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Towards understanding internalised abortion stigma: listening to women's voices

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Research Projects:

- **London Abortion Study**
 - Funded by Government office for London
 - 10 in-depth interviews with young women (14-18)
- **England and Wales Abortion Study**
 - Funded by MSI
 - 36 in-depth interviews with young women (16-24)
 - 16 interviewed twice



Research Projects: Qualitative Secondary analysis

- Original research questions:
 - individual abortion decision-making
 - sexual and contraceptive behaviour
 - abortion experience
 - post-abortion feelings and emotions
- Secondary analysis questions:
 - How did women manage stigma resistance and/or stigma rejection?



Stigma and deviance

- Goffman 1963: Stigma as a discrediting attribute
- Scambler & Hopkins 1986; Scambler & Paoli 2008: distinction between 'enacted' and 'felt' stigma
- Scambler 2009: importance of distinction between stigma and deviance. Stigma invokes 'shame' and deviance invokes 'blame'
- Scambler 2009: stigma and deviance are socially and culturally embedded

Abortion-related stigma and deviance

- Kumar et al 2009: abortion-related stigma – ‘a negative attribute ascribed to women who seek to terminate a pregnancy that marks them, internally or externally, as inferior to the ideal of “womanhood”’
- Cockrill and Nack 2014: abortion can signal multiple transgressions (deviance) – female sexuality; rejection of motherhood; rejection of the maternal
- Major and Gramzow 1999: abortion can be concealed and stigma thus internalised
- All also note the importance of socio-economic and cultural contexts in construction of abortion-related stigma (though under-researched area)

Working definitions

Individual-level abortion stigma:

- felt stigma includes women's assessment of other people's attitudes towards abortion;
- enacted abortion stigma relates to actual experiences of actions that reveal negative attitudes towards abortion
- internalised stigma signifies women's acceptance of negativity associated with abortion;

(Cockrill and Nack 2013; Herek 2009)

Abortion Stigma: 'The shared understanding that abortion is socially and morally unacceptable' (<http://seachangeprogram.org/our-work/abortion-stigma-defined/>)



The abortion studies: internalised abortion stigma?

- What makes a difference?
 - Views of significant others (shared value frameworks and social support)
 - Context of abortion pragmatism - not moral opposition
 - Importance of personal autonomy
 - Non-judgemental attitudes from providers



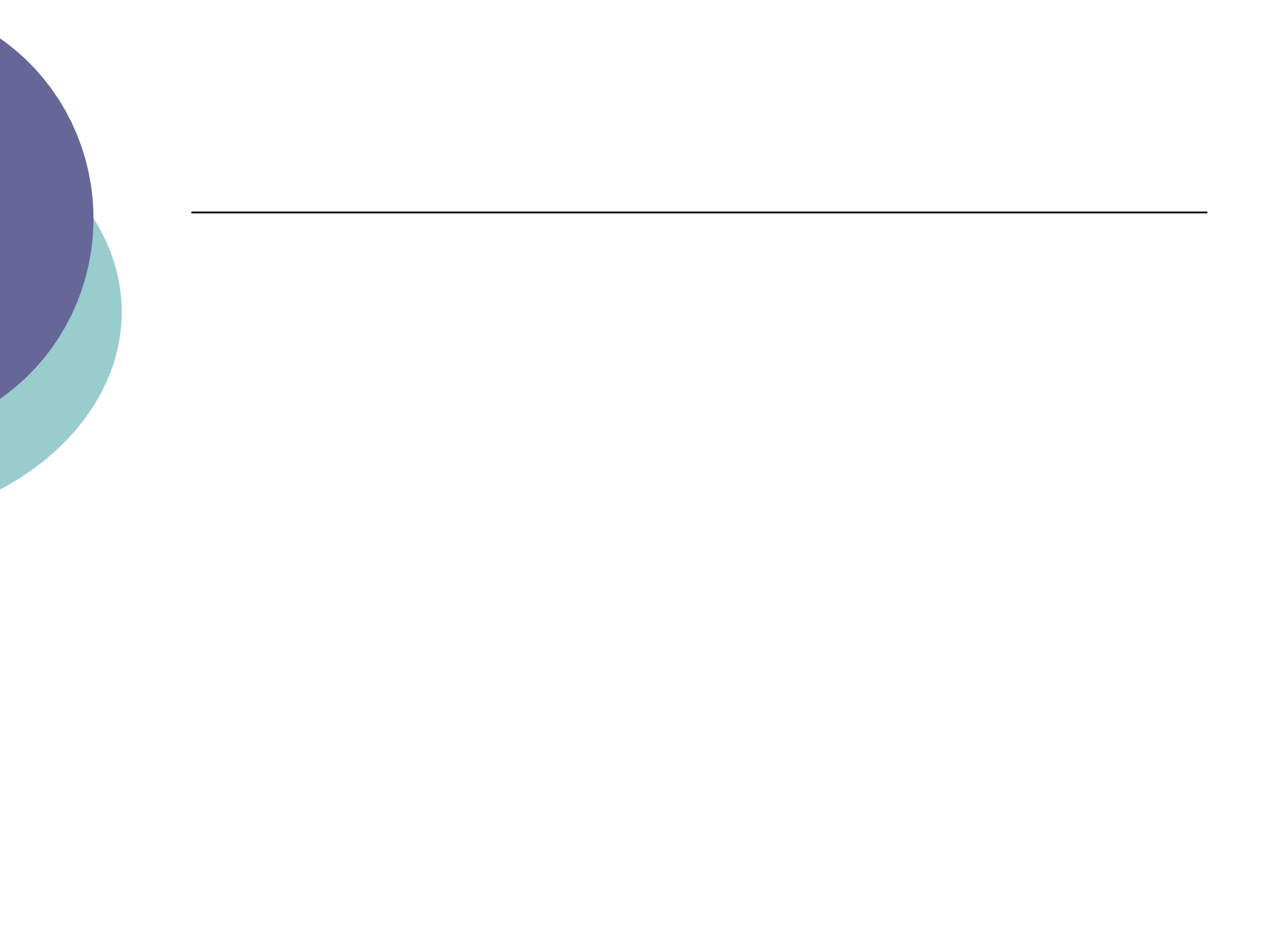
The abortion studies: stigma resistance and rejection

- Stigma resistance: importance of gendered social norms – the ‘good mother’
- Stigma resistance: narratives of sexual responsibility – ‘its not my fault’
 - Contraceptive use
- Stigma rejection: no need for explanations; no sense of abortion as morally wrong; no sense of transgression

- SO stigma was not internalised by all women

Abortion-related Stigma is neither universal nor inevitable

- Women's abortion decision-making, (and post-abortion feelings) indicate the importance of challenging abortion-related stigma
- Towards de-stigmatising abortion(s):
 - Providers/policy-makers should avoid talking about preventing abortion(s)
 - Everyone could help establish the ordinariness of abortion
 - Abortion story-sharing and activism
- Greater understanding of resistance/rejection needed





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