

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Southampton		
Unit of Assessment: 30 Philosophy		
Title of case study: 30-02 Infant Feeding: Guilt and Shame		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: July 2014 – July 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Fiona Woollard Lindsey Porter	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Philosophy Research Fellow	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: September 2010 – present June 2016 – September 2016; October 2017 – April 2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: July 2014 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Professor Fiona Woollard's research on the ethics of infant feeding has reached mothers, health professionals, infant feeding support volunteers and the general public through interactive online resources, professional development/training resources, workshops, and media engagement. It has significantly helped in combating negative feelings about infant feeding decisions that can have serious effects on the wellbeing of vulnerable new mothers and their infants. The research has:

1. Provided mothers with a framework to help them feel better about their feeding experiences and be more sensitive and less judgmental towards others.
2. Enabled health professionals and infant feeding support volunteers to feel more confident in discussing infant feeding decisions and to be more sensitive to the need for non-judgmental support. These influential individuals will interact with thousands of women during their careers.
3. Helped *Alberta Health Services* (the largest provincial health authority in Canada) to develop an inclusive breastfeeding policy.

2. Underpinning research

Woollard's research on ethical issues surrounding infant feeding began in 2015. This research draws on a wider body of research into the philosophy of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood, and Woollard's extensive work on deontological distinctions and self-ownership.

Existing sociological research shows that formula feeding is strongly associated with guilt and shame. At the same time, women who want to breastfeed face shame, particularly surrounding breastfeeding in public. This can have extremely negative effects on the autonomy and well-being of sometimes vulnerable mothers and their infants. Woollard's research shows that this guilt and shame is unwarranted [3.1, 3.2, 3.5]. Her research reveals misunderstandings that implicitly influence the way we think about, talk about, and treat, mothers. She explains (i) how these misunderstandings contribute to unwarranted guilt and shame, (ii) why these feelings persist despite policy changes intended to support all parents in their infant feeding decisions and despite the good intentions of many health workers, and (iii) how judgment surrounding the use of infant formula hinders breastfeeding support [3.6].

Central Research Findings

a) Woollard's distinction between maternal reasons and maternal duties provides a framework to support and encourage breastfeeding and to argue for institutional support for breastfeeding without legitimising guilt and shame for formula feeders [3.1, 3.2, 3.4, 3.5]. Woollard shows that there might be reasons to breastfeed – things that speak in its favour – without these reasons generating duties of the kind that make emotions like guilt or blame appropriate.

b) Woollard's research shows that the moralised context surrounding infant feeding decisions may lead to barriers to providing non-judgmental support. Her research explains why statements that are simply intended to convey information may be heard as negative judgments. It also explains how awareness of this phenomenon should influence communication with pregnant women and mothers [3.2, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6].

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c) Many defenders of breastfeeding argue that breastfeeding should be positioned as the default method of infant feeding in order to fight stigma and improve support for breastfeeding. However, this may lead to descriptions of formula feeding as “harming” or “risking harm”. As these concepts are normatively loaded, this can have serious negative effects on mothers who use formula. Moreover, the descriptive facts do not warrant positioning breastfeeding as the default because the application of defaults is problematic in the context of infant feeding. For both practical and theoretical reasons, we should avoid positioning either feeding method as the default [3.3].

d) Woollard argues that the right to breastfeed can be derived from the right to family life. Moreover, given that women have a right to take part in public life, these rights ground a right to breastfeed in public whether or not one is able to do so discreetly. Current public discourse about infant feeding does not adequately recognise this right [3.5].

3. References to the research

- 3.1 Woollard, Fiona, “Motherhood and Mistakes about Defeasible Duties to Benefit”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2018; 97 (1): 126-149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12355>
- 3.2 Woollard, Fiona, Porter, Lindsey, “Breastfeeding and Defeasible Duties to Benefit”, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 2017;43:515-518. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2016-103833>
- 3.3 Woollard, Fiona, “Should we talk about the benefits of breastfeeding? The significance of the default in representations of infant feeding.” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2018; 44: 756-760. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medethics-2018-104789>
- 3.4 Woollard, Fiona. “Infant Feeding: Changing the Conversation”, *Perspective: NCT’s Journal on preparing parents for birth and early motherhood*. Issue 33, December 2016. https://www.nct.org.uk/sites/default/files/related_documents/Trickey%20H%20et%20al%20Changing%20the%20conversation_0.pdf (3rd article)
- 3.5 Woollard, Fiona, “Requirements to Justify Breastfeeding in Public: A philosophical analysis” *International Breastfeeding Journal*, volume 14, Article number: 26 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13006-019-0217-x>
- 3.6 Woollard, Fiona, “You Don’t Have To: The Duty Mistake, The Justification Trap and Perceived Pressure to Breastfeed”, Gold Lactation Library Presentation, Ethics 2018. <https://www.goldlearning.com/speaker/464/fiona-woollard>. Slides and Handout available on request.

Research funding from the ANU, Templeton Foundation, and the University of Southampton totalling over £30,000.

4. Details of the impact

4.1 Direct impact on mothers

Negative feelings about infant feeding decisions can have serious effects on the wellbeing of vulnerable mothers and their infants. Mothers have engaged with the research both (4.1.1) online and (4.1.2) face-to-face – each is explained, in turn, below. In general, feedback shows that engaging with the research in these ways helped mothers feel better about their feeding experiences, through helping them to articulate and understand their own experiences and to feel less alone. Feedback also shows that mothers felt it would help them to be more sensitive / less judgmental towards others [5.1, 5.4]. Woollard has also received informal feedback indicating a significant personal impact. One mother emailed: “I had a terrible time with breastfeeding last year and it took a huge emotional toll on me, I think largely due to the kinds of assumptions about maternal obligations that are so pervasive in the media, not to mention the NHS... I've had a hard time articulating all of my thoughts and frustrations about this issue, but your article has been a great help.” [5.5].

4.1.1 Field-tested interactive online resources: Feeling Good About How We Feed Our Babies (www.feelingsaboutfeedingbabies.co.uk).

Woollard led a team of researchers from the University of Southampton, the University of Cardiff and representatives from the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) and Breastfeeding Network (BFN) to produce online materials to be used by NCT and BFN practitioners, lactation consultants, midwives, health visitors and mothers to explore feelings surrounding infant feeding. The aim of the resource

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was to tackle common unhelpful ways of talking and thinking about parents' choices about how they feed their babies. It also proposes an alternative framework for thinking and talking about the issue to encourage supportive conversations. The NCT and the BFN are key players on this topic: The NCT is the largest charity for parents in the UK, reaching over 100,000 parents in person each year and over 3 million online, whereas the BFN oversee 800 trained infant feeding support volunteers who help families in the UK with infant feeding.

The resource combines Woollard's ethics research and Heather Trickey's (Cardiff/NCT) social science research, with testimonials from mothers and interactive activities. As project manager, Woollard led the development of this resource. With support from Trickey and psychologists at the University of Southampton, she presented her research to focus groups (April/May 2017), produced text for the resource, and incorporated feedback from Phyll Buchanan (founder member and Director, BFN), Sarah McMullen (Head of Knowledge, NCT), Shereen Fischer (CEO BFN) and others within the infant feeding community. The resulting prototype was tested through an online survey (December 2018 – January 2019), and Woollard made further changes as a result.

The feedback from the prototype study showed that over 80% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the resource was personally useful and 70% agreed or strongly agreed that they will make use of the ideas introduced in their personal life. User comments included "Finally someone understands", "[It helped me to] stop feeling guilt and shame", and "[I] feel positive about this kind of resources [sic] that help to change the narrative of guilt and shame against mothers and certainly will make a difference to our already stressful journey." [5.1]. These evaluations can be extrapolated to indicate the impact of the final version of the website.

The final version of the website was launched in Westminster, at the invitation of Alison Thewliss, MP, at the *All Party Parliamentary Group on Infant Feeding and Inequality* in May 2019. This group is composed of cross-party MPs and a wide range of key stakeholders in infant feeding. The website was also featured on the parenting forum *netmums* [see 5.4 for link]. As of 15th December 2020, there have been over 17,605 unique visits to the website [5.13]. In feedback taken between 30th May 2019 and 30th May 2020, 77% of responses rated the site 5 out of 5, or 'very, very helpful' [5.10]. This suggests that the impact on individuals interacting with the website is comparable to those recorded during the study of the prototype.

4.1.2 Workshops and activities for mothers and Local, National and International Media

Woollard, with other colleagues at the University of Southampton, ran several events aimed either at mothers, or at the public with a focus on mothers: three in-person workshops had a talk on the research followed by general discussion; over four university outreach festivals, she ran activities involving craft and informal discussions of the research (twice in person, once online), delivered an online animation and chat and ran two online panel discussions with Q&A. Over 500 people were reached at these events. Feedback from these events showed that mothers feel that the research helped them to be more sensitive and less judgmental about others' feeding decisions [5.4]. These events also helped Woollard to develop an understanding of how mothers found the research useful, and thereby to develop the online resources above. Woollard also wrote articles and blogs aimed at a general audience for *The Independent*; *Psyche*; and the *Journal of Medical Ethics*. She was interviewed about her work for the BBC Radio 3 *Arts and Ideas* Series; 3CR 855AM Radio in Melbourne, on *TalkSolent* (television) and the *Imperfect Cognition* blog. Her work was discussed in the *Huffington Post* and the *UNICEF* blog [5.4].

4.2 Impact on health professionals and infant feeding support volunteers

The focus group data and interactions with health professionals and infant feeding support volunteers at workshops and conferences showed that many were worried about how to talk to mothers about infant feeding decisions. Significant numbers of these practitioners were also reached through both (4.2.1) a series of engagement events and (4.2.2) formal training resources – each is explained, in turn, below. These groups reported that engaging with the research helped them to be more sensitive to the need for non-judgmental support [5.2, 5.4]. Phyll Buchanan (founder member and Director, BFN) summarised the impact of Woollard's research on practitioners: "You've given us a framework and words for looking more objectively at the influences on infant feeding decisions and the tensions within. Once parents have words to express their feelings it takes the weight off their internal struggles. It can't solve the dilemma, what it does do is reduce the guilt and shame. That is invaluable." [5.6].

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Each of these influential individuals will interact with thousands of women during their career (e.g. a health visitor's recommended caseload is 250 children at any time). This means that changing the actions and attitudes of these groups is likely to have an extremely wide positive impact on mothers by increasing the number of mothers who receive non-judgmental support.

4.2.1 Face-to-face and online workshops and activities

The research was presented and discussed at 7 events that Woollard (co-)organised bringing together midwives, trainee midwives, GPs, health visitors, NCT practitioners, BFN practitioners, policy makers, and academics. Approximately 200 delegates participated in six workshops in Southampton and London, and a seventh workshop hosted online attracted 1,043 unique visitors and 2,188 page views. Woollard was also invited to present her research at many events including the BFN Annual Conference 2016 (to an audience including over 100 BFN counsellors), the European Neonatal Ethics Conference 2019 (to an audience including an estimated 150 neonatal healthcare practitioners), the Western Sydney University Infant Feeding Group Seminar (roughly 15 academics who are also practising midwives, nurses, and infant feeding support volunteers) [5.4]. In total, these workshops and activities reached an estimated 684 people in face-to-face settings and over 1,000 online.

Feedback was gathered from a sample of these events. In each case, a high percentage of respondents indicated that they were likely to use the research in their personal or professional lives: *Breastfeeding Dilemma* 80%; *Breastfeeding and Ethics* 75%; *Taking Pregnancy Seriously* 77%. Participants commented: "This will inform my tutoring and supervision." (BFN Tutor/Supervisor); "As a student midwife I hope to use this broadening of thought to facilitate my understanding/ empathy when working with individual women that I encounter during my hospital placement"; "What was shared by Fiona will inform my own personal approach and 'internal attitude' as I support women." [5.4]. One NCT practitioner and tutor, who attended multiple workshops over a period of several years, said: "Fiona's work on moral duties and breastfeeding opened up ways of looking at the subject, and brought a new language to use when working with parents and my own students" [5.8].

4.2.2 Contributions to accredited professional development resources and training resources

In February 2020, Woollard was contacted by *Gold Lactation* - a virtual education provider for Nurses, Midwives, Doula's, Lactation Consultants and other health care workers who provide care to women, infants and families - asking her to contribute to an international accredited online professional development module for lactation professionals, and as a result they launched a presentation by Woollard in June 2018 [3.6]. The presentation focused on how the moralised context surrounding infant feeding can hinder attempts to provide non-judgmental support and how awareness of this phenomenon should influence communication with pregnant women and mothers. In feedback from the initial cohort of participants, 98% agreed or strongly agreed that "the information presented at this activity was pertinent to my professional needs", while 90% agreed that "The content of this activity contributes valuable information that will assist me in improving patient outcomes." One commented "Very helpful, balancing the need to give information with the desire not to make someone feel guilty has been a constant struggle for me and I have been a lactation consultant for 15 years." [5.2]. *Gold Lactation* also chose Woollard's presentation to be translated into Mandarin as part of a package of training materials selected to be made available to lactation consultants in China. As of April 2020, this presentation has been part of the accredited professional development of 928 lactation consultants in English and around 100 in Mandarin [5.7].

Phyll Buchanan (founder member and Director, BFN) used Woollard's research to revise the BFN's training activity for Neonatal Unit helpers, "Exploring Attitudes to Infant Feeding" to include discussion of the perceived need to justify infant feeding decisions. This training will be given to around 100 volunteers a year, who collectively help many new parents. Sarah Edwards, the BFN Training manager, estimated that they would also use the exercise in training approximately 50 people per year in the community, as the exercise is also part of the BFN's school lesson plans and the First Milk Matters training and she intended to include the updated version in those places as well [5.6].

The *Feeling Good About Feeding Babies* website (4.1.1, above) was also welcomed by health professionals and infant feeding support volunteers as a useful training resource. Woollard and Trickey were asked to write articles on the website for the BFN newsletter, and *Infant: the journal for neonatal and paediatric healthcare professionals* – the most read UK publication on this topic. The BFN also ran a webinar for BFN and NCT practitioners discussing the website and how it might

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feed into practice. BFN CEO, Shereen Fisher, commented: “we think that the Feeling Good website will be a very useful resource for our peer supporters because it helps deepen their understanding of women’s experiences and makes us more aware of the issues that influence infant feeding decisions” [5.9]. As of 15th December 2020, there have been over 17,605 unique visits to the website [5.13].

Woollard’s research formed the basis of two activities in an online *20 hour Breastfeeding Course* produced by *Alberta Health Services* – the largest health authority in Canada – aimed at all health care professionals in Alberta who work with breastfeeding families, including public health and acute care nurses, physicians, midwives, and other health care professionals [5.3, 5.12]. Alberta Health Services produced the activities after engaging with Woollard’s work (see details below) and Woollard helped refine the wording and content. The course launched in August 2020 [5.12; 5.14].

4.3 Development of infant feeding policy

On the basis of her work, *Alberta Health Services* asked Woollard for support in developing their breastfeeding policy. Alberta Health Services are the largest health authority in Canada, delivering health services to around 4.3m people, and 50,000 new mothers per year. In August 2018, a Health Promotion Facilitator at Alberta Health Services contacted Woollard asking for a copy of her research to help them with their provincial breastfeeding policy. This policy issues guidance to all medical professionals in Alberta about breastfeeding, though is used most often by midwives, lactation consultants, and health visitors. Woollard’s work was then shared internally at Alberta Health Services, including with the Early Childhood Manager for their Healthy Children and Families Programme, and this led to Woollard being consulted at length about the policy and how it should be modified in light of the research. Alberta Health Services confirmed via correspondence that Woollard’s research significantly influenced their breastfeeding policy in three key ways [5.3]:

First, it consolidated their choice of language, moving away from discussing the “benefits” of breastfeeding and the “risks” of using formula to more balanced language that discusses the health benefits, considerations, safety issues and health risks associated with each feeding option. Second, it influenced their decision to avoid positioning breastfeeding as a default option, even though in the past this has been perceived as appropriate and even beneficial. Third, it caused them to explicitly acknowledge, within the policy itself, how difficult it is to support informed feeding decisions in a wider context in which mothers are strongly disposed to feel judged for their choices.

Alberta Health Services has also used Woollard’s research in a new worksheet to help parents explore their thoughts, feelings and experiences of infant/child feeding, and to record any questions they have about feeding options [5.11]. This form will then be used to guide discussion with their health care provider about infant feeding. Woollard’s research led to the inclusion of an introduction that explicitly clarifies the role of the health service in this context, and is designed to help reset any expectation of judgment of the sort outlined in Woollard’s research [5.3]. Alberta planned to launch these in early 2020, but the launch has been delayed due to COVID-19.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Evaluation Summary for Feeling Good About Feeding Babies Online Resources Prototypes.

5.2 Gold Lactation Evaluation Summary.

5.3 Emails from Alberta Health Authority representatives.

5.4 Evaluation Report of Public Engagement.

5.5 Email from mother describing how Woollard’s research helped her.

5.6 Messages from Phyll Buchanan (founder member and Director, BFN) regarding the impact of training exercise and overall impact of Woollard’s research on practitioners.

5.7 Email from Gold Lactation confirming how many lactation consultants accessed the resource.

5.8 Testimony from Kathryn Kelly, NCT Antenatal Practitioner and Tutor.

5.9 Email from Shereen Fisher (CEO of BFN).

5.10 Evaluative data from Feeling Good About Feeding Babies Website.

5.11 Alberta Health Service Parent Worksheet Options-for-feeding:

<https://www.healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/app/uploads/2018/11/Options-for-feeding.pdf>

5.12 Activities based on Woollard’s research for Alberta Health Services 20-hour Breastfeeding Course Final Versions Used in Online Content.

5.13 Website and Social Media Analytics December 2020.

5.14 Launch Announcement for Alberta Health Services 20-hour Breastfeeding Course.