

***The Secret Language of Intimacy:
Releasing the Hidden Power in Couple
Relationships (2008)***
By Robert G. Lee

Is Shame All There Is?

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In *The Secret Language of Intimacy*, Robert Lee offers us the view that *shame and belonging* are the opposite ends of a polarity of intimacy. This book follows his earlier one on the secret language of shame, and forms part of a series of his writings on shame. Lee's theory of intimacy hinges on the role of shame in preventing connection. This volume highlights the importance of emotional safety and connection in couple relationships in overcoming shame, as well in health and happiness. It also offers a variety of experiments to be done in groups, experiments to become aware of how shame prevents intimacy, and experiments to promote intimacy.

Lee's book and his view on the importance of shame as a central process in both individuals and couples have informed and supported my views on the significance of shame and its role in relational aspects of functioning. I have written on shame in individuals and couples, in part inspired by Lee's previous writings and edited texts on the subject (Greenberg 2002; Greenberg and Goldman 2008). Below, I will review Lee's view of the nature and function of



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shame, and especially the effect on intimacy of this most newly considered emotion. Then I will raise the question posed in the title – *Is Shame All There Is?* – in understanding couple intimacy and belonging. I will offer the perspective, based on developments in Emotion-focused couple therapy (Greenberg and Johnson 1988; Greenberg and Goldman 2008), that more than an understanding of the dynamics of shame is needed in order to understand couple conflict. First, I will suggest that attachment related anxiety is crucial in understanding couple connection; in addition, I will propose that, although as Lee demonstrates, shame is important in connection, it often plays a specific and somewhat different role in couple conflict from the one he proposes. I will posit that shame in relationships is even more important in influencing the dynamics of power, influence, and identity validation in couples than in influencing connection and belonging.

Lee informs us that the basic nature of shame is to hide in different ways. With this point I agree. He also proposes that emotions provide a social function, important to the survival of our species; that they provide an instantaneous analysis of the condition of our field; and that shame has to do with the field and the perceived experience that we are not received. With these points I also agree. Lee offers up that, while shame is experienced as information about the self, it is actually information about our perception of the state of the larger field – of others' ability and interest in receiving us. This field view is given as an antidote to an earlier prevailing independence view in Gestalt, and in personality theory more generally, in which health was seen as independence and autonomous functioning, and self-actualization was the main drive. The relational view highlights rather that partners are highly interdependent; that the experience of reception and connection, the experience of being together, promotes health.

Lee then builds his approach on the idea that the experience of shame is the experience that our yearnings are unacceptable – silly, shameful, too much, too little, inappropriate, unthinkable – and that we therefore believe that they will be met with disgust, disdain, contempt, anger, or perhaps, even worse, merely disinterest. Because we believe our yearnings will not be received, we hide them and, as a result, we cannot talk about them directly; ultimately, this leads to conflict in couples. Lee proposes that this leads to the escalating and explosive arguments couples have. As he highlights, these yearnings can come out of nowhere; around such mundane things as on which side of the table the salt- shaker should be placed. From my more general perspective, the non-disclosure of underlying vulnerable feelings leads to the expression of secondary reactive feelings, which leads to defensive/aggressive behaviors (Greenberg and Johnson, 1998). Lee, however, focuses specifically on the underlying feeling of shame which, when unacknowledged, leads

to secondary anger and attack, or secondary fear and withdrawal, and ultimately to disconnection. Here, our views begin to diverge. I think shame does prevent intimacy, but it is not necessarily the source of conflict in the way that he describes. Shame clearly prevents intimacy, and sharing our most private yearnings is a high form of intimacy, but conflict emerges from much more than this, as I hope to show below.

Lee draws on Tomkin's (1963) original views that "the experience of shame is inevitable for any human being insofar as desire outruns fulfillment sufficiently to attenuate interest without destroying it." The function of shame, from this point of view, is essentially one of regulating positive affects. According to Tomkin's theory, the positive affects regulated by shame are those of interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy, combinations of which encapsulate all of our hopes, dreams, and yearnings. From this has emerged the view that shame is about having excitement or yearnings that go unrecognized. In my view, however, this theory of the nature of shame suggests that we are in danger of experiencing it when we do not get the validation of others, which we need in order to support our sense of vitality. Shame, then, is not directly about needing connection in the form of closeness and intimacy. Shame is activated when a sense of being seen and valued for ourselves and our self-experience is not forthcoming from our partners. What we need at these times is confirmation of our identity, and not the security of attachment and connection or intimacy by reception of our yearnings. Shame pulls us back when we do not believe we will be validated, and when we do not have sufficient internal support.

According to Lee, as we have seen, the opposite pole of the experience of not being received is the experience of belonging. From my point of view, the opposite of not being confirmed by the other is deflation of self-esteem. This, in turn, leads to hiding or to reactive rage; this is what disrupts connection. Shame itself is not about needing the closeness of attachment, and it certainly is not a response to not belonging, separation, or distance. Loneliness is the feeling of not belonging. Shame is about feeling not good enough, diminished, small, insignificant, and needing to be validated. What primarily keeps us connected is the anxiety and fear of being alone. Shame (and its opposite pride) is more fundamentally about the self being seen, or not being seen, as acceptable. At its core, it is not about being safely connected but about being confirmed that one is OK. Conflict emerges from shame mainly because we fight to be validated, to have our identities confirmed. Although not being able to share our yearnings produces distance in relationships, it is not, in my view, the major source of conflict, although I agree that it can produce marital dissatisfaction, which makes conflict more likely.

In addition to seeing shame as relating to feeling our yearnings are

unacceptable, I think we need a broader, multifaceted theory of shame to encompass its many different aspects and types. The experience of shame, as we have said, is always an attempt to protect, within a relational context, but it potentially robs us of our identity as we hide. Shame's adaptive function is not to show aspects of ourselves that violate group norms, so that our group deems us acceptable. The function of adaptive shame is ultimately to have us not display that which would make us unacceptable to others, and thereby to maintain our standing or acceptance in the group. Maladaptive shame, however, is a further human development, regressive as it may be, which goes beyond the initial evolutionary adaptive aspect of shame. It results from the internalization of past humiliation in which, having been shamed before, we now feel shame and feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness when our identity, self esteem, and status are challenged or threatened. Thus, people who have experienced being previously shamed, and internalized it as a sense of inferiority, feel maladaptive shame when they are shown up to be wrong, defeated in competition, or criticized or rejected. Shame about the acceptability of our yearning is only one form of shame – one that, as Lee points out, is important in couples – but it is not the only form of shame that plagues us. If, for example, on returning from doing the week's grocery shopping, Jonathan's wife asks, "Did you buy the Kleenex?" he may react with, "Stop criticizing me" if he is shame sensitive. His wife's innocent question has triggered the shame of inadequacy that comes from years of parental criticism. This is not the shame of a hidden yearning, but the shame of feeling inadequate. And when this shame goes unacknowledged, it often leads to anger and attack to protect one's identity

Concern about being seen as worthless operates for people who are vulnerable to self-esteem diminishment and shame at being criticized; this often stems from prior experiences of invalidation, not of abandonment. For example when, as a child, Jonathan engages in some activity and his parents do not recognize his excitement, he may shrink in shame and feel not important; but he will also feel shame from other things, such as when his parents criticize him, or when he becomes distressed and cries and they shame him directly (e.g., "Big boys don't cry"). However he feels shame, he will associate it with his experience and behavior. Shame will attach to his actions or to his experience of distress. He then will automatically experience shame whenever he is criticized or feels distress. Maladaptive shame is associated with a belief that "I am worthless or inadequate," and in addition, as Lee astutely points out, that our underlying yearning is unacceptable.

When people feel criticized or diminished, they then often counterattack and criticize. Thus Jonathan, on being asked about the Kleenex, says such things as, "You are always so critical; you just like to dominate people"; or,

if his wife becomes polite and distant, or sullen, or contemptuous, or gets up and leaves, he may say, "You are just like your mother; I try to be helpful and you just have to control." When the ante is raised, his wife gets a dose of shame and must respond in kind. And thus the situation escalates into more and more shaming, painful, and diminishing exchanges: partners feel more and more shame, and they attempt more and more to distance themselves from their underlying yearnings for validation. But, in my view, they seek validation and not connection in this process.

In a couple relationship, getting this validation may be facilitated by expressing underlying feelings and needs to see if the partner can hear the other. This expression may only involve an underlying yearning; it may be the expression of loneliness, anger, or fear. Or if the partner is not able to hear the other, one will need to find a way to support oneself. Below, I will outline my view of couple conflict more fully.

An Emotion-Focused Therapy View of Couple Conflict

EFT-C essentially is an integration of person-centered, Gestalt and systemic approaches. It was an attempt to integrate a growing understanding of the role of emotion in therapy (Greenberg and Safran, 1987), with an understanding of the role of interaction and communication (Fisch, Weakland, and Segal, 1984; Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967). Emotion is seen fundamentally as telling us if our needs are being met or not met, and providing action tendencies to meet the need. Thus, fear tells we are in danger and need safety, and organizes us for flight; while sadness tells us we are missing or have lost something important to us, need to be close, and organizes us to cry out for the lost object. From systems theory, EFT-C took the importance of focusing on interactional *cycles* that occur between members of a relational system. To this, however, we added that it is through affect and affective tone that intimate partners primarily convey to each other their interactional positions and views of each other. It is this, and what they feel in response to this, that primarily influence how partners view each other, and what they do.

In EFT-C we differentiate among three central groups of emotions: those primarily related to connection and attachment; those primarily related to identity and self-esteem; and those related to liking and warmth. Most important in marital difficulty are problems with emotions related to these sets of needs. Emotion, we will suggest, are more fundamental, more concrete, and more differentiated than motivation; they allow us as therapists to work with them in a more direct manner. Emotions present themselves more experientially than do motives; they are thus more accessible and will provide us with a map of how to work with couples. Therefore, we focus on how

to work with the different sets of felt emotions related to perceived threats to attachment and identity – especially fear, shame, contempt, anger, and sadness; as well as the role of positive emotions such as joy and excitement related to attraction.

In line with developments in affective neuro-science, we view intimate relating as a primary means of **affect regulation** in couples, and see both other-soothing and self-soothing as important processes in couple therapy. Given that we construe affect regulation as the master motive that subsumes both attachment and identity/agency, we suggest that the therapist's main aim is to help couples mutually regulate and self-regulate affect. We thus work on having partners reveal and become responsive to each other's underlying vulnerabilities, and on enhancing their self-regulation of underlying affect and self-soothing.

Motivations

In our view, human beings are primed by evolution to feel pleasant feelings when close to caretakers, and unpleasant ones when unwillingly separated (anxiety). Healthy adult **attachment** involves emotional availability and responsiveness, and security. These are all antidotes essentially to fear and are part of a safety and comfort-seeking system. When this need for comfort becomes unhealthy, a person cannot tolerate separation, clings, flies into a rage, becomes depressed at separation, or is anxious about being close and avoids closeness.

Human beings need connection as well as **recognition**. Battles in which marital partners attempt to settle their differences by gaining dominance over each other have their roots in shaming experiences encountered during earlier years, as far back as childhood and adolescence. People are primed by evolution with shame, humiliation, and pride to be concerned about their **identities, position, and social rank**; and to compete for position, recognition, status, and self-esteem. These emotions are particularly sensitive to how others see us, and to **what others can do (or have done) to us** (e.g., others can be critical or hurtful). Emotions of fear and shame related to diminishment of identity are activated when our status or self-esteem is threatened. Identity needs are thus another important basis of relationships.

If a person's sense of worth, self-esteem, or position is challenged, **identity** is threatened. Challenges to identity are a key concern in couples and can lead to **power and control** struggles. This need becomes unhealthy if threats to identity lead to **coercive dominance** or to **submission**; and response to challenges to identity becomes anger/contempt in order to protect position in the eyes of self and other, or submission. The primary *vulnerable* emotions underlying threats to identity are *shame* at diminishment or invalidation, and

at powerlessness/loss of control; as well as fear from threat to one's standing or control. The primary *assertive* emotion underlying submission of identity is *anger* at boundary violations.

In a field relational view it is not that partners in relationships want autonomy. The struggle is not one between connection and separateness, intimacy and autonomy, but instead that people need both connection and attachment and recognition and identity validation. These are not necessarily in conflict; rather, we need connection, and we need validation. Conflict between partners, on the other hand, arises because of unmet needs. We form a secure sense of self mainly by being securely attached, and we develop a confident sense of self mainly through being seen, recognized, and validated by the other. Both are highly relational. Our self forms at the boundary between self and other and our identity, as Buber (1958) indicates, requires confirmation or validation by the other in an I-Thou relation. You see me, and this confirms that I am here. In addition, Bowlby (1973) points out that we need attachment to feel secure.

Couple conflict therefore comes from threats to both *attachment* and *identity*, and from failures to solve struggles for security and validation. Automatic, amygdala-based, emergency emotions are at the core of threats to identity and security and are key generators of conflict, so that when attachment or identity are threatened people respond automatically with either shame or anxiety. Unable to accept and express these primary, softer, more vulnerable emotions they obscure them; or defend against them with the harder, secondary feelings of anger, disgust, and contempt for the other. Conflict then results from the emotionally activated, escalating interactions sparked by the more protective/defensive harder feelings that rigidify into negative interactional cycles.

The third ingredient important in understanding couples and conflict in EFT-C is the system of attraction, involving passionate or romantic love, excitement, and pleasure. The attachment system that evolved for the purpose of protecting the young and providing security need not also function to produce affectional bonding and intimacy. Nor did the shame system evolve to produce intimacy. Rather attraction, warmth, liking and appreciation of the other seem to be another important, but distinct, set of feelings and motivation, leading to an analysis of the positive emotions involved in intimate relationships. We seek the other for excitement, interest and joy in *who they are*. The stimuli that activate this system act as natural clues for pleasurable, affective response. Intimate relationships are thus pleasurable to the participants and are actively sought after. In fact, the human affectional system can be conceptualized as an evolved reward system, and in extreme forms can lead to problems of addiction and delusion. Witness how we can see

the other as perfect, become addicted to love, and feel rage at abandonment. Passion is often phrased as “I could die for you.”

Conclusion

According to Lee’s view, the job of shame is to pull us back from acting on our yearnings when we perceive that we might not be received. In EFT-C theory, however, we distinguish between needs for connection and needs for identity validation (Greenberg and Goldman, 2008), and see shame as operating more in the domain of identity than in that of attachment. Lee points out that an underlying component of every interaction – particularly in a couple system, where needs and wants are most keen – is our sense of the extent to which connection and belonging are occurring and/or are possible; and, at the same time, of the degree to which we are experiencing or anticipating disconnection anxiety. But is this not shame? Shame occurs when we feel *that our yearnings will not be responded to, or when we feel our identity is threatened.*

Connection, in my view, is based primarily on attachment and separation anxiety, and not on shame. From this perspective, shame operates more in relation to threats to identity in response to self-esteem or status diminishment than to disconnection. It is true that, if one’s self-esteem is threatened and this leads to feeling one is inadequate or worthless, then a fear that others will abandon me often arises. But the fundamental emotional reaction is not abandonment, but the shame of being found to be unacceptable. What one needs most fundamentally from a partner is acceptance or recognition of one’s worth. Then the fear of abandonment is neutralized. The secondary fear of loss of connection stems from a deeper sense of shame at being unacceptable as one is, seen as not fit or inadequate, worthless or a failure.

In addition, in EFT-C we emphasize both other regulation and self-regulation of emotion as important components of couple work. This results in a therapy with a dual focus – a therapy that focuses on other-soothing *and* self-soothing. If soothing by an intimate partner is important in alleviating couple distress (Greenberg and Johnson, 1988), so too is the ability to self-soothe to ensure lasting change (Greenberg and Paivio, 1997; Greenberg, 2002). As Gottman (1997) has shown, the ability to self-soothe is highly important in couple therapy. How individuals are able to regulate their loneliness, fears of abandonment, shame and anger that stem from childhood, emotionally based, relational injuries will affect how they respond to their partners. As research on emotion has developed, it appears that viewing affect regulation as a core motive is useful in helping to understand human behavior and couple interaction in highly observable and concrete terms. Thus, we offer

affect regulation as a core motive; and we look at ways to work in couple therapy with how the relationship regulates a variety of emotions of anger, sadness, fear, shame, and love, and other positive emotions.

So, the secret language of intimacy is illuminated by understanding shame, but more than shame is the need to understand and promote intimacy. Lee's main point that shame about our yearnings prevents us from being ourselves in couples clearly highlights an important process that does hinder intimacy. We cannot achieve intimacy if our shame leads us to hide our yearnings.

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