Managing the dynamics of shame in breastfeeding support

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Question:

What can we learn about supporting breastfeeding women from the literature on shame and shame management?
Shame - the invisible dynamic

Shame is a taboo in Western countries
(Scheff, 1995)
Breastfeeding:

‘Shame if you do, Shame if you don’t’
(Thomson et al, 2015)
When struggling is seen to represent failure or inadequacy…

I just cried and cried and cried ‘cos it was just such a big disappointment I felt like I had failed really, almost as a woman really, you feel like this is a natural thing, why can I not do this?… my baby would die if he was in a country where they didn’t have bottles

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 um, produce what she was needing . . . It just made me feel very inadequate.

Williamson et al (2012)

(See also e.g. Burns et al., 2010; Guyer et al., 2012; Mozingo et al., 2000; Shakespeare et al., 2004; Thomson et al., 2014)
Shame vs guilt:

Negative judgement of self vs negative judgement of behaviour:
‘I’m a bad mother & a failure as a woman’ (shame)
vs
‘I’m not trying hard enough at breastfeeding’ (guilt)

Flaws exposed before the other vs breaching own moral standards:
‘Everyone can see I’m a bad mother & a failure’ (shame)
vs
‘I’m doing something morally wrong by formula-feeding’ (guilt)
Guilt

Self (able)
- Source of hurt
- Intact and capable
- Focus on own actions
  - Wrong doing
  - Putting it right

Other (unable)
- Needful, hurt
- Incapable

(Gilbert et.al,1994; Gilbert, 2003 - adapted from Lewis,1986)
Shame

Self (unable)
- ‘Bad’ self in focal awareness
- Object of scorn, ridicule
- Inferior, smaller, weaker
- Involuntary body response (rage, blush..)
- Functioning poorly (mind blank, desire to hide, paralysed, helpless..)

Other (able)
- Source of scorn, ridicule
- Laughing, rejecting
- Superior, bigger, stronger
- Adult & in control

(Gilbert et.al, 1994; Gilbert, 2003 - adapted from Lewis, 1986)
Shame and the expert gaze

“I didn’t well I didn’t want my baby screaming if nobody else’s baby was screaming I …didn’t want the nurses coming in all the time or the midwives thinking what’s wrong with her (.) she’s not managing very well.”

Leeming et al., 2013
Responding to the threat of shame

Nathanson’s ‘Compass of Shame’:
Scheff & Retzinger: Mutual shaming cycles

1. Exposed as ‘inadequate’
2. Perceived disrespect / insult
3. Humiliation
4. Rage/attack
5. Veiled insult
6. Humiliation
7. Rage/attack
Resisting shame in breastfeeding promotion

Lift focus on *responsibility* of individual mothers to make healthy ‘choice’

Increase emphasis on challenging constraints on women’s *right* to breastfeed
To normalise breastfeeding difficulties or not?

Art work credit: Lucy Scott/Running Press
Shame resilience

Connection

Articulating & acknowledging shame

Rebuilding self

Acceptance, validation, empathy

Normalisation & contextualisation of experiences

Empowerment

Art work credit: Hero-in-shame, Deviantart.com

(Brown, 2006, 2008; Dayal, Weaver & Domene, 2015; Leeming & Boyle, 2013; van Vliet, 2008)
Shame resilience

“Shame needs three things to grow exponentially in our lives: secrecy, silence and judgement”

Brene Brown, 2013