

## What's Love Got to Do with It? by Thomas Scheff

### Chapter 3. Emotion Language: Flat Earth Beliefs in Modern Societies.

It would appear from the discussion in the Preface that popular songs provide a confusing picture of emotions, especially love and the feeling of being rejected. These kinds of difficulties are not limited to pop songs, but occur equally in the larger society. Especially in the English language, the conventional names used for emotions turn out to be ambiguous, confusing, and in large measure, deceptive. In the spectrum of emotions, there may be no word for one color, too many words for another, and green can mean yellow and purple. Our emotion lexicon seems to conceal more than it reveals.

This chapter will document the problem of emotion ideas in the English language, and suggest a provisional way of overcoming it, new definitions of some of the basic emotions and a theory of the emotional/relational world. With this scheme we will be able to clarify the way in which pop love songs both reveal and conceal emotions.

People who live in modern societies have grown accustomed to thinking that their societies are advanced in every way, that progress is comprehensive and total. In the realms of technology and mastery of the outer world, there are certainly grounds for this belief. Yet there are some areas that are not advanced, or that may even be regressing. The realm of emotions seems to be one of these areas.

The meaning of the emotion names that are used in modern societies seem self-evident to the average person to the point that they are taken for granted. To propose, as this chapter will, that these meanings need to be changed may seem utterly without foundation, as if I were to propose that the sun revolves around the earth. Nevertheless, if we are to make sense of pop love songs, this is the direction that needs to be taken.

The hiding of the emotional world in Western societies begins with the avoidance and disguise of feelings. There seem to be three main lines of defense against emotions:

1. Ignoring them. Most discussions, both in lay and expert language, don't mention emotions. Objects, behavior, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, images, and perception are discussed, but not emotions. This is by far the most prevalent defense. Until recently the social sciences had no sections devoted specifically to the study of emotions. Even after such sections had been established, they remain small enclaves lost among vast numbers of other fields.
2. When emotions are mentioned, as they are beginning to be, the references are usually at so abstract and general a level as to amount to dismissal. The word emotion, and terms like feeling, hurt, anxiety, emotional arousal or upset, refer to such a variety of states as to be almost useless. Just as the idea of "the rational man" in legal discourse leads to a dismissal of the vast domain of irrationality, so the use of highly abstract emotion terms negates the realm of emotions.
3. The final line of defense is that even words that seemingly refer to specific emotions are wildly ambiguous and/or mask one emotion with another. Most of this chapter will be devoted to briefly outlining some of these usages, with specific reference to fear/anxiety, anger, pride,

shame, embarrassment, grief/sadness, and love. The comments on shame and love below are preliminary to full treatments of these emotions in later chapters.

The realm of emotions in the West is beset by an elemental difficulty: the meaning of words that refer to emotion are so ambiguous that we hardly know what we are talking about. Virginia Woolf said it succinctly: “The streets of London have their map; but our passions are uncharted” (Jacob’s Room). Compared to maps of the material world, and the social science of behavior, thoughts, attitudes, perception, and beliefs, the realm of emotions is terra incognita.

Both lay and experts disagree on almost everything about emotions. For example, several studies have pointed out the lack of agreement on which emotions are basic. Ortony et al (1988, p.27) show no agreement on this issue among twelve investigators, some leading experts in the field. Even the number of such emotions, much less the specific emotions, is in contention; the fewest proposed is two, the most, eleven. There is not a single emotion word that shows up on all 12 lists. Plutchick (2003) also shows complete disagreement (see the table of 16 theorists on p. 73).

This disagreement involves emotion words in only one language, English. The comparison of emotion words in different languages opens up a second chaos. Anthropological and linguistic studies suggest that just as the experts disagree on the number and names of the basic emotions, so do languages. Cultural differences in emotion words will be mentioned here, but it is such a major issue that brevity forbids the attention it requires.

There are by now many studies that compare either emotion words or still photos of facial expressions in different languages/cultures, finding mostly similarities. The problem with these studies is that in order to use a quantitative (“scientific”) format, they have focused entirely on the words or still photos themselves, omitting nonverbal and/or contextual elements. But the meaning of emotion words, particularly, is largely dependent on these extra-verbal components. The phrase “I love you” can mean everything or nothing, depending on how it is said, and in what context. Leaving out either nonverbal components (as in Shaver 1992) or contextual ones (as in the still photo studies of facial expressions) invalidates the findings.

In their study of limbic communication, Lewis et al (2000) make a similar observation with respect to formulaic approaches to psychotherapy (p. 184). Applying their idea to the present topic, comparisons of languages that ignore nonverbal and/or contextual components of emotion words will find them “like Reader’s Digests condensed books --- where, by purging the particular, the stories are strangely identical.”

The supply of emotion words in the West, particularly in English, is relatively small. Although English has by far the largest total number of words (some 600,000 and still expanding), yet its emotion lexicon is smaller than other languages, even small languages like Maori. In addition to having a larger emotion lexicon than English, its emotion words are relatively unambiguous and detailed compared to English (Metge 1986).

As indicated above, in Western societies, emotions are seldom even mentioned. Or if mentioned, only abstractly, avoiding specifics. The last stage of defense is that even when

specific emotions are mentioned, usage of these words helps to confirm the emotional status quo. Some examples follow.

**Pride:** This word has two distinct meanings in current usage, one positive, the other negative. The dominant one is negative, as in the Biblical “Pride goeth before the fall.” This usage confounds the positive meaning, authentic or justified pride, with arrogance, egotism or self-centeredness. It is quite possible that negative “pride” might be the opposite of genuine pride, a defense against shame. In order to convey appreciation of pride, it must be modified by an adjective. The word pride alone, the default position in English, is negative.

**Fear/anxiety.** Before Freud, fear meant the emotional signal of physical danger to life or limb, and anxiety was a lesser fear. But after Freud, anxiety became broad enough to include any kind of diffuse or unclear emotion. Current vernacular usage is so enlarged that fear can be used to mask other emotions, especially shame and humiliation. “I fear rejection” has nothing to do with danger of bodily harm. It refers rather to the anticipation of shame or humiliation. (When I first explain this nicety to students, their eyes glaze over.) Anxiety has become an abstract, pliable word like emotion or arousal.

**Love:** in current usage, love is so broad as to include almost any kind of positive feeling, including extremely dysfunctional ones. The title of the mass market hit Women Who Love Too Much illustrates this usage. Women who are so pathologically passive and dependent as to allow their husbands to abuse them and/or their children explain that they don’t leave because they love their husbands too much. Love, a positive word, is used to deny and conceal an alienated relationship that is explosively destructive. Yes this usage is perfectly proper in English.

Current usage also confounds genuine love, which surely means loving someone that we know, warts and all, with infatuation, which deletes warts and any other blemish. Infatuation is an idealized fantasy of another person, often based on appearance alone. In this way, love is used to hide a failure to connect with a real person, i.e, alienation.

**Grief/sadness/distress.** There is a collective misunderstanding in Western societies about the nature of grief, the emotion of loss. Even in societies that maintain collective rituals of mourning, grieving the loss of a close attachment is apt to be lengthy and consuming. But in Western societies the person in mourning is usually given little time. After a few weeks, expressions of grief are not encouraged, if not actively condemned: “get a grip, take a pill, see a shrink.” For most people in modern societies it is almost impossible to understand that a long siege of grief and mourning is often natural and necessary.

**Anger:** the confusion over the meaning of this word seems to be different than any of the above problems. It involves confounding the feeling of anger with acting out anger, that is, confusing emotion and behavior. We don’t confuse the feeling of fear with running away, the feeling of shame with hiding one’s face, or the feeling of grief with crying. But anger is thought to be destructive, even though it is only a feeling.

The feeling of anger is an internal signal, like any other emotion. It is one of the many pain signals that alert us to the state of the world inside and around us. In itself, if it is not acted out, it is instructive, not destructive.

When anger is expressed in verbal form, rather than acted out as screaming or aggression, it can be constructive: "I am angry because..." It explains to self and other where one is, how one is frustrated, and why. Both self and other need to know this information. The confounding of anger expression with acting out can be seen as a way of justifying self acting out, rather than expressing anger, and therefore the prevalence of acting out, as in spousal abuse and road rage. Like the other confounds, this one attempts to justify and conceal the profound alienation between persons when anger is acted out rather than expressed verbally. The former both reflects and generates disconnection, the latter can lead to connection. "Things aren't right in this relationship because..."

Shame: In contrast to the nearly limitless pliability of the word love, current usage of shame in English involves only one meaning, an extremely narrow one: a crisis feeling of intense disgrace. In this usage, a clear distinction is made between embarrassment and shame. Embarrassment can happen to anyone, but shame is conceived as horrible. Embarrassment is speakable, shame is unspeakable. This usage avoids everyday shame such as embarrassment and modesty, and in this way sweeps most shame episodes under the rug.

Other languages, even those in modern societies, treat embarrassment as a milder version of shame. In Spanish, for example, the same word (*vergüenza*) can be used to mean either. Most languages also have an everyday shame that is considered to belong to the shame/embarrassment family. For example, the French *honte*, disgrace shame, as against *pudeur*, which can be translated as modesty, or better yet, a sense of shame. If you ask an English speaker is shame distinct from embarrassment, they will answer with an impassioned yes. A French speaker might ask Which kind of shame?

Comments by several native speakers of German suggest to me that their language is moving toward the English language model of denying everyday shame. They say that in contemporary German, since the word for disgrace shame (*schande*) is seen as old fashioned, the word for everyday shame (*scham*) is being used in its place. This usage is probably making shame less speakable, as in the English language model. A similar phenomenon may be happening with pride. The negative version (*hochmut*) is now seen as old fashioned, so that the positive version (*stolz*) may be confounding a positive feeling with a negative one. I suspect that what current German speakers mean by old fashioned is that *schande* and *hochmut* were staples in Hitler's usage, so are no longer viable. I would like to get more votes on this issue from German speakers, since my own knowledge of modern German is dated.

It seems to me that the language used by emotion experts is no clearer than used by laypersons. Emotion researchers use a wide variety of emotion names: there are many different names used for what seems to be the same emotion, each seemingly connoting a subtle or sometimes a flagrantly different meaning.

One example would be the emotion that is usually called grief in the clinical literature, that follows from loss of an attachment, or anticipation of that loss. There is a very large literatures

on attachment and on child development that use the term distress instead of grief. Distress is much broader than grief since it connotes physical as well as emotional pain, and implies consciousness more than grief.

Silvan Tomkins (1962) seems to have started the use of the word distress rather than grief. In the first three volumes of Affect/Imagery/Consciousness (1962; 1963; 1965; 1992) the word distress is used frequently, with the word grief occurring only on one page (V.2, p. 6). However, in Volume 4 (1992), there is an abrupt change: distress disappears, its place apparently taken by grief.

In the first three volumes it is fairly clear what Tomkins means by distress, because he connects distress to loss and crying. In V. IV, he makes this connection using only the word grief. What happened? As far as I know, there has been no published response to this dramatic change in nomenclature.

The original studies of facial expression of emotion followed Tompkins first usage: neither Ekman and his colleagues nor Izard refer to grief. However, later works, such as Harre and Parrott, refer only to grief, never to distress. Plutchik (2003) also refers only to grief. Others use the word sadness, rather than distress or grief. Volkan (1988, 1997, 2004), one of the leading theorists of conflict, uses an entirely different nomenclature. What I would call unresolved grief, a standard diagnostic category in psychiatry, plays a central role in his work. Yet instead of referring to it, he uses only the phrase “the failure to mourn.” This usage behaviorizes, and therefore disguises, an emotion.

I have found only one explicit discussion of the relationship between distress and grief, in Izard (1977). What he proposed, that distress is the primary affect of which grief is only one ingredient, seems to me the exact opposite of the majority understanding: grief is the primary affect. However, in a recent publication (2004), it is clear that Izard has, like Tomkins, switched terminology. He doesn't switch from distress to grief, as Tomkins did in his 1992 volume, but from distress to sadness. As with Tomkins, there is no explanation of the change.

There are many other emotions words run amok in studies and discussions of emotion. The broad usage of fear and anxiety, referred to above, is one instance. There have been several surveys of the occurrence of specific emotions in populations, but the results are ambiguous. For example, when a subject is asked about his or her anger events, a detailed definition of anger that is inclusive of the cognate emotion words the subjects might use is not offered by the researcher. Without such a definition, however, it is not clear whether the distribution in the population studied that results refers to emotions or to the emotion words that are current. I have noticed for example, that my students often use the term “pissed off” rather than angry, and surprisingly, that some of them do not connect this feeling with anger. These latter students, if asked about their anger events, might reply that they don't have them.

Aaron Lazare told me about a similar experience he had in an actual anger study he did. At one point he was meeting with groups of elderly Jewish women in NYC to investigate their experiences of emotion. When he came to anger, however, each group denied its occurrence. He tried many cognates (irritated, annoyed, etc) , but there was silence until he mentioned “aggravation.” Everyone responded enthusiastically with raised hands and murmurs of recognition. In one group a woman cried out: “Oy gewalt! Have we got aggravation!”

In studies in English in which emotions go undefined, there are likely to be different understandings by researchers, the subject, and readers. We need concepts of emotions so that these different groups will understand each other within and between the three groups.

## Discussion

All of these confusions and limitations help maintain the status quo in the realm of emotions: individualism and the subordination of feeling to thought and behavior. The broad use of the word love, and the narrow meaning of the word shame may be central to this end.

Referring to all kinds of slightly positive or even negative relationships with the positive word love helps disguise the miasma of alienation and disconnection in modern societies. Similarly, defining shame narrowly, as only disgrace shame, helps mask disconnection. Since this latter idea is not obvious, it will be necessary to discuss it further.

Suppose that just as fear signals danger of bodily harm, and grief signals loss, shame signals disconnection. In modern societies, since connecting with others seems to be infrequent, we hide that fact. Instead of saying that we were embarrassed, we say “It was an awkward moment for me” or some such. This particular usage involves a complex maneuver: it was the moment that was awkward (projection), not me that was embarrassed (denial).

In English especially, there is a vast supply of words that can be used as alternatives to the word shame (Retzinger 1995). She lists more than a hundred vernacular codewords that can be used to refer to shame without using the s-word, under six headings:

*Alienated:* rejected, dumped, deserted, etc.

*Confused:* blank, empty, hollow, etc.

*Ridiculous:* foolish, silly, funny, etc.

*inadequate:* powerless, weak, insecure, unworthy, inadequate, etc..

*uncomfortable:* restless, tense, anxious, etc.

*hurt:* offended, upset, wounded, etc.

The use of rejected (“I feel rejected”) and rejection (“I fear rejection”) is particularly prevalent. The name for a behavior (rejecting) that causes shame is used to disguise the underlying emotion.

The broadening use of fear and anxiety seems to be another way of disguising shame. To say that one fears rejection, or to use a term like social anxiety or social fear, is to mask the occurrence of shame and embarrassment. The many variants of dignity and indignity can serve a similar function.

We can also disguise the shameful pain of rejection by masking it with anger or withdrawal and silence. Similarly, the negative version of pride can be used to mask a defense against shame as too much pride. Studies of stigma and of indignities, even though these words signify shame, seldom take note of the underlying emotion, concentrating instead on thoughts and behavior.

Apologies suggest another instance of the masking of shame with another emotion. The ritual formula for an apology in the English language is to say that you are sorry. But the word sorry (grief) serves to mask the more crucial emotion of shame. "I'm ashamed of what I did" is a much more potent apology than the conventional "I'm sorry." (Scheff 1994; Miller 1996).

#### Chart of Emotion Names

Name	Source	Signs
Grief	Loss	Sadness, crying
Fear	Physical Danger	Alarm, shaking and sweating
Anger	Frustration	Intense focus, rapidity of thought and speech
Pride	Attunement (connectedness). Satisfaction	
Shame	Disconnection	Feeling unworthy, alone

Family Love Attunement and attachment Miss the person when they are away.

Romantic love Attunement, attachment and sexual attraction.

This chart will allow us to navigate the language of love in pop songs.

The hiding of emotion is connected with gender differences in the management of emotion. Until quite recently, males were being routinely socialized for achievement in the outer world, women for dealing with the inner world of home and family. This difference was closely connected to industrialization and urbanization: men were usually in the forefront of this change, rather than women. In any event, the result is that men became more dominant over women, the suppression of emotions was reinforced by their domination.

The banishment of emotions from discourse and thought in modern societies both reflects and generates alienation. One way of countering this trend would be to acknowledge emotions, rather than denying them. Rediscovery of the emotion world may be a crucial step in helping us to understand ourselves and our society.

In order to discuss the emotion language in pop songs, we need a spectrum of emotion words different from those that are routinely used in our society. In the absence of agreement among the experts, I will use my own tentative spectrum in order to understand pop love songs, as it is implied above. Note that in this chart the meaning of love is greatly narrowed compared to the vernacular meanings, and the meaning of shame is greatly expanded.

The process of industrialization and urbanization has been influencing spoken English longer than any other language, since industrialization began in England. In this paper I propose that modernization has led to the downplaying of emotions and relationships in spoken English to a

greater degree than in any other language, in favor of emphasis on thought, behavior and individualism. As this process continues, the emotional/relational world seems to be vanishing from awareness in English speaking countries, and to a somewhat lesser degree, in other Western societies.

### Two Key Dimensions of the Emotional/Relational World

Having sorted through some of the problems of emotion terminology, we are now prepared to deal with a theory that links emotions and social relationships. The approach to understanding human emotions and relationships in this book involves two fundamental ideas. With respect to emotions, this idea is framed in terms of degree of distance or involvement. The second idea concerns relationships, the degree of connectedness. As will be noted below, these two ideas are closely related. The idea of distance from emotions will be discussed first.

Drama theory has long held that the degree of emotional distance between audience and the characters is the key feature of all drama. In an earlier book (1979) I further proposed that aesthetic (optimal) distance involves a balance in the audience's perspective, being equally involved and detached from the drama.

When an audience is at optimal distance from the emotions evoked by the drama, it is both highly involved emotionally, but also detached, continually knowing that it is only a drama. This distance allows members of the audience to feel their own emotions freely and with little pain, even grief, fear and shame. With too much involvement, however, persons merely replay the painful part of these emotions. With too little involvement, there are no feelings at all. Without emotions, dramas evoke thoughts but not feelings, and are usually dull or boring.

At optimal distance, one moves rapidly back and forth between involvement and detachment. This movement is usually so rapid that we are not aware of it. We experience feeling and thought simultaneously. As mentioned above, this rapid movement has been named pendulation (Levine 1997).

The idea of optimal distance also provides the basis for a way of considering relationships also. The distancing of emotions discussed above involves internal pendulation, between feeling and emotion and observing ourselves feeling. Yet pendulation also can occur between persons. As discussed in Chapter 5, genuine love involves both unity and separateness between lovers, an optimal distance between them that can be called attunement. The movement back forth between self and other occurs not only in genuine love, but any social relationship. When this kind of relationship occurs between groups, it is called solidarity. The members of each group have a deep understanding with the members of the other group, if only temporarily.

Understanding spoken language requires social pendulation, because vernacular language usage is so fragmented, incomplete, and situational. Most words and phrases have so many possible meanings that we need to take the point of view of the speaker in order to know which of the meanings are being employed. People learn pendulation so early in childhood, and use it so well, they don't realize they are doing it. As mentioned in the last chapter, Cooley wrote that "we live in the minds of others without knowing it."

This chapter has introduced a theory of the close linkage between emotions and social relationship. It will be used below to help understand the ways emotions and relationships are represented in pop songs, and how these ways might be changed in future lyrics.