis with participants as the researcher advertised the research study and it was the participants who volunteered their time and effort to be a part of this study. There was no coercion or forced participation. The voluntary concept allows for the participants to have the right to choice and decide if this study was something they would like to participate in, upon meeting the requirements of the study (Kılınç & Fırat, 2017). Voluntary participation allows the participants to be more open to engaging within the study as well.

No harm to participants

The aim of ensuring ethical considerations was to ensure no harm towards any participant in relation to the study. This study has a low risk as there was identification around the sensitivity of talking about the subject of menstruation in relation to some conservative societies, conducting research within the university campus for safety and reducing any potential risks that may occur. However, the study aimed to ensure no harm malpractice

RESULTS

The results reported in this study focused on the (5.1.1) the awareness and knowledge regarding menarche, (5.1.2) the past and current general experiences of both participants and surrounding relatives being positive, neutral and negative, (5.1.3) accessibility to sanitary products, (5.1.4) challenges faced in relation to menstruation, (5.1.5) perceptions of how others within participants generation experience menstruation and (5.1.6) suggestions/ recommendations regarding menarche. All of these have a significant impact on how young adult females experience menstruation and the relationship or associations they have with their menstruation.

The past and current general experiences of both participants and surrounding relatives being positive, neutral and negative:

When asked about the age of the menarche (first menstruation), majority of the participants have stated that menarches are general around the ages of 12 to 13. In relation to the menarche, the research aimed to identify whether participants were informed about menstruation prior and if so from who/ where. Regarding participants being informed of menstruation prior to menarche, it appeared that 8 out of 10 participants were informed or had some sort of idea around what menstruation was. 6 out of 10 participants were informed about menstruation from their mothers and 2 out of 10 were also informed from their schools.

The researcher then looked at the type of location that the participants experienced their menarche and 6 out of 10 of the participants had their menarche at home and 2 out of 10, specifically experienced their menarche in their bedrooms and 4 out of 10 participants have experienced their menarche in public spaces such as the shops or the airport.

Evidently, 7 out of the 10 participants experienced a negative or uncertain emotion/ thought or feeling toward experiencing the menstruation. 4 out of the 10 participants stated that they felt excited and had positive associations prior to experiencing the menstruation. Within the theme of family reactions there was generally a neutral reaction from the family members which was 6 out of 10, regarding the participants menarche.

Accessibility of sanitary products

All participants had access.

Challenges faced in relation to menstruation

Within the theme of challenges, 7 out of most of the participants suffered with a significant amount of pain in relation to their menstruation.

Perceptions of how others within participants' generation experience menstruation

Within this theme, 9 out of 10 of the participants have shown a negative relationship with menstruation or have been taught to hide or conceal themselves or the topic around menstruation

Suggestions/ recommendations regarding future menarche experiences

Within the theme of advice to others, most participants stated that there needs to be less stigma. Another suggestion included the idea to develop an understanding that menstruation was a natural process. Other advice including participants sharing that there should be more open conversations need to be had and the sub-theme (code) of teaching or engaging with men around the topic came out during 3 of the interviews.

DISCUSSION

Discussing the findings in relation to the set-out objectives of the study.

Objective One: Gain insight into the level of understanding that young females have around menstrual process.

Some participants gave a textbook or biological definition, and some gave an informal definition which still demonstrates some understanding of what the menstrual process was.

Objective Two: Identify the young females understanding about menstruation prior menarche.

This objective was achieved as it was evident that some participants had no awareness or limited knowledge on the topic of menstruation whilst some had intense education presented to them prior their menarche. These answers very clearly

give insight into whether the participants were informed about menstruation prior to their menarche and explained if they were informed, how this came about.

Objective Three: Explore coping strategies in relation to social pressures and expectations, used by young females to cope with menstruation.

This objective was met as the researcher asked the participants questions which evoked answers regarding family and cultural impacts, destigmatizing the concept of menstruation by having more open conversations and teaching men about menstruation.

Objective Four: Understand their views on the sanitary products and menstrual hygiene.

This objective was met as the researcher was able to gain insight into how many participants view the topic of sanitary products. All 10 participants had access to sanitary products, and it was evident that majority of the participants used sanitary pads.

Main findings, conclusion and recommendations

The main findings demonstrated that most participants had a good idea of what menstruation was and were able to give a timeline around when menstruation occurs. Despite the standardized definition of menstruation, some participants were able to define menstruation in relation to how they experience or understand it. There appears to be a negative association with menstruation that remains amongst females who menstruate and by society which causes anxiousness and strong dislike towards the relationship females have with their menstruation.

Regarding the objectives in relation to the main findings

a) Gain insight into the level of understanding that young females have around menstrual process

Within this objective it was found that all participants had a compressive understanding of and were able to explain the concept of menstruation in relation to how the participant experiences it.

b) Identify the young females understanding about menstruation prior menarche

It was found that many participants had a brief understanding of what menstruation was prior to their menarche, either by their school, their mother or a book given by a caregiver. However, most participants who were informed about menstruation felt underprepared and unable to fully understand the concept of menstruation until having it.

c) Explore coping strategies in relation to social pressures and expectations, used by young females to cope with menstruation

It was found that when asking participants to identify gaps from their past experiences, especially regarding their menarche up until the current date. Majority of the participants shared that after experiencing their menstruation there was much realisation around it being a natural phenomenon, the need to destigmatize the idea of menstruation and to include men in the conversations around menstruation. Coping strategies include treating the symptoms experienced such as cramps and speaking to others who menstruate and often relate to each other's stories.

d) Understand their views on the sanitary products and menstrual hygiene

All the participants were able to identify the types of sanitary products they use whilst majority of the participants used pads and two of the participants shared using menstrual cups as an alternative to the tampons and pads. The menstrual cup was seen as an environmentally friendly and long-term cheaper product. Some participants shared using hygienic wipes and finding the need to shower or clean self because of suffering from a heavy flow. However, majority of the participants stated that menstrual hygiene was not an issue or problem.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of young females, between the ages of 18-25, who attended the university of Witwatersrand in relation to menstruation. However, this study was limited to a certain number of participants as per the degree requirements and underrepresented the university in relation to a variety of faculties and identifying genders such as a queer individual who may be non-binary and menstruate. Another limitation included the calibre of university students from this university who mostly have access to sanitary products within the university space and was not a true reflection of the population of females within this population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Conversations with men

Some participants shared included men or the opposite sex into conversational spaces around menstruation as well as to thoroughly inform young females around the realities of menstruation. A pre-menstrual box was shared by many participants which eased the uncertainty of having access to sanitary products. More insightful education needs to be shared around the variety of sanitary products such as menstrual cups which are more feasible and sustainable in the long-term. Open conversations between females who menstruate and those who are about to achieve their menarche should be had. Empowerment and practical tools need to be further emphasized within the schooling system as a potential study to further investigate within the schooling system in South Africa in relation to menstruation.

Further research

In future research, a potential avenue to venue into the cultural factors affecting or impacting the experiences of individuals who menstruate, to consider looking at how many students miss school because of menstruation and understanding the views of religious groups around menstruation.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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