

# Shame if you do, Shame if you don't: Women's experiences of infant feeding

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# Outline

- What is shame
- Shame v's guilt
- Events, experiences and impact of shame
- How to mitigate shame

# What is shame?



- Through the eyes of the 'other'

*'Self is both agent and object of observation and disapproval, as shortcomings of the defective self are exposed before an internalized observing "other"'. (Tanger & Miller, 1996 p. 1257)*

Looking glass self (Cooley, 1902)

# Evolutionary perspective

Paul Gilbert (1998, 2002, 2007)

Innate needs

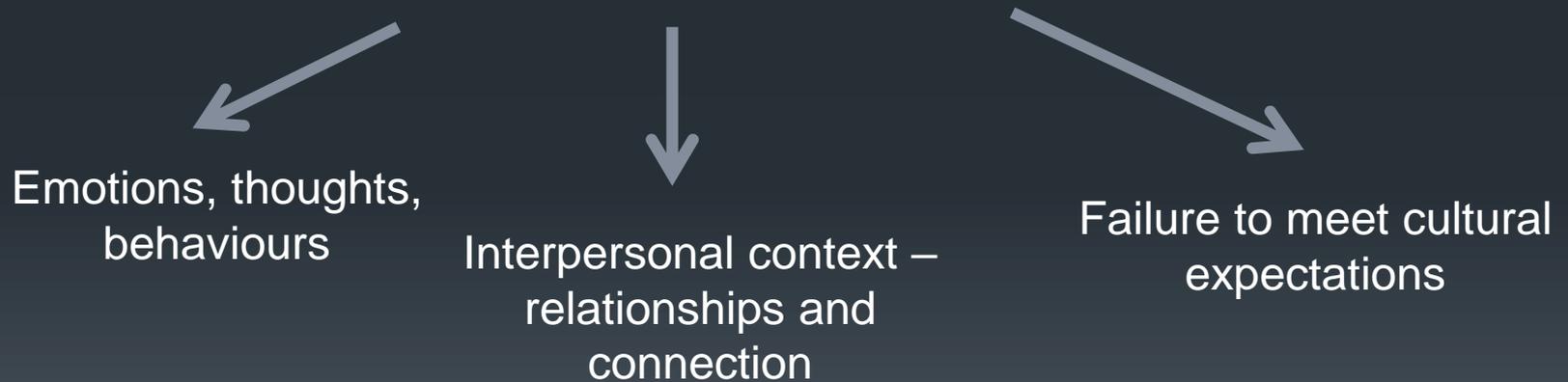


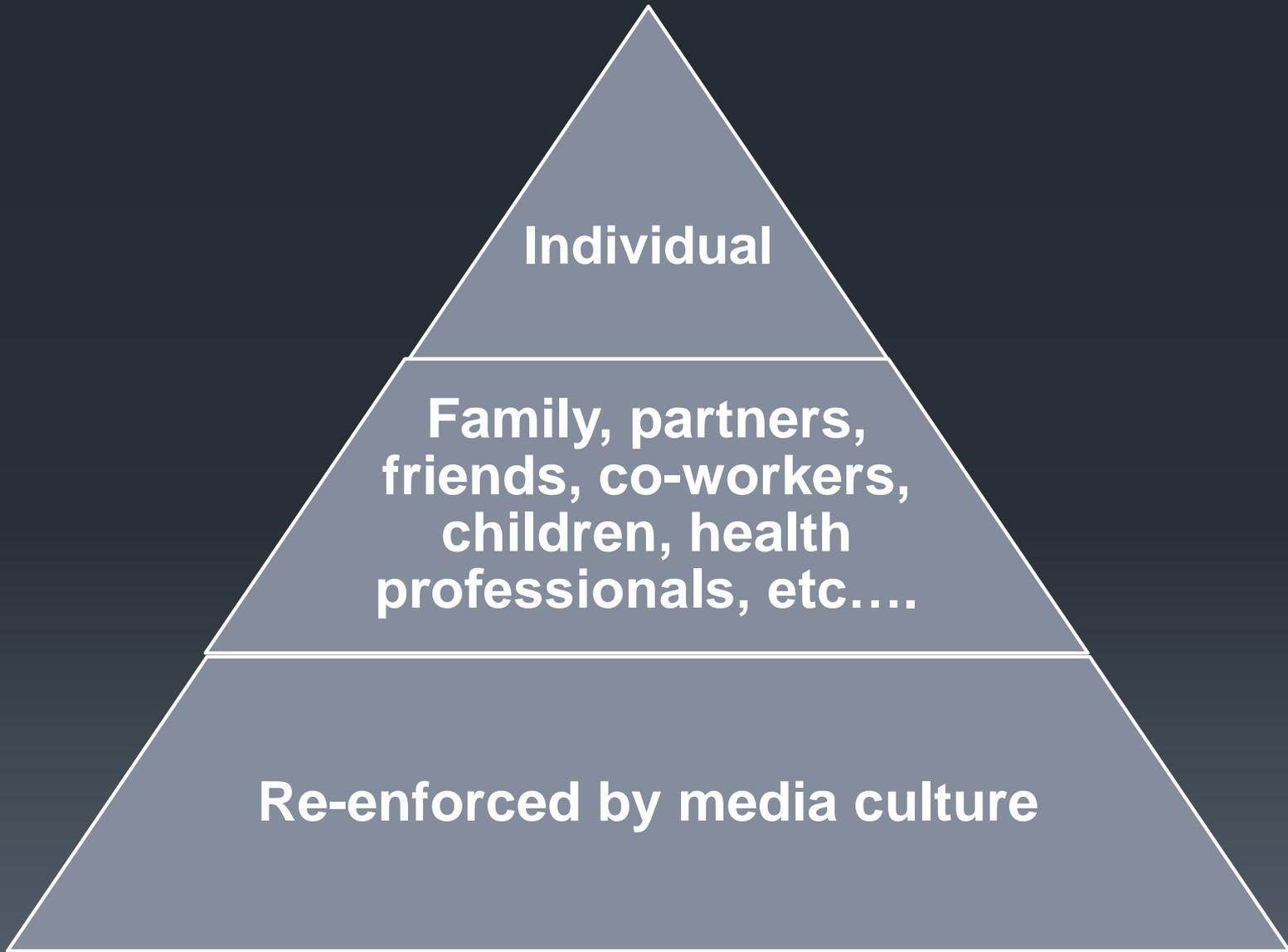
Defensive  
strategies

# Women's sense of shame....

- An intense painful feeling or experience or believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging (Brown, 2006, p. 45)

- Psycho-social-cultural construct





**Individual**

**Family, partners,  
friends, co-workers,  
children, health  
professionals, etc....**

**Re-enforced by media culture**

# Shame or Guilt?



- Used inter-changeably – two distinct emotions (‘emotions of self-assessment’)
- Guilt = doing a ‘bad thing’ leading to tension, remorse and regret
- Guilt is a feeling that results from *behaving* in a flawed or bad way – whereas shame relates to a flawed or bad *self*.  
(Brown, 2006, p. 45)

# Relevance to Infant Feeding

- 'Breast is best' - nutritional and moralistic dimensions - synonymous with 'good mothering' (Lee, 2007; Knaak, 2010)
- Cultural pressure to breastfeed:
  - 'it is the general message that are out there and it is getting stronger as the years go by - you are just expected to breastfeed' (Thomson et al, 2011, p.3)
- Murphy (1999) "moral minefield" an "accountable matter"



I can't speak for every woman of course but some are lazy and just can't be bothered even though they know deep down it's best for their child. (blog – netmums (20/7/14))

## Moral defeasible duty

Dr Fiona Woolard – University of Southampton

# Numbers affected

- Breastfeeding mothers - Komninou et al (2017) 6 times more likely to express guilt / 3 times more likely to feel dissatisfied – supplementation (n=679)
- Formula feeding mothers – Fallon et al (2017) - 67% satisfied with choices... 67% guilt, 68% stigmatised, 76% defend. Intended to EBF, changed sig higher risk for guilt/dissatisfaction (n=609)

# How is shame is experienced and internalised?

- exposure of women's bodies and choices
  - undermining and insufficient support
- language and rules of infant feeding
  - Internalising shame

# Exposure of bodies and 'choices'

*Manhandling and exposure of women's breasts:*

**Embarrassed,  
humiliated**

**Defective –  
can't do IT**

**Withdrawal**



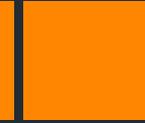
They say they have groups, people can come round and show you, but it's a stranger in your home you don't know, grabbing your breasts, trying to shape them in a certain way to get it into your baby's mouth' (Is that the experience you have had?) Yes that is the experience I had in hospital and at home. It's bloody awful, really embarrassing, I could actually cry (starting to cry). (Annie – Thomson & Dykes, 2010, p.8)

# Exposure of bodies and choices

## Portraying an alternative reality

- “When I went to town for coffee or lunch with my friends, then I breastfed even though I had weaned, because I felt ashamed about using the bottle” (Flacking et al, 2007 p. 2412)
- Expressing to present as a formula feeding mother (BIBS study, Morgan et al, 2015)

# Exposure of bodies and choices



## Public breastfeeding?\*

Hippies – weirdoes - outcasts

Fear of disapproval

Only acceptable if discrete  
(physically and spatially)?

Acceptability of bottles

- 
- Well if there is anything in the media about breastfeeding it is negative. You know somebody has fed somewhere and somebody has said something, or asked them to leave. It's the negative things that are printed, and it's the negative things that I remember. (Katrina, Thomson & Dykes, 2011, p. 10)

### **Daily Mail Readers (September, 2014)**

'Just use a blanket or cover up! Have some respect for the people who don't want the sight of your breast thrust in their face, then everyone's happy'

'If you want to show off your bosoms you are obviously an exhibitionist. No need for it.'

**New mum left in tears after  
being stopped breastfeeding in  
Rugby hospital waiting room  
20<sup>th</sup> March 2014**



**Mother who was breastfeeding her 14-week-old daughter was told to leave the Jobcentre because 'it was against policy' (12<sup>th</sup> November, 2015)**



**Breastfeeding mother is left in tears after being told to cover up or go into the back room of a restaurant to feed her baby boy**

**29<sup>th</sup> March, 2016**



**Distraught breastfeeding mum 'asked to leave church' after being told 'we don't want to make men uncomfortable'**  
**27<sup>th</sup> April, 2017**



# "You Have To Be Covered": Woman Breastfeeding Baby Asked To Leave Pool

12<sup>th</sup> June, 2019



Image posted on Facebook by misty.daugereaux



You shouldn't  
be embarrassed  
to breastfeed  
in public...  
"in a country  
of billboards  
covered in tits"

‘...feel shamed as failures to live up to standards of maternal modesty and asexuality’ (Taylor & Wallace, 2012)





**Furious mother 'squirting her boob' at a woman who told her to move while she was breastfeeding because it was distracting her husband (Daily Mail 5th August, 2016)**

# Exposure of bodies and choices

## Exposure of bottles/formula milk

- *'People make the odd comment like "why are you not breastfeeding", they shouldn't ask questions like that' (Julie, Thomson et al, 2012, p.54)*
- *'I felt so guilty and bad about giving up, but I just couldn't stand the pain. [...] I felt really frowned upon, and made to feel really bad. I was really frightened of saying "I don't want to". I was in fear of telling the midwife' (Kryshia, Thomson et al, 2015, p. 8)*

# Undermining and inadequate 'support'

## *Care on the postnatal ward*

- They wouldn't allow me to cup feed her, so I had to wait for a midwife to be free [. . .]. I did ask as it was distressing that I couldn't feed my child. (Belinda, Thomson et al, 2015, p.8)
- 'It [topping up with a bottle of formula milk] also made me feel very, um, just like a really crap mother, to be honest.....I just felt that I couldn't produce what she was needing' (Caitlin, Williamson et al, 2012, p. 18) – midwives, paediatricians, health visitors.....

# Undermining and inadequate 'support'

And when you're bottle-feeding.....

- *'So when I put him on the formula milk I knew he was getting something..... but when you decide I don't want to do it anymore it seems the support goes out the window. It's breast breast breast breast in the hospital which is good but there should be support for bottle-feeding.....'* (Focus Group 4, Thomson et al, 2011)





I have actually come to the point that we are imposing something on them because some of them really don't want to... because I have actually seen some staff trying hard and no matter what that woman has to breastfeed. (Schmied et al, 2011 - FG 4).

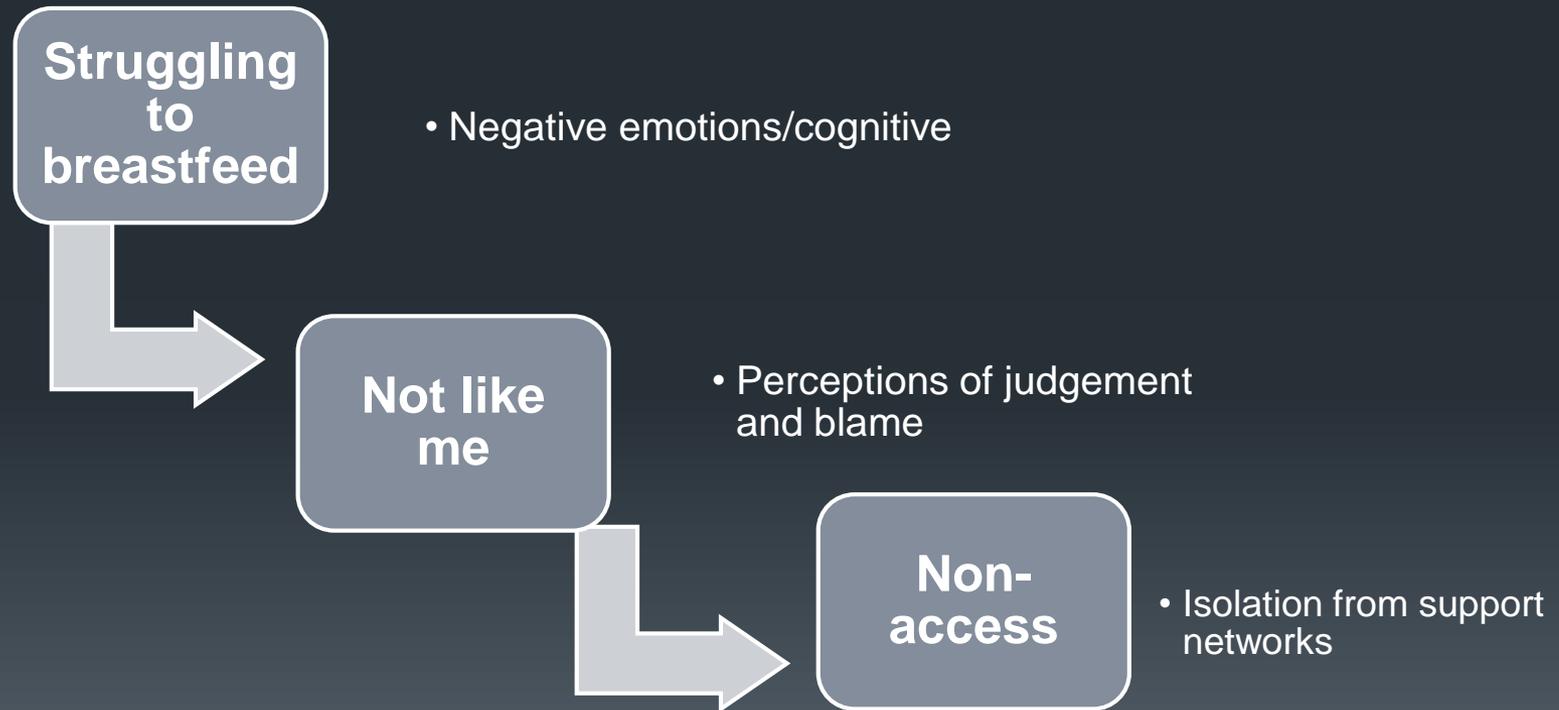
'Breaking the rules' (Furber & Thomson, 2006)

Furber & Thomson, 2006, 2010; Lagan et al, 2014; Lee, 2007; Schmied et al, 2011

# Undermining and inadequate 'support'



Access to peer support breastfeeding groups (Hunt & Thomson, 2017)



# Language/rules of infant feeding

- **Inferiority of formula milk**

‘It was such a hard decision to go onto bottles, cos the way they [voluntary support group] talked about it, it was something that was really, really bad, so then it makes you feel as well that you are almost poisoning them....’  
(Caitlin, Williamson et al, 2012, p. 20)

**Public health campaigns**

# Language/rules of Infant Feeding

## ▪Normal, natural way to feed

'I'm devastated that I can't [breastfeeding] and now I'm a bad mother because I can't do something that is natural. (Ayton et al, 2019)



When reality not as intended 'moral collapse' (Lakshman et al, 2009)

Hoddinott & Pill (1999)

## Language by professionals

- “You have to get a result! There’s no point in sitting there cuddling.”  
(Flacking et al, 2007, p. 2411)

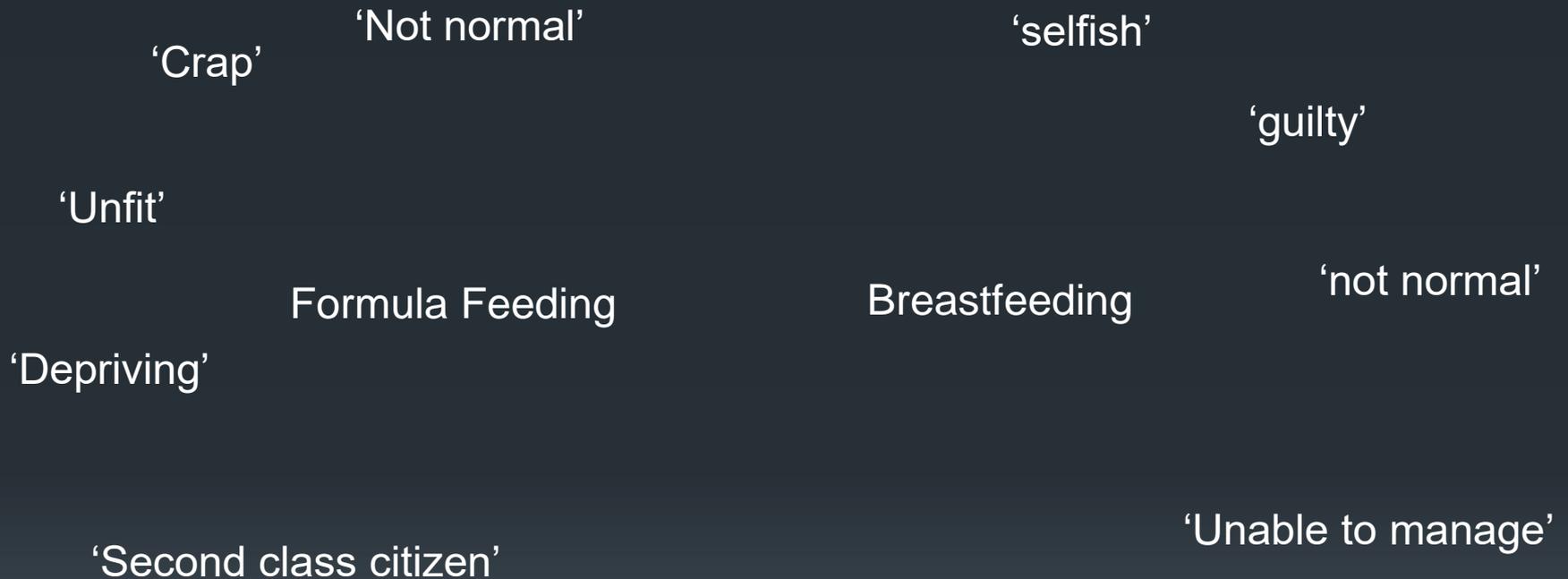
## Needing ‘support’

- ‘I think it was the fact that I didn’t want to appear that I wasn’t coping and I didn’t want people thinking that’ (Lorraine, Thomson et al, 2015, p8-9)

## Rule bound approach

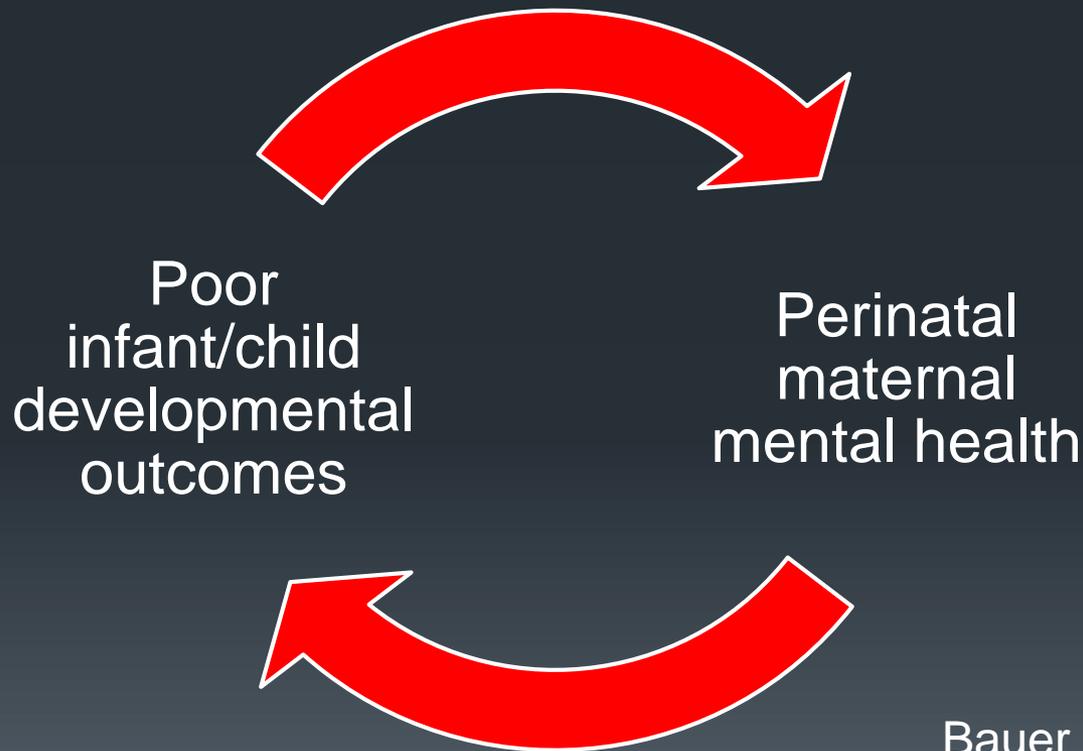
## Length of feeding

# Internalising shame



Thomson & Dykes, 2011; Thomson et al, 2015; Williamson et al, 2012

# Shame – ‘the master emotion of everyday life’



Bauer et al, 2014 – 8.1 billion

# Shame resilience theory (Brown, 2006)

## Empathy:

- non-judgemental – infant feeding v. breastfeeding;
- UNICEF-UK BFHI;
- avoiding emotive language – ‘breast is best’?;

- 
- **Connection:** value of peer support for mutual support/shared experience; addressing cultural attitudes; breastfeeding 'friendly' areas; proactive help
  - **Power:** awareness, freedom and access to choice - informed choice – idealism v's realism (Hoddinott et al, 2013)

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