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### Separating Rope Strands: An Unraveling of Shame in Gay Men

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Separating Rope Strands: An Unraveling of Shame in Gay Men

by

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DISSERTATION

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The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

**SEPARATING ROPE STRANDS:  
AN UNRAVELING OF SHAME IN GAY MEN**

presented on June 30, 2020

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For My Father... With Love and Gratitude.

## Abstract

This theoretical dissertation uses self psychology, Lacanian theory, and neuropsychanalysis to explore shame in gay men and formulate an integrative understanding for how this master affect effects self and psyche for same-sex attracted men. Brief introductions to the theories used are provided with links to existing scholarship that informs theoretical leanings. A scholarly case is made for the significance of understanding the origin and lifecycle of shame, as well the importance of differentiating between early relational trauma shame (understood as an “inside out” experience), and a later, socially informed “outside in” experience. An argument is made for how shame “attaches” to emerging sexuality, and a review of relevant literature is woven throughout the project. Conversations with two shame theorists and reflection on my subjective life experience support the thought process and formulation of the model that emerged.

This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohio Link ETD Center, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>.)

*Keywords:* gay; gay men; self psychology; sexuality; sexual orientation; shame

## Separating Rope Strands: An Unraveling of Shame in Gay Men

### Prologue

Years after I came out of the closet, after marching in dozens of pride parades as an openly gay actor, and after appearing on a number of national radio and television programs to defend equal rights and fight for gay marriage, I took a job working with a group of Christian filmmakers. I was up front about the man I was, about my intentions to build bridges between our communities, and about the imperative that our work never be used to shame young gay people. My employers were up front that they felt God called me to work alongside them, and pledged to stand with me in the face of any backlash we felt as a result of their casting an openly gay man to portray a famous Christian missionary. As our work together proceeded, I became aware that for some, the idea that God called me to work with them meant that they were called to save my soul—to convince me that the savior’s true aim was to see me acknowledge my sexuality as sinful, relinquish homosexuality, and come “home” to God.

As a boy in Catholic school, I remember sitting in the church pews staring up at that beautiful, naked, suffering man; arms outstretched and nailed to planks of wood. I remember the lessons that he suffered for our sins, how he called us to a relationship with him for the good of the whole world, a relationship I desperately wanted. I also remember my friend Michael sitting next to me. I remember how the veins that protruded from his muscled arms called to me as I tried to focus on prayer. I wanted to touch them so badly and I fantasized they were wrapped around me as explored myself in masturbation. I also remember the shame I felt afterwards, the hatred I projected onto my penis, and the crushing awfulness I felt looking at that statue of Jesus after dreaming about Michael.

As my time working on the missionary film wore on, I began to see my co-workers as incredibly loving people with a very real relationship with our creator. These were not the hate-filled others I had come to believe stood in opposition to us during my activist work, and for them I was not the soulless heathen that many of them expected. I watched them love each other, saw them worship and care for one another; I witnessed their happiness and it affected me. In calling me to “salvation” they were doing what they truly believed was the most loving act, yet it hurt me so badly. At night I would sit outside with a close friend who saw how hard it was on me to be the object of their religious fervor, and he would gently remind me of my essential goodness. By the time I returned home I was confused and scared. The shame I thought I had overcome was in my face. What if they were right? What if there was a God and all of this was about my learning something different? I lay in bed at night curled up in a ball crying, begging to understand, praying for an answer. I woke up one day with a singular thought: Find a church I once heard about in Pasadena, California. I had no idea why I couldn’t stop thinking about this place or even where this church actually was. I got in my car and, without knowing where I was going, managed to drive right to it. It happened to be Sunday and services were just beginning. I walked up to the first person I saw and simply said, “My name is Chad and I am new here.” A woman grabbed me by the hand and said, “Come with me.” She sat me down next to an older gentleman, quickly told him I was new and left. This man looked down at me and without asking my name said, “What a lucky day for you to arrive. Today is a very special day here, do you know what today is?”

“No,” I responded.

“Bishop Gene Robinson is here from New Hampshire,” he said, referencing the first openly gay man ever to become a bishop in the history of Christianity. “We are celebrating

inclusion today, we are celebrating diversity,” he said, “At this church we believe God loves everyone the same including gay people, and if you don’t agree with that then this isn’t going to be a very good place for you.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” I managed to utter as tears started streaming down my face, “I’ll be just fine.”

### **An Introduction**

In their searching exploration of shame in gay men, Kaufman and Raphael (1996) wrote, “If we are to effect substantive, lasting change in the personal lives of gay people, then we must begin with a searching inquiry into shame that expands our knowledge of this misunderstood human emotion” (p. 7). I agree, and there is still much to say. Higher levels of shame have predicted a host of outcomes for gay men including anxious attachment styles and relationship difficulties (Brown & Trevelyan, 2010), substance abuse (Cabaj, 2000), sexual compulsivity (Pachankis et al., 2015), mental and physical health disparities (Mereish & Poteat, 2015), posttraumatic stress (Robinson & Rubin, 2015), and depression and anxiety (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003). An integrative model that incorporates biologic structures and functions, shame theory, and the cultural/systemic factors that contribute to the shame lifecycle has not been previously elucidated. This was my primary task as presented here: an emphasis on early shame formation as a key aspect of self. To accomplish this project, a review of existing scientific shame literature, including findings from current neuroscience, was filtered through a lens of Self Psychology (Kohut, 1971; Morrison, 1983; Nathanson, 1987), Lacanian psychoanalytic thought (Lacan, 1991), personal experience, and interviews with two shame theorists whose work spoke directly to me about shame as I experienced it.

This introduction details my journey towards understanding shame in gay men, provides insight into some of the books and theories most influential to that inspiration, and illustrates how and why I came to view the unraveling of shame as critical to wellbeing for gay men. Along the way, I give a basic definition for shame and a framework for the content included in following sections.

### **Why Shame?**

Sometime during the Spring of 2018, I sat down with Eric, a client at the University counseling center where I was working as a trainee. I started seeing Eric the prior semester when he first arrived at college. He had experienced a series of concussions linked to sports injuries and he was hoping to address related sadness and a loss of identity; to better understand who he “really” was and what he wanted to become. Something, maybe it was the tight jeans and perfectly selected shirt, or perhaps it was the glint in Eric’s eye that reflected some mix of recognition, excitement, or shared experience. Something told me Eric was gay. I didn’t push it. I knew that if it were important to our work it would find its way into our shared space, and eventually it did. Eric was not out to his parents and he wasn’t sure he ever could be. His immediate concerns were about always having to be the “Best”—a perfect student, a great athlete, and the perfect son. He couldn’t understand why he performed perfectly during practice only to fall short on race day, especially as his father watched from the sidelines in dismay. I sought supervision around the excitement I felt sitting with Eric, and about when and if to reveal my own sexuality to him. This led to endless theoretical debates around the benefits and risks of self-disclosure that, in retrospect, all seem kind of silly. Somehow, whether we talked about it or not, Eric also just seemed to know something about me. In relatively short order, Eric came out

to me as gay and then to his family; he took some big next steps on the winding, unending journey of self-acceptance and I got to be a fellow traveler on his path.

As I thought about Eric, I often found myself reflecting upon Andrew Tobias' (1973) memoir "The Best Little Boy in the World," a book that meant a lot to me when I was first coming out of the closet. Tobias originally wrote the largely autobiographical book under the pen name John Reid and included this note on the original edition:

This is a book about owning up to one's true identity, yet I have disguised the characters and signed it with a pen name. The characters are disguised to protect their privacy, which I have no right to invade. Using a pen name, though I would rather not, is the least I can do for my parents, who have done a great deal for me. Ideally, of course, it would not be necessary. But, then again, ideally there would be no reason to write a book like this at all. (Tobias, 1973, Chapter Author's Note)

This notion of owning up to one's true identify while protecting parents with a false self struck me as so odd but profound. It seemed to reach far beyond the notion of hiding one's sexuality and into something else, something kind of sad about taking care of others while denying ones own experience. It was a feeling I understood well, and one I had a hunch Eric would too. I recommended the book to Eric and he devoured it. Then one day Eric brought in a tattered copy of another book I was familiar with, Alan Downs' (2012), *The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing up Gay in a Straight Man's World*. Downs' self-help manual is rich with stories of the many gay men he worked with as a therapist in the gay community of Los Angeles. Over the course of the last 15 year with three different editions, *The Velvet Rage* has gained an almost fabled popularity, becoming something of a touchstone for gay men. Eric was ecstatic. The book seemed to allow him access to and framework for an unspeakable something

he felt deep down inside, but for which he had not found words. The book did something similar for me when I first read it a decade earlier. *The Velvet Rage* gave me permission and the words to talk about shame. It is my greatest hope that this contribution continues that conversation.

### **What Is Shame?**

Shame has been defined in many ways: a sickness of the soul (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996), an affective reaction to guilt (Morrison, 1983), or a narcissistic injury (Silverstein, 2007). Shame refers to a felt sense of unworthiness; not that one has done badly (guilt), but that one is inherently bad. Shame as defined here, is certainly felt as affect but it is also an internalized aspect of self that informs affect regulation, thought, and behavior. It is complex and dynamic; a master affect (Morrison & Stolorow, 1997) informing emotion and meaning making. Some theorists have used the terms toxic shame or chronic shame to identify a deeper identity construct that emerges through mutuality, bestows unworthiness, and is capable of “tearing the self from the self” (Bradshaw, 2005, p. 11). It is this deep and often destructive force we are talking about when considering shame in this project.

For many years, at least since the advent of the gay rights movement, to talk about shame for gay men was an anathema to gay pride. Psychologists like Nicolosi (2009) used many of the ideas you find here, such as inadequate mirroring and attachment loss, to falsely correlate shame with homosexuality. They saw same-sex attraction as the product of misattunement and dysregulation rather than shame, and shame became the byproduct of what they saw as pathologic sexuality. To this day, Nicolosi and others use these ideas to push for defunct interventions to repair what they see as the brokenness of gay men, and they point to shame experience as evidence for the correctness of their theories (Schneider, Brown, & Glassgold, 2002). Determined to prove them wrong, many men sought to erase any notions of shame with a

manufactured pride. Pride became the polar opposite of shame, inversely correlated, with the absence of the one necessary in order to fully embody the other. This is a false relationship. Linear models of sexual identity development have proven short-sighted (Johns & Probst, 2004), and only useful when thinking about overt and conscious attitudes, not when considering the deeper constructs and sense of self that are far more complicated than many self-report measures can quantify. It is my assertion that shame often dwells unconsciously in the shadows of the lives of many gay men, and may underscore the attitudes and actions of the most overtly proud among us, for “the mere assertion of gay pride does not undo [shame]; it hides it” (Odets, 2019, p. 73). What dismantles shame is an evolving, conscious understanding and awareness for how shame informs self-concept, behavior, and experience (Friel, 2016), to painstakingly unravel it thread by thread.

In speaking about his book’s title, Downs was quoted as saying:

Velvet rage is the deep and abiding anger that results from growing up in an environment when I learn that who I am as a gay person is unacceptable, perhaps even unlovable... this anger pushes me at times to overcompensate and try and earn love and acceptance by being more, better, beautiful, more sexy — in short, to become something I believe will make me more acceptable and loved. (Flynn & Todd, 2011, para. 4)

*The Velvet Rage* brought a couple of important ideas to the forefront that I continued to explore in this project; it helped make the impacts of social bias and discrimination accessible to gay men like never before, and it moved the timetable of those impacts backwards. Shame was not a just a problem that began when we came out of the closet into a hostile world, it started long before, in the world of adolescence, at a time when we sensed our difference even if we didn’t have the words to name it. But: have we gone back far enough? I argue the timeline for

shame's incursion on gay men's psyche deserves to be pushed back much further, to the very beginning in fact; before sexuality is conscious, perhaps even before a separate self is conscious.

### **Central Questions**

When exploring contemporary and classical self psychology, Lessem (2005) offered this idea: A boy, yearning to have his "specialness affirmed by well-attuned, caring parental figures learns instead that he is seen as not special and therefore feels inferior, unworthy, and flawed" (p. 22). I was immediately captivated by the question of what, exactly, constitutes specialness for a child? If shame does indeed result from misattunement to any significant aspect of the child's affectivity, including sadness, despair, anxiety, and longing (Morrison & Stolorow, 1997), then how does emerging sexual orientation inform that sense of specialness, and how does it get mirrored in a world that does not often reflect minority sexuality? Longing is defined as a yearning desire. It is at the core of narcissism and narcissism, from a self psychology perspective, is an age appropriate preoccupation with self and wellbeing, "a yearning for absolute uniqueness in the eyes of a designated, idealized 'other,' a yearning to be the one that matters most to that designated other" (Morrison, 1986; as cited in Morrison & Stolorow, 1997). What about sexuality as an aspect of unique affectivity akin to, or at the very least, informing affect such as longing? This question and its impacts on shame formation were fundamental to this exploration, and the application of these ideas to the very first months of gay men's lives provides an important contribution to shame theory.

What about those aspects of shame already better studied in a queer context; distal and proximal stressors important to later development such as homophobia, internalized homophobia, marginalization, and gender stereotypes and expectations? How do we account for the impacts of living in a world that may hold our sexual differences as abnormal at best and

disgusting and shameful at worst, regardless of the quality of our early childhoods? As I explored shame theory, two very different ideas emerged: (a) one about the socio-cultural impacts of living in a biased world [see *Shame From the Outside In*], and (b) another more concerned with misattunement to a child's unique subjectivity [see *Shame From the Inside Out*]. I've already mentioned this idea of unraveling shame. When discussing her own attempts to understand deeply toxic shame, Patricia A. DeYoung told me it felt like that "trying to separate out the strands of a rope" (Patricia A. DeYoung, personal communication, January 10, 2020), so deeply woven into the self it presented a seemingly impossible task. Certainly no theory about shame can adequately account for all of the aspects informing and resulting from this complicated emotion, but as my research evolved it became clear that we were talking about two very different but interacting concepts of shame, and each deserved to be explored independently.

Walt Odets (2019) wrote *Out of the Shadows: Reimagining Gay Men's Lives*, a beautiful examination of gay men's psychology over multiple generations with a special emphasis on how the HIV/AIDS pandemic changed his and many other lives. Patricia A. DeYoung's (2015) book, *Understanding and Treating Chronic Shame: A Relational/Neurobiological Approach* looks deeply at the relational origins of shame using constructs I was similarly drawn to in order to understand shame in gay men. Conversations with these clinician-authors helped to encourage and evolve my thinking in innumerable ways that I am forever grateful for. Excerpts from these conversations are included throughout.

### **Fundamental Theory**

Shame is an affect and perspective of self that was largely ignored by early psychoanalysis. Freud (1933) gave little attention to shame; he proposed it was more a feminine characteristic and preferred to focus on guilt as the more relevant byproduct of Oedipal tensions

and conflict (Bradshaw, 2005; Smolen, 2016). It has been suggested that Freud's "sensitivity to shame underscores the conspicuous omission of shame in his theoretical conclusions" (Lansky & Morrison, 2009, p. 22). If this is true, Freud was certainly not alone. Many years passed before the topic was focused on succinctly. Freud's theories centered on the idea that maturity evolved from taming deeply intra-psychic, aggressive and sexual drives. Erikson (1950) and Kohut (1971) however, focused on the notion that self and subjectivity emerged within, and largely as the product of, interpersonal and cultural/historical contexts (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Erikson felt that shame was an insufficiently studied emotion because it was so easily absorbed by guilt. By this, Erikson seemed to point to cultural and linguistic limitations on understanding affect rather than more motivated phenomena—certainly a limiting force for Freud—but also to the more externalized focal point of guilt as the child begins to ambulate and identify with the potentially threatening parent (superego), rather than his own ego ideal (Lynd, 1958).

Erikson tied shame to the anal stage of development, when a sense of basic faith in existence could lead to emerging autonomy as the child begins to stand, move in his world, and control or release what is inside of him during toilet training. The child must be protected from arbitrary experiences of shame and doubt at this time or else he internalizes a sense of being inherently defective (Erikson, 1950). It seems important, if typically unacknowledged, to point out that the negative pole of each of Erikson's stages (mistrust, shame and doubt, guilt, inferiority, role confusion, isolation, stagnation, and despair) are actually elaborations or a reworking of shame extended through development and given wider meaning. Shame is the singular affect most identified with the undesirable result in each crisis, and these "cognitive symbols reflect differences not in affect per se but in *coassemblies* of affect with perceived causes, targets, and consequences" (Kaufman, 1996, p. 9).

Erikson described shame as rage turned against the self, a self that the child attempts to conceal from others, but while other emotions may certainly become woven with shame as we grow and encounter new goals, objectives, and motivations, it is shame that seems most central to identity. It is this sense of shame as tied to self and identity development, regardless whether we understand it as rage turned inward, a sense of defectiveness, or a sense of inadequacy, that seems most important to understanding the significance of shame for gay men. Erikson (1950) wrote that shame was akin to a sense of having exposed oneself prematurely, naked in the eyes of the world. This notion of self-consciousness and objectification becomes important to our emerging understanding of shame as an interpersonal construct for gay men, especially digging deeper to understand mirroring and Lacan's conceptualizations of anxiety through desiring of the Other's desire.

### **Self Psychology**

Kohut's *self psychology* placed relationship and cohesiveness of self at the center of experience. He thought the self could not truly be defined; it was a depth concept that referred to the core of personality—"not knowable from its manifestations" (Kohut, 1977, p. 311) and at the center of a person's initiative and experience. From the earliest moments of life we begin formulating self from experiences with primary caregivers. The self emerges from an interaction between the infant's physiology and temperament, and parental hopes, expectations, and responsiveness—between the baby's innate equipment and the selective responses of his attachment figures, to the baby's selfobject needs (Kohut, 1984).

Kohut viewed relationship and self as fundamentally motivating a person to fulfill his intrinsic design through meeting what he called selfobject needs, fundamental developmental-psychological needs sought in early development, adolescence, and adulthood.

The selfobject concept fundamentally pulled the psychoanalytic view of motivation away from sexual and aggressive drives and towards a far more relational experience that demanded the responsiveness of others. Kohut's concept of the selfobject evolved over time. He first viewed "self-object" as other or representation of other; and then, using an ego psychology framework, he talked about self-object as serving a narcissistic function for the person, as part of the self, but not as a separate person (Kohut, 1971). In later writings he talked of *selfobject* as a function rather than a person, as "that dimension of experience of another person that relates to this person's function in shoring up our self" (Kohut, 1984). Most importantly, Kohut emphasized repeatedly that self should always be talked about in a context of selfobject experience; to talk about self as a separate or discrete entity was misleading. Kohut thought of self as fluid and unbounded, contextualized, changing, and open to influence—ideas that become more important as we explore how shame can become such a fundamental influence for self.

Kohut's model for the nuclear bipolar self emerges in about the second year of life. Basic strivings for recognition and power represent one end of the pole, and guiding ideals emanate from the other. These poles represented developmental selfobject needs for the mirroring of grandiosity (recognition) and the need for an idealized other (guidance and security). A tension arc between the two activates one's basic talents and skills (Kohut, 1971). In later writings Kohut added a third selfobject need for kinship, or alter ego, which he called twinship. The bipolar self became a tripolar striving for mirroring, idealizing, and twinship (Kohut, 1984).

Selfobject, then, refers to primary developmental needs that require relationships and the responsiveness of others, and expands through development to include those objects and people that fundamentally reflect who we are, provide self-esteem, security, or kinship. Kohut came to believe man was dependent upon a selfobject milieu: "From birth to death man lives in a matrix

of selfobjects or selfobject responsiveness” (Lessem, 2005, p. 32). He felt that self-selfobject relationships were the basic nutrient of growth from the beginning to the end of life, and that the ego psychology emphasis on attaining autonomy was impossible for, “a move from dependence (symbiosis) to independence (autonomy) in the psychological sphere is no more possible, let alone desirable, than a corresponding move from a life dependent upon oxygen to a life independent of it in the biological sphere” (Kohut, 1984, p. 47). For Kohut connection and responsiveness of others was tantamount to life and growth.

As mentioned, Kohut identified several selfobject functions that the child must receive from the environment in order to form a cohesive, or integrated, self-concept beyond the first year of life: (a) mirroring, (b) twinship, and (c) idealizing. When the child’s spontaneous emotional and physical expressions are validated through recognition and affirmation (mirroring), the emerging self is affirmed. Kohut also acknowledged a yearning to recognize self in others through longing to belong and identify with them, a selfobject function he called twinship. This is most clearly identified by a child’s need to imitate significant others. Through this twinship function self develops by incorporating that which the child identifies within its environment (Teicholz, 2009). By idealizing a parent or caregiver, the child draws a sense of comfort and safety by holding omnipotence in relation to self. By now the child has learned to differentiate from others and, as opposed to a merged, undifferentiated, narcissistic fantasy of omnipotent union, they comfort themselves by holding an idealized fantasy of others (Kohut, 1971). By fantasizing that dad, for example, is omnipotent and indestructible, I remain safe by staying close to dad.

Kohut saw early, primary narcissism as necessary and appropriate to identity formation. When a young person is provided adequate selfobject functioning through mirroring, twinship,

and idealization, normal grandiose narcissism is transformed through optimal frustration (inevitable striving to acquire selfobject function) into a realistic, and cohesive sense of being complete with “a capacity for empathy with others, a sense of humor about one’s self and the world, and an acceptance of limitations and mortality” (Teicholz, 2009, p. 126). Primary merging becomes the foundation for self whereby security is achieved by internalizing a differentiated sense of oneself through a process that requires empathizing, understanding, and learning from those around us.

When selfobject needs are not sufficiently met, when the child is not responded to empathically or optimal frustration is not provided, aggression and disintegration fragment the polar needs of the grandiose, ambitious, and idealizing self. The otherwise balanced need to be admired and seek comfort from others distorts. This fragmentation often presents as an innate sense of emptiness (at times covered by grandiose self-centeredness), a lack of self, and a continual searching to achieve selfobject function not provided in early life (Kohut, 1977).

Returning to the concept that self does not exist without selfobject, that there is no stable self without recognizing ourselves in the world around us and the others we interact with, self psychology is an inherently relational psychology. The fundamental change process is the re-experiencing of empathic attunement within a real relationship that allows selfobject needs to be met, essentially re-parenting the narcissistically injured self, and allowing the process of transmuted internalization to, once again, fortify a cohesive self through optimal frustration (Kohut, 1977).

### **Jaques Lacan**

Lacan (1901–1981) was not a self psychologist; he had a very different idea about self than Kohut, but the concept of mirroring plays an important role in this exploration of shame and

subjectivity, and Lacan had some interesting things to say about that. Lacan argued that what we think of as identity is actually *imaginary*—a social creation constructed out of reflections in the eyes of others, our culture, and our time and place in history. He called the moment this imaginary self first developed *the Mirror Stage*. Lacan believed that the child exists in psychic unity with all that surrounds it prior to 6–18 months, helpless to coordinate its physical self and unable to differentiate from the world around it. When the infant first becomes aware of herself in a mirror, however, she recognizes a separate self; contained, contiguous, and very much at odds with the child’s emotional experience of unification. In this moment the child is threatened with fragmentation. To resolve the conflict between subjective experience and reflected image, the child identifies with the image, forever separating id from newly formed ego. Lacan imagined this as a moment of excitement for the infant accompanied by a sense of mastery over the conflict and disintegrated self, but it is in this moment when reality is lost. The child begins to identify with an ego-self. She becomes alienated from thoughts, ideas, and impulses that threaten the illusion and organizes to protect herself against these inconsistencies by pushing them into the unconscious (Dor, 1998).

**Other/other.** In Lacan’s formulation, what we identify as self is an imaginary character based on relating to other imaginary characters who are used to gratify ego needs. We are merely the sum of subjective identifications drawn from reflections from others perspectives. Life in the imaginary, where most of us live according to Lacan, “Is experienced in a hall of mirrors, organized around mirages... we strive to be characters we are not, with various intense needs in relation to other characters who, because they are also social creations, also are not” (Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 197). Lacan called this imaginary identity, an accumulation of ego projections and reflections “other,” to contrast it with what he saw as the true, or real, subject; integration

with the unconscious. The little “o” other is also not a true object, however, it is drawn from identifications with objects, or what Lacan called “Other.” The Other transcends the imaginary because it contains that which cannot merely be assimilated through identification, that which cannot just become imaginary “me.” The Other is both other subjects, including the first Other or mother, and is the symbolic order that mediates relationships to other subjects—ideas like language, the law, culture, and social norms. The lifeblood of Other is social constructs developed before birth that cannot be assimilated as subjectivity per se, but fundamentally construct the imaginary ego-self. Little “o” other draws the reflections and projections of Other and they become the DNA for constructing a sense of self (Dor, 1998).

There is already a lot here that seems important to consider when thinking about shame and early life for gay men, but for now it is important just to note that, at least according to Lacan, the sense of self is comprised of social norms; rules for behavior and social constructs, and these most certainly contain gender scripts and sexual proscriptions. But perhaps it was Lacan’s ideas concerning human desire and the “Real” that are most relevant to the subject at hand. In addition to the mirror state, Lacan ground his understanding of the imaginary in a conceptualization of desire. The first person to occupy the place of Other is the mother, and Lacan describes this early state as one of seamless unity as the mother continually gratifies the infant’s needs. With awareness of separateness, however, come the opening of a gap and the birth of desire, by which Lacan meant much more than sexual drives or the satisfaction of needs. Lacan believed desire to be ultimately insatiable, an impossible longing to heal an imaginary separation and once again be in utter and complete unity with mother and essential nature once again. Desire, for Lacan, was existential and persistent; it was a real but impossible quest to return to an original state and fulfill the unfulfillable, “eternally stretching forth towards the

desire for something else” (Lacan, 1977; as cited in Mitchell & Black, 1995, p. 201).

**The real, the imaginary, and anxiety.** For Lacan, the Real was outside language and resisted symbolization absolutely. Lacan defined the Real as the “impossible” because it was impossible to imagine and to integrate into the symbolic. It was this resistance to symbolization that lent the Real its traumatic quality, it was an object of anxiety, something faced with which all attempts to categorize or verbalize fail, the supreme object of anxiety (Lacan, 1991). For Lacan anxiety was about first experiencing desire as “desire of the Other’s desire” (Dor, 1998, p. 182) he believed anxiety stemmed from not being able to know what we really are for the Other. In his Seminar IX (April 4, 1962) Lacan spoke about staring into the eyes of a praying mantis while wearing the mask of a praying mantis. Female mantises are notorious for biting off the heads of their mates after copulation, so we stare into the big eyes before us desperately trying to determine from the reflection if the mask we are wearing is one of male or female. Will we be consumed by the Other’s desire or not? Again, for Lacan, that which we understand as self is entirely imaginary and we walk around in the world desperate to respond to others’ desires based upon how they see us, but we are also looking into the eyes of disguised, imaginary others. I cannot “really” know how others see me and therefore I don’t know who I am. Anxiety was not about misunderstanding other’s desires for us but an over proximity to Other’s desire to begin with. When we don’t have the crutch of the reflected image to lean on and the core belief that the image truly is “me,” then I can’t know what place I have as an object of Other’s desire; I lose my bearing, my reference point, my sense of self (Dor, 1998). This loss sounds a lot like Kohut’s concept of fragmentation in the face of selfobject loss and it is, admittedly, similar except that Lacan would likely counter that there never was a self to begin with, it was and always will be an illusion. Lacan’s conceptualization also strikes close to an understanding of narcissistic

organization (I need to see this reflection to understand who I am), something Kohut strongly tied to the shame experience and many gay men identify with as they strive for validation in the eyes of others. The solution, for Lacan, is not to internalize selfobject function and a cohesive self as Kohut would argue, but to acknowledge deeply that self was all a farce to begin with. Perhaps this is best illustrated by an examination of Lacan's view of childhood phobia.

For Lacan a childhood phobia of spiders, for example, represented an attempt to triangulate or create space between self or other and the overwhelming proximity of Other's desire. Essentially, when we become fixated on fear of spiders, we are managing the far more terrifying prospect of facing the unknowable Realness of not knowing what Other sees, who we are, and how to respond to desire. The child captures in an image (or "image-inary"; the spider) what is too foreign, too terrifying to handle (the Real).

Lacan is suggesting that all that we believe to be "me" is really an imagined cloak drawn from what is deemed socially appropriate and sewn together to protect ourselves from the truth of our desire. He further suggests that anxiety is the product of not truly knowing ourselves but desperately needing to know what others see in order to respond accordingly, an ultimately impossible task. Now I ask you to imagine a core aspect of subjectivity, a deep desire and an emerging sexuality at odds with the Other's desire, at odds with the fabric of social expectation that constitutes a sense of self. I suggest that in many ways shame can replace the word anxiety in Lacan's formulation and provide an insight into a core early gay experience; looking out into the world and seeing little reflected back that supports a key element of the psychic "Real" for pre-gay boys (boys with an essentially gay constitutional self even if conscious gay identity remains hidden to self and others). As DeYoung (2015) offered, "In the thought-scapes our shame-ridden clients inhabit, others are always looking, and our clients see themselves through

these others' eyes" (p. 24). We feel anxious, or perhaps we feel shame, when we sense an expectation in the eyes of Other but we don't know what they truly want or cannot conform to this imagined expectation. We feel shame—we fragment—when we lose selfobject function in the face of a disjointed self-experience.

### **Shame From the Outside In**

Lacan and Kohut invite us into an interpersonal psychology where aspects of self are fundamentally affected by social and interpersonal forces. Odets (2019) wrote:

In itself, being gay is as natural as breathing, and in a society truly accepting of natural diversity, we would accept ourselves as we are, no questions needed or asked. Shame, self-rejection, and self-contempt are feelings imposed from outside, toxic feelings we hear expressed by others and take in. Once internalized, the feelings are a Trojan horse, a gift from the Greeks, a gift that unleashes internal havoc by creating lives that are twisted by a divided self. The "gift" becomes a self. (p. 301)

This section includes a brief overview of distal and proximal socio-cultural forces including minority stress, internalized homophobia and hetero-centrism, and gender roles, norms, and expectations in order to explore some of the many ways that forces and influences from the world around us can inform a more introjected kind of shame experience. Many other concepts could be explored here, including the role that religion plays in an outside in shame experience for gay men. In consideration of focus, religious issues were largely left as an assumptive aspect of cultural shaming with strong Real and Other implications. I was reminded during my conversations with Walt Odets that, despite the tremendous social progress, Western societies have made concerning gay rights, homosexuality still largely goes against a dominant social

order, and “American society is still largely hostile to gay people” (Walt Odets, Ph.D., personal communication, November 26, 2019).

### **Minority Stress and Internalized Homophobia**

The minority stress framework emphasizes the lifelong, accumulated stress associated with holding a stigmatized identity (Sue, 2010). It was developed and validated to explain the positive correlation between disparities in social experience (i.e., the inequity of power, negative bias, and social oppression faced by a marginalized community) and minority mental and physical health (Cochran, Mays, Alegria, Ortega, & Takeuchi, 2007). A minority stress frame has been proposed to understand psychological health disparities in sexual minority communities and shame is often considered to be an important minority stress factor, one that may be the action mechanism by which the experience of minority stress internalizes and harms physical and mental health (Mereish & Poteat, 2015). Minority stress and shame are also closely associated with internalized homophobia.

Internalized homophobia is defined as “the adoption of negative and unhelpful ideas that exist in the broader community toward homosexuality” (Brown & Trevelyan, 2010, p. 268). While the concept includes the assumption of hateful or fearful attitudes toward LGB people by gay or lesbian individuals, internalized homophobia is also about accepting the systemic assumptions for what is normal, good, or deserving of recognition by a hetero-centric society that sees differently gendered couplings as the default for what is “normal” (Pachankis et al., 2015).

### **Relationship to Shame**

A positive relationship has been reported between shame and internalized homophobia and a negative relationship between internalized homophobia and self esteem. The two constructs (internalized homophobia and shame) may combine to impede young people from

obtaining a more cohesive self with shame as the critical pathogenic factor in internalized homophobia (Allen & Oleson, 1999). When children are exposed only to hetero-centric notions of what is normal and acceptable, they are inclined to hide or foreclose on aspects of their own identity when they begin to become conscious of their LGB identity. In fact, gay and lesbian adolescents become adept at learning to hide and hiding oneself has long been understood as a manifestation of shame (Radkowsky & Siegal, 1997). A recent study tested mediators of the relationship between distal variables (discrimination, rejection, and victimization), proximal variables (internalized homophobia, sexual orientation concealment), and psychological distress (depression and anxiety; Mereish & Poteat, 2015). Results indicate that shame, which is strongly correlated to internalized homophobia and identity concealment, was critical to an understanding of how minority stress relates to mental health, particularly in the ways it affects interpersonal relating. Psychological outcomes were “mediated through feelings of shame as well as the indirect associations of shame with poorer relationships with a close peer and the LGBT community, and loneliness” (Mereish & Poteat, 2015, p. 434).

While shame and internalized homophobia are closely related, Downs (2012) proposed that they are distinct in that internalized homophobia denotes fear of being gay, while shame relates more to fear of being unlovable. This understanding implies that internalized homophobia has a precursory relationship to shame—it informs shame. Considering the developmental underpinnings of shame is later discussed in greater detail, it is useful to consider internalized homophobia and minority stress as both fundamental aspects of shame and continuative to its function in the self-object milieu. Internalized homophobia and minority stress may, in fact, sustain the shameful selfobject function in so much as we seek out those objects that reflect and confirm an internal sense of shame.

Theoretically, this notion of shame as sustaining to a shameful selfobject function may offer unique insights into the association seen between shame-proneness and some mental health outcomes for gay men. As previously stated, higher levels of shame and internalized homophobia have predicted anxious attachment styles (Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey, Oram, & Perlman, 2004), lower levels of relationship commitment (Brown & Trevethan, 2010; Greene & Britton, 2015), and compulsive sexuality (Pachankis et al., 2015). When discussing the kind of empathic failure essential to a relational understanding of shame, Kohut (1984) wrote “Instead of further development of a firmly cohesive self able to feel the glow of healthy pleasure in its affectionate and phase-appropriate sexual functioning...we find a continuing propensity to experience the fragments of love (sexual phantasies) rather than love” (p. 23).

Gay people struggling with sexual compulsivity report that shame often feels like a compulsion in itself, something hated but somehow irresistible. They speak of being unable to imagine sex as healthful, and life enhancing; if it doesn't feel shameful, it doesn't feel sexual (International Service Organization, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous [SCA], 1991). As Kaufman & Raphael (1996) put it:

A degrading sexual encounter actually permits the displaced expression of humiliation. We learn to crave sex if that is the only arena in which we can express certain affects, like shame, that are actually triggered elsewhere but blocked from expression where they originate. In this particular form of addiction to sex, the cycle is maintained by the intolerable intensification of shame that has been suppressed and that must find an outlet somewhere. Shame is displaced into sex and we, in effect, bathe in it. (p. 220)

Contemporary Self Psychology has developed as a highly relational field whereby self is understood more as a construction promoted and sustained by a nearly unlimited number of

interpersonal self object relationships. What I am suggesting is that with a shame-informed self we seek out selfobject function that maintains shame providing, in essence, a shameful selfobject function that is continuative and regulating—a homeostatic return to a place of familiarity if not necessarily congruence—and without which we risk fragmentation.

Given the implications that a shameful selfobject function may have on mental health and maladaptive behavior for gay men, this topic alone could consume the remainder of this exploration, but it is not my primary focus. Some important seeds can be drawn from these ideas that are important to take note of here, however, for they bear fruit later in the conversation as I continue to model the shame lifecycle for gay men: The notion that (a) gay men report feeling that shame memories are more central to their self-identity than heterosexuals (Matos, Carvalho, Cunha, Galhardo, & Sepodes, 2017), (b) shame has become a well known risk factor for self destructive behaviors for gay men (McDermott, Roen, & Scourfield, 2008), and (c) inadequate sensitivity to a child's unique subjectivity is at the root of later selfobject difficulties emerging from sexual expression (Lichtenberg, 2008).

### **Gender Roles**

Another aspect of hetero-centricity that deserves consideration for its implications on the introjection of shame is social norms based upon gender. By their very nature men who have sex with men are gender-role transgressors. While certainly not requisite, violating gender norms can unleash a sense of shame and self-devaluation (Bepko & Johnson, 2000) or make gay men the target for cultural shaming. How gay men react to this violation differs dramatically. While some push against hyper-masculine, socially, culturally, or religiously codified expressions of maleness, others become highly sensitive to any implication of gender-role incompetence. Theorists have argued that this sensitivity promotes the development of a false, public self that

gay boys believe will be more acceptable to others, including parents and loved ones (Greenan & Tunnell, 2003). In relationships, this may lead to role inflexibility, defensiveness, and lack of emotional authenticity, but this seems to be particularly true for men that strictly adhere to normative gender scripts. For those with greater flexibility, male couples have shown higher rates of cohesion than heterosexual couples (Bepko & Johnson, 2000).

Issues surrounding gender roles and their impacts on relationship are not unique to gay men, what is unique is the degree to which they use those roles to defend against shame, and hide a more authentic emotional self (Greenan & Tunnell, 2003). In my conversations with DeYoung, she reported feeling as though her subjective shame experience was more about gender non-conformity than her emerging “queer” sexuality. When asked to consider gay male sexuality and gender, DeYoung felt it certainly might be different for men than for women, that perhaps men don’t have gender issues to work out in quite the same way as women, She acknowledged what she saw as massive gendered expectations for men around sex and sexuality (Patricia A. DeYoung, personal communication, January 10, 2020).

Among the many messages gay men receive as a result of more toxic male gender expectations is the notion that sex should be stripped of emotionality. To see sex as a vulnerable act of connection is often considered both shameful and feminine, as if to be more feminine is inherently shameful. In my conversation with Walt Odets we reflected on the notion that many straight men tend to obsess about gay sex and receptive anal penetration in particular. They make jokes about anal sex and use it to denigrate and shame other men. Odets felt this reflected fear on the part of many straight men that, in reality, find it frightening because they often recognize unconscious feelings that fly in the face of dominate gender expectations. Gender norms are a constantly evolving concept that are beginning to change in modern culture, and so too are

gendered associations for men and anal pleasure (Branfman & Stiritz, 2012), but there remains an aligning of the sex act most closely identified with gay sexuality with the feminine and the derogatory. In his many years of doing therapy with gay men, Odets felt that, “those who have been with women sexually have a better understanding of sex as an emotional expression,” (Walt Odets, Ph.D., personal communication, November 26, 2019). I concur, and I would emphasize this as reflective of the power that toxic male gender expectations can have on the experience of sex, sexuality, and shame for gay men

### **Shame from the Inside Out**

My primary task remains to answer the proposed question regarding the impact of emerging sexuality on developing self and shame by laying out a theoretical model consisting of a constitutional self, establishing a timetable for self consciousness, shame formation, and emerging sexuality; and taking a closer look at the function of mirroring and idealizing as it relates to identity and shame development.

Shame has been described as a “primary social emotion” with massive implications for brain development, attachment processes, and emotion regulation beginning at 14-16 months old if not earlier (Schoore, 2003). As such, this section examines the origins of shame from the very beginning. Using a neuropsychanalytic, structure/function framework, I explored brain structures and biologic mechanisms relevant to the shame experience and gay men, and then fold these in with a better understanding of how this informs the functional aspects of attachment, emotion regulation, psychic functioning, and formation of self—concepts especially important to the emerging understanding that is presented later.

What I remember feeling most confused about during the time of my life considered in the preface of this project, when I came face to face with a shame I did not understand was:

Why? How was it possible that after years of pride, of standing up with gay brothers and sisters and feeling genuinely proud of the good we were doing in the world, shame still felt so overwhelming in the face of people I barely knew—as if it was a part of me I had successfully ignored for a time but could never fully separate from. We are reminded that shame is rooted beyond conscious reach and informs psychic reality from a world beyond language and subjective narrative (Odets, 2019). To better understand it then, a framework that can account for deep psychic processes over time is needed.

### **Constitutional Self**

Neuropsychanalysis links models for psychoanalytic and brain development to relate neurologic and psychic development into a cohesive structure-function principle whereby changes in brain structures and psychic function go hand-in-hand. The neuropsychanalytic model holds that biologic structures and functions are programmed by interpersonal experiences resulting in development of the psyche in the first five years of life (Schore, 2003). The constitutional self is “comprised of inborn personality characteristics including sexual identity, constitutional developmental capacities, as well as genetic risk factors for the development of psychopathology” (Stortelder, 2014, p. 2). The constitutional self is where biology meets Kohut’s selfobject function, where predisposition interacts with the environment to socio-culturally construct personality and sexual identity. This process lays the groundwork for psychic functioning throughout the lifespan with a substantial reorganization during adolescence (Stortelder & Ploegmakers-Burg, 2010).

The process of identity development proposed for gay men begins with a neurologically based constitutional self that consists of gene expression, neurochemical, and brain development (Stortelder, 2014). The heredity of sexual orientation is thought to be multiply determined by

several different genes acting in concert from a single carrier. A search for homosexual genes isolated the Xq28 gene, transmitted on the maternal side (Hamer, 1994). Hamer's findings were never replicated, though they took on an almost permanent place in scientific lore, and continue to be referenced throughout academic, popular, and cultural literature. That fact may, in and of itself, reflect the gay communities' reactance to cultural shaming with a need to legitimize its existence by referencing a biologic basis (O'Riordan, 2012). The presence of a gay gene is now widely questioned, however, with some researchers firmly convinced that Hamer mistook a simple fecundity effect for a maternal line effect (McKnight, 2000). Hamer's research did push forward familial research on sexuality differences, and it is important to remember that biologically based behavior need not be genetically based. The Prenatal Androgen Theory postulates that male homosexuality is due to variations in levels of prenatal androgens in the second half of pregnancy, when brain development is masculinized determining gender identity, gender-role behavior, and sexual identity (Stortelder, 2014, p. 2). Considerable evidence suggests subtle differences in the brains of gay men when compared to their straight counterparts (McKnight, 2000) including size and structural variations of the hypothalamus, which regulates psychosexual functioning (LeVay, 1991). While it is tempting to attribute causality to physiological differences, variation in brain anatomy may just as well be the result of common environmental or social factors. When one reviews all of the available research "it seems probable that a majority of observable structural differences are the result of hormonal influences deriving in part from environmental and genetic sources, yet also in small part due to social influences – including behavior" (McKnight, 2000, p. 226). What seems important to conclude for our purposes as we examine shame and emergence of self, is that the idea of a constitutional self comprised of a biologically and socially informed sexual identity is well supported, and this

became increasingly significant as I explored the need for adequate mirroring of that constitutional self in the first years of life.

### **Structure**

Even as I consider the dynamic quality of my own shame and pride experience today, it can feel as though I am of two very different minds—a logical knowing that I am not ashamed of my sexuality held alongside an adult experience with this highly fragmenting sense of self. When shame is internalized it interacts psychosocially and informs how and what we attend to in the world around us. The kind of attention we bring to the world actually alters the nature of the world we attend to (McGilchrist, 2019) by altering what comes into being for us. In this sense, how we attend to the world is akin to how we make meaning of and actually create our reality. When we consider the brain, we must consider two very different ways of attending to the world.

**Hemispheric specialization.** Hemispheric lateralization, or the specialized functioning of the two hemispheres of the brain, would matter little if all we considered was functionality or what parts of our brain contribute to specific behaviors. Efforts to pigeonhole the two sides of our brain in terms of strict functioning have proven shortsighted. Most behavior once proposed to be isolated to a given region or hemisphere, be it language, visualization, sensation, and many others, are served by both hemispheres. Important contributions from the right and left brain enter into virtually every neurologic function including notions of self (Lezak, Howieson, Bigler, & Tranel, 2012). If we look at the brain, not for what it does but for *what manner it does those things*, important differences begin to emerge (McGilchrist, 2019) which hold implications for the study of shame.

Right-brain language is fundamentally the language of emotion expressed body-to-body, in quality of eye contact and voice tone, in rhythms of response and modulated

intensities, in overt gestures and subtle body language. The right brain “hears the music, not the words, of what passes between people” (DeYoung, 2015, p. 37). Research has shown that birds, for example, maintain a narrowly focused kind of attention to what they are eating with their left-hemisphere-dominated right eye, while keeping their left eye open for predators; open to sensing danger and an experience of threat. Many animals use their left eye to form bonds with others of their kind and this difference seems to have been preserved as mammals evolved. The left hemisphere specializes in a kind of detailed attention allowing us to make use of the world, while the right maintains a kind of open attention that enables us to see ourselves connected to others, and allows us to empathize with them (McGilchrist, 2019). The right brain is the seat of passion, creativity, imagery, primary process thinking, and unconscious process (Siegel, 2012); it can also be the site of massive dissociation from emotional and attachment stress—from whatever is too painful to know viscerally and emotionally (DeYoung, 2015). Right-brain processes were important to focus on when I considered the impacts of shame.

**The limbic brain.** The limbic area includes the specific regions of the hippocampus and the amygdala that reside in the medial temporal lobe on both sides of the brain. Some studies suggest that the right limbic region takes in data from the body more fully than the left. It is interesting to note that the left hippocampus helps to process a kind of explicit memory called semantic memory and deals more with specific objective facts, while the right hippocampus helps to process the episodic or autobiographical forms of explicit memory. The right brain can be seen as the processor of bodily input about the self, and the left brain seems more directly attuned to assessing and remembering details of the outside world (Lezak et al., 2012). As we evolved as mammals, the limbic area of the brain enabled us to build more complex functions that more primitive structures would not allow. One implication of this fact is that the limbic area

is an interface between the more impulsive or “primitive” brainstem and the higher, often more rational, cortex. Integration in the brain, resulting from adequate attunement and internalization of affect regulation systems, discussed in greater detail later, would honor the differences in these regions and promote their linkage through collaboration rather than internal warfare (Siegel, 2012).

While much has been learned from functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) as it relates to adolescent brain development and the experience of guilt, far less research has been devoted to the neurological correlates of shame. Two studies have found shame to be associated with activation of the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and posterior cingulate cortex (PCC). The limbic ACC has a direct role in governing attention, noticing body states, and it influences emotion regulation and social cognition (Siegel, 2012).

A 2015 study used self-report measures of interpersonal guilt and shame-proneness and structural magnetic resonance imaging (sMRI) to find that higher levels of shame-proneness among 60 participants aged 15–25 were associated with thinner PCC thickness and smaller amygdala volume. Amygdala damage seems to promote a taming effect whereby those afflicted cannot distinguish between emotionally meaningful stimuli and present as minimally spontaneous, uncreative, and apathetic (Lezak et al., 2012). The PCC has also been firmly linked to emotional salience. It has been hypothesized that the emotional importance of autobiographical memories may contribute to the strength and consistency of activity in the PCC upon successful recollection of these memories. The PCC is bilaterally activated by emotional stimuli, independent of valence (positive or negative). This is in contrast to other structures in the limbic system, such as the amygdala, which responded disproportionately to negative stimuli.

This supports the hypothesis that the PCC mediates interactions between emotion and memory, and is involved in retrieving autobiographical, “self” memory. The PCC is involved in self-reflection, particularly in relation to an outward-directed, social focus. These findings might reflect an association between shame-proneness and other such functions, consistent with the suggestion that shame is particularly associated with self-reflection in social contexts (Whittle, Liu, Bastin, Harrison, & Davey, 2016). Acknowledging the limitations of what brain scan results can tell us in terms of function, it is important to note that at least one implication of this research is that the parts of the brain affected by shame are those most directly related to an assessment of self in an interpersonal context.

**Frontal cortex.** There is a thinking part of the emotional brain. The right orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) integrates emotion with ideas and thoughts, and integrates affective information with the selection of actions to take. According to Schore (2003), the major debilitating impact of emotional/relational trauma is on the right brain-implicit self-system. The right hemisphere sense of self is much more dependent upon affectively toned, non-verbal information received from many body/brain sources. In states of dissociation due to emotional trauma (shame), this is the structure not well developed and not well integrated with its cortical and subcortical connections.

Higher levels of shame-proneness have been associated with attenuated age-related reductions in thickness of lateral orbitofrontal cortex (lOFC), these findings are consistent with a growing body of evidence showing that accelerated cortical thinning during adolescence may be associated with socio-emotional functioning (Whittle et al., 2016). To be certain, the cortex is highly molded by experience across the lifespan. We are continually shaping our cortical architecture—not only in childhood and adolescence but also throughout our lives. Family

experience influences our cortical development and may play a part in how attachment relationships shape many aspects of our functioning including emotion regulation and our narrative self-understanding. When in empathic attunement, the brain of a mother and her child are changing (Siegel, 2012), and the growth of IOFC is contingent upon relational experience (Schore, 2003). The OFC “depends on the attunement of parents. If parents are unresponsive or abusive, the child is left with a deficit in the ability to regulate the length, intensity, or frequency of distressing emotions like anger, terror, or shame” (Jordan, 2009, p. 76).

### **Function**

I have established biological roots for the existence of a constitutional self comprised of and influenced by an emerging (or pre-gay) sexual identity. I have also established the origins of shame as an interpersonal process that both influences and is affected by brain development. Now, a closer look at the functional implications of these neurologic assertions and the idea that shame is the byproduct of compromised affect regulation resulting from emotional misattunement, unresponsiveness, or inadequate stimulation by primary caregivers (Lessem, 2005; Morrison & Stolorow, 1997).

Schore (2003) speaks about shame as the product of misattunement, a hyperactive physiological state that represents a sudden shift from high arousal to a negative, low arousal state brought on when something is essentially wrong with presence at a time when a child needs a particular kind of response. In a good-enough parenting environment, shame is modulated and metabolized when a parent notices disconnected distress and re-establishes attuned presence. The child becomes able to internalize the parent’s capacity to recognize, tolerate, and regulate the child’s shame and narcissistic stress (Schore, 2003). In many ways this reflects Kohut’s conceptualization of optimal frustration, the process that helps to bring about a transmuted

internalization of coping skills and affect regulation. This transmutation leads to a balanced self that finds equilibrium between narcissistic striving and idealization, validation seeking and disempowerment (Kohut, 1984).

**Attachment and affect regulation.** If the cortical and subcortical structures so highly affected by misattunement and shame are those most directly responsible for self-understanding in a social context, the implication for gay men is that higher shame vulnerability may equate to a higher level of vulnerability to relational and affect management difficulties. A closer look at those processes from a functional perspective is warranted. Siegel (2012) describes attachment as “an inborn system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence and organize motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant caregiving figures” and adds that “attachment establishes an interpersonal relationship that helps the immature brain use the mature functions of the parent’s brain to organize its own processes” (p. 67). We are not born with the capacity to regulate our own emotions; this is learned as our brain develops. As Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, and Target (2002) wrote:

A dyadic regulatory system evolves where the infant’s signals of moment-to-moment changes in his state are understood and responded to by the caregiver, thereby achieving their regulation. The infant learns that arousal in the presence of the caregiver will not lead to disorganization beyond his coping capabilities... In states of uncontrollable arousal, the infant will come to seek physical proximity to the caregiver in the hope of soothing and the recovery of homeostasis. (p. 37)

These early interactions between the baby and their caregiver are critical to brain development; they shape the architecture of the growing brain, stimulating the activation and growth of integrative fibers that enable coordination and balance of the nervous system. This

balance is the essence of self-regulation; therefore emotional balance is dependent upon adequate mirroring of the child's affective state and unique subjectivity in order to develop a balanced and cohesive self (Siegel, 2012). This bears repeating. We have come up against the notion that healthy brain development and affect regulation is dependent upon an interpersonal context capable of adequately mirroring unique aspects of self. Our central question concerns the emerging self and unique subjectivity of gay men looking for mirroring from a context that might reflect back difference or rejection. Shame is the product of that distorted reflection. Broucek (1991) tied shame to attachment strategies and neuroscience when he noted that: "According to Lewis, 'Vicarious emotional experience is the foundation of attachment on both sides...Shame is the empathic or vicarious experience of the other's rejection of the self'" (p. 21).

While it is certainly interesting to consider the impact of fragmentation or rejection of self from the object or Other perspective (i.e., when a parent approaches attunement from a place of their own subjective self rejection), for the purpose at hand it is most important to consider Lewis' statement from the point of view of the child who, oblivious to any intersubjective or relational process, senses that his parent fundamentally rejects him. This is discussed in greater detail as my model became more fully flushed out, but it is the moment when shame becomes capable of "attaching" to self and sexuality.

Schore (2003) speaks of transmuting optimal parenting into a "self-regulatory ego ideal," and he specifically links this to development of right-brain functionality. Right-brain ego ideal is one part of super ego, the part of the mind that performs a self-critical function. The other part of super ego, conscience, he links with the left-brain and notes that it is dependent more upon social standards learned from parents, teachers, and environmental inputs (Schore, 2003). This offers

one explanation for the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt requires the left-brain verbal and cognitive understanding of socially constructed values and expectations. It is more aligned with the sense that one has “done badly.” Shame, as a right-brain dysfunction of ego ideal is an experience of self as “being” bad.

The importance of shame’s impact on attachment and self cannot be overstated; when shame is deeply internalized it prohibits the possibility for authentic relating with a full spectrum of emotional color (Kaufman, 1996). The poet Robert Bly (1990) related to shame through the work of Marian Woodman. He wrote that, “Shame keeps us from cultivating a garden. Men and women deeply caught in shame will, when they tend their garden, pull out weeds and flowers because so many of their own feelings seem defective or soiled” (p. 143). If cultivating a garden means applying just the right amount of love and care for seeds of work and play to sprout flowers of satisfying relationships in a variety of hues, then shame is truly toxic. Shame forestalls the ability to deeply explore self, an essential ingredient for relating to others (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996), and it may inhibit some gay men from forming relationships at all (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). For those that do seek partnership, the disregard and misattunement from family members can be likened to a sense of invisibility that is driven by a desire to maintain a dominant, hetero-centric narrative (McLean & Marini, 2008).

### **A Neuropsychanalytic Model**

Consider the implications in the context of developing gay children: If emerging sexual difference constitutes an often overlooked part of the constitutional self, and inauthentic mirroring of constitutional self equates to underdevelopment of structures highly relevant to the function of attachment, relational capacity, and emotion regulation, then inadequate mirroring of

emerging gay sexuality in the very first years of life may directly link to a right brain dysfunction of ego ideal or ideal self (Morrison, 1983) resulting in a “bad me” self narrative, or... shame.

Based upon what has been explored here so far, a neuropsychanalytic model for the development of a conscious self and sexual identity begins at approximately 18 months old, when the toddler begins to recognize himself in a mirror and in the mirroring interaction with his caregivers. Incongruent mirroring of the authentic, constitutional self leads to the development of an alienated self and can begin the unconscious process of shame integration (shameful self understanding) and defensive posturing (anxious attachment patterns and disconnection). Organization of psychosexual development takes place in the first five years of life with childhood masturbation seen especially frequently between the ages of two and four (Lichtenberg, 2008). Erotic fantasies develop shortly thereafter, and the pre-gay boy, and by this we mean a boy for whom emerging sexual orientation has yet to concretize into a concrete identification, may develop unconscious longing for same-sex peers or his father figure. The boy may distance himself to avoid recognizing the attraction, or the father or peers may begin to recognize the boy’s need for closeness and become detached or hostile. This withdrawal is often experienced as rejection leading to a fragmentation of self, alienation, a sense of inadequacy, internalized shame, attachment difficulties and disconnection (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996; Stortelder, 2014).

### **Personal Reflection**

In our conversation about attachment and sexuality, Odets reminded me that, “We start out literally inside someone else, that’s literal attachment. Then after birth, as an infant, we are calmed by having someone pick us up and hold us closely. That’s the sort of thing we never get over; as adults we still need that kind of contact.” Odets inspired me to consider that being gay is

fundamentally about emotional attachment; about how our unique subjectivities inform the specific language we use to find our way back to closeness and connection. Sex is one of the most important expressions of that language, and most people feel that whether they act it out sexually or not.

There was a moment when my own unique expression of emotional attachment made sense to me in a way far beyond what any left brain, analytic conversation could explain. It was the moment when I truly knew I was gay, but more importantly it was the moment I first experienced a sexual kind of love. For most of my adolescence, as I moved into middle school and then high school and began watching pornography and talking about sex and girls with my friends at school, I remember feeling as though I just did not quite get it. I had sex for the first time with a woman when I was beginning my freshman year of high school. It was fun, it felt good, but I honestly just couldn't understand what the big deal was—why sex and girls was all my friends ever talked about. I received plenty of attention from members of the opposite sex but, given the choice, I would just as well have spent time with my male friends (this makes a little more sense now). It's not that I didn't fantasize about other boys; shower time after gym class was a terrifying and exhilarating experience. I simply never equated those fantasies with being different or gay necessarily, I just thought sex was overrated.

Then one day, about the time I was approaching my final year of high school, I met a boy. He was a few years older than me, a freshman in college. He was athletic, smart, and active in his fraternity. He was strong and handsome and did not at all seem effeminate—which I would have likely rejected intensely at that time. I was in love with him in a way that only a 16-year-old boy could be, and I remember feeling excited just to be near him and talk to him. I'm not sure that sex ever even entered my mind. Then, one night, he stayed over at my family home so we

could hit the slopes early the next morning. As we lay in our shared bed chatting away my foot connected with his and I flinched—but he didn't. I let my foot gently fall back against his... but he didn't pull his away. My heart started to pound inside my chest, and I felt the blood rush to my head. Soon, our whole legs were pressed against each other's and we still weren't pulling them away. I felt his arm casually come up above my head as he stretched, and then he wrapped it up under my neck, pulled me over on top of him, and we kissed.

In that moment it all just made sense. I understood why my friends spent all of their time talking about girls and sex, and I wanted that moment more than anything in the world even if I could never have imagined it. The next day we went snowboarding with my high school buddies. On the way home I started to fall asleep with my head on his shoulder in the backseat, and in my half-wake state I could hear my friends laughing about it, cracking gay jokes at my expense—but I didn't care. I was in love and it consumed me. It felt like coming home to something essential that I never knew I was missing. I realized that my whole life up until that point, I had been faking it—pretending I knew what love and sex were about but never really allowing myself to experience it.

I tell this story now because we are developing a theory about shame. What we have developed so far indicates shame as a complex emotion, a “master affect” capable of informing self and other meaning making in ways that seem almost incomprehensible. Its power to affect cognition likely lay in it being the byproduct of the very processes, relational attunement, that nature relied upon to propel human brain development beyond the womb-dependent nature of our closest evolutionary relatives. Attunement, however, is also the key to shame's evolution. As Schore (2003) noted, when the two sides of the brain are not structurally integrated, the self a person says he is can be quite different from the self he presents with his emotions and his

reactions. I am an often confident, powerful advocate for social justice and the beauty of human difference. Undoubtedly, many who know me would be surprised to learn how tough my struggle with shame has been. I am also a man who has devoted himself to a deep immersion into the healing power of relational attunement and right-brain limbic connection. When we become aware of nonverbal input from the subcortical regions, including the limbic areas, we open the mind to subtle but important signals that shape our internal worlds. These are not word-based thoughts but *felt sensations* that arise in awareness and may be difficult to articulate (Siegel, 2012). Walker Percy wrote that, “modern man is estranged from being, from his own being, from the being of other creatures in the world, from transcendent being. He has lost something — what, he does not know; he only knows that his is sick unto death with the loss of it” (Percy, as cited in; Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000, p. 224). I would argue that what has been lost is our beautiful, right brain, experiential resonance. Shame and disconnection is the product of that loss, but also the cause. When we find ourselves caught in the tangled fibers of shame’s grasp even our attempts at unraveling shame can become marred in darkness and doubt—as if there was a right or good enough way to unravel these strands. There is not. Shame is and we are. Often the best I can hope for is to acknowledge the now much softer voice of shame urging me to hide from you and return to the shadows. There are shadows and there is daylight. I can appreciate both.

### **Current Theory**

So far, in this exploration of the interpersonal origins of shame (shame from the inside out), we have looked at neurologic structural differences implicated in the shame experience and established the notion of a sexually-informed constitutional self in need of adequate mirroring from primary caregivers. We have also looked at the functional implications of those differences

for gay men with a closer examination of impacts on emotion regulation and attachment processes. Now I would like to take a closer look at the link between shame and objectification because it strikes me as significant to understanding the early shame experience for gay men, particularly as it relates to understanding a timetable for shame and sexual identity development.

Experiences of failed efficacy or intentionality most likely happen through mismatches between the infant's cues and a caretaker's facial responsiveness. The power of a shame-inducing gaze may explain, "the lifetime association between shame and the wish to avoid another's gaze or not be seen at all" (Broucek, 1991, p. 35). In early childhood a powerful parental gaze will interact with the beginnings of a child's self-awareness. When a child fails to elicit a gaze that support his intentionality, excitement, and indwelling sense of self, he will experience something else: being looked at in a way that objectifies him (Broucek, 1991). In other words, if a parent's gaze does not support emerging self, including emerging constitutional identity, then objectification and shame are the result. To adequately consider this idea and fold it into my emerging model of shame formation in gay men, then the point of development in which gay men experience both shame and our unique sexuality must be considered. To do so, I took a closer look at the literature on shame and its relationship to sexual identity development, and considered what has been left unsaid while also looking more closely at the function of shame and the first moments of self-awareness and erotic urges.

### **A Shame and Sexuality Timetable**

If we accept that gender identity begins to emerge at least by 18-months old and sexual identity shortly thereafter (Stortelder, 2014), then establishing some sense of when the shame affect can be first felt seems important to an understanding of how emerging sexual identity may intersect with the shame experience and emerging self. The moment that shame is first

experienced as a discrete affect is an area of much controversy. A 2009 study wondered if shame and guilt were salient in early childhood depression. Shame and guilt were explored in a sample of 305 depressed, anxious, and disruptive preschoolers, as well as their healthier peers, using a story stem completion task that was coded by blind raters. Findings demonstrated that high levels of shame and guilt were related to preschool onset depression when using observational measures of children's internal representations of their self-conscious emotions as well as parent reports. Results demonstrated continuity of these core depressive emotions as early as age three, and suggested that shame should be explored in clinical assessments of young children (Luby et al., 2009). Luby's study provides evidence to support the relational assumption that shame can be internalized and effect emotional resonance at least as early as age three.

Lewis (2008) felt that shame was an affective response only for verbal children approximately 18–24 months old. He felt that children must be able to recognize their caregivers as separate from themselves, and then use the shame response to reflect upon how they were able to succeed or fail at abiding by rules and expectations set by caregivers. Tomkins (1987), however, viewed shame as an innate affect present at birth. By the fourth month of life, as soon as the infant is able to differentiate the face of the mother from a stranger's, he is vulnerable to shame. In his discussion of the famous "still face" experiments (Tronick, Als, Adamson, Wise, & Brazelton, 1978), in which mothers were filmed interacting with their three-month-old infants, Nathanson (1987) concluded that the group of infants that reacted to their mother's unresponsive face by slumping in their seats and averting their own gaze were exhibiting a shame response. For the purposes most relevant to the question at hand, I tend to concur with Lichtenberg (2008) who synthesizes these views. Shame acts as a regulatory signal in early life and it is:

a) An important contributor to the socializing and acculturating of infants and toddlers during the period when the self is forming; b) An affirmation-shame balance may be generalized from the lived experiences of the preverbal period and will influence fundamental nonconscious and conscious mentation and the quality of form of symbolization of both sensuality and sexuality; and c) When admonishments and prohibitions are delivered without sensitivity to the child's subjectivity, roots are planted for difficulties for later selfobject experiences to emerge from sexual expression. (p. 6)

This notion of shame's utility for acculturating the child to social expectations, rules, and behavioral norms may seem innocuous at first glance. It reflects much of the concept of guilt as it has been understood here—an affective reaction helping young people to learn from actions “done badly” in the face of “Other's” expectations. When we consider the shame response from a pre-gay child contemplating self relative to social expectations of conformity to a world that often rejects homo-normativity, however, we glimpse much darker implications. Our gay children learn to foreclose on themselves in order to survive rather than learning to honor themselves and thrive.

While shame experienced preverbal is not the same as that experienced in later life, in many ways it is far more destructive and vitally important to the emerging self and sexuality and, therefore, to selfobject function later in life. There is a strong developmental link between shame and emerging gender identity and sexuality, regardless of sexual orientation: “The earliest manifestations of genitility and gender identity are exactly contemporaneous with the period during which shame takes on its deepest significance in terms of the self” (Nathanson, 1987, p. 39). Shame, as was demonstrated earlier when discussing neurobiology, is understood to

“attach” to emerging self. When the child first begins to recognize itself in the mirror or in another’s eyes, to recognize itself as a whole and distinct figure, the very time that Lacan spoke of as exciting and ego-defining, this is the time when the self (regardless if self is understood to be illusory or not) begins to grow exponentially. It is also the precise moment when we begin to have subjective awareness of genitalia, of exciting physical sensations from deep within and, as suggested, erotic pre-conscious phantasies and the attractive pull of sexuality.

As Nathanson (1987) wrote, “it seems that the development of objective self awareness predisposes the child to take ‘more personally’ parental criticism or censure; whatever is important to the child in this era can be linked to this newly amplified sense of shame” (p. 40). He felt that “The earlier a child experiences sexual excitement, the earlier and more forcefully will this excitement, and the organs in which this excitement is experienced, be capable of linkage with both shame and pride” (p. 41). This is an extraordinary statement in consideration of shame and emerging gay identity. It provides a strong theoretical link between the early experience of shame and the sex organs, the physical focal point for emerging sexuality. If we are tempted to think of childhood genital play as mere exhibitionism, curiosity, or sensation rather than an intense early experience with emerging sexuality, I would suggest that we vastly underestimate the power of this time in development. As Nathanson suggested, “the child who has achieved objective self-awareness is neither merely demonstrating its genitals nor idly exploring. It is in the throes of real genital excitement. Rejection, or censure by the (unwittingly) exciting parent must come as a powerful stimulus to shame” (p. 42). To be clear, I concur with the work that Lichtenberg (2008) did distinguishing sensual bodily sensations (that are often mirrored by shared others in a benign way) from sexual urges (when sensuality is met by a prohibiting response). Sexual impulses are frequently met with a prohibitive response from

parents, and the child's effort at finding a way around these barriers to fulfill urges is an important component of emerging sexuality, but it is important to establish that once symbolic processing starts, "body-generated experiences can activate imagination, fantasies, and dream imagery" (p. 4), and these can intensify sensual experiences.

What is astonishing to me is how little consideration has been given to emerging sexual orientation as a variant in the psychic experience. Lichtenberg (2008) did some extraordinary work re-conceptualizing the Oedipal struggle, tying it in with attachment strategies and what we now know about emerging gender identity. However, this work is a deeply binary and hetero-normative interpretation with little mention of emerging sexual difference or how this complicates the context within which the Oedipal struggles takes place.

Imagine, then, a gay (or pre-gay) infant who arrives at the point of self-awareness with a constitutional sexual self fundamentally different from his caregivers. We experience shame when we are placed outside of the context from which we wish to be interpreted (Schneider, 1977). After the acquisition of objective self-awareness, "the child may either experience being looked at in a way that supports his intentionality, excitement, and indwelling sense of self, or he may experience being looked at in a way that objectifies him and activates shame" (Broucek, 1991, p. 40). The former is consistent with Kohut's conceptualization of healthy mirroring and the integration of balanced self, the latter with an externalizing need for validation, a severe tension between self and an idealized, objectified self, and a hunger for selfobject function. The significance of idealization, discussed in greater detail in the next section, is once again anchored with personal reflection; but for now it is important to note that sexual identity and fantasy emerge at a time when we are first aware of emerging self and uniquely vulnerable to shame. If our gay child is admonished or senses rejection in a manner that does not support his unique

subjectivity, roots are planted for difficulty in selfobject function to emerge from his very special sexual expression.

### **An Emerging “Attachment” Theory**

A lot has been laid out that is worth taking stock of as we begin to pull together a more integrative understanding of shame in gay men. My central objective was to explore the notion that emerging sexuality represents a unique aspect of specialness or subjectivity that, if not adequately mirrored may lay the groundwork for a shame experience that attaches to self and disturbs sexual expression and selfobject function. Morrison (1983) argued that shame was first experienced between 12 and 18 months, as the toddler’s self begins to differentiate from a sense of primary merging with attachment figures, when the infant first becomes conscious of a separate self or “I,” and that shame results from misattunement to any significant aspect of the child’s affectivity including sadness, despair, anxiety, and longing (Morrison & Stolorow, 1997). When emerging self-awareness and unique, gay subjectivity, is met by a non-responsive, perhaps even rejecting other (when selfobject needs are not sufficiently met), constitutional self is felt as alien and “to the extent that a toddler feels that he does not embody those qualities that please or are affirmed by the parental figure, he believes there is something wrong with him” (Lessem, 2005, p. 24).

At this point in my study, I returned to a contemporary self-psychological understanding for how these ideas inform selfobject function as our young gay boy continues to develop and compensate for inadequate mirroring through idealization. Thereafter I explored the ideas of “specialness” and how inadequate mirroring might encourage a unique kind of shame attachment, not to object in the traditional sense of “other” but to sexuality itself.

For Kohut, shame lay in an inability to manage split off grandiosity, to live up to phantasies of greatness that may have gone unacknowledged. Morrison felt that Kohut's view of the nature of shame was narrow but he acknowledged that the language of shame permeated Kohut's work, and that many aspects of shame, particularly the relationship between shame and narcissism, were best understood using the constructs of self-psychology. Using a fundamentally Kohutian formulation, Morrison weaves in a "modified version of Piers's (Piers & Singer, 1971) thesis that shame is reflective of tension between the ego and the ego-ideal. He translates Piers structural terms into the language of self psychology, resulting in the restatement that shame reflects severe tension or strain between the self and the ideal self" (Broucek, 1991, p. 55).

An idealizing phase frequently comes after a child fails to receive adequate mirroring of their grandiosity, and it can serve to compensate for that less than optimum mirroring experience. From the gay male perspective, we are talking about the moments following inadequate mirroring of our unique sensibility and sexuality. This is a time when we begin to develop concepts for ideal self and ideal others from caretakers that were not able to provide reflections of our specialness. When there is a good mutually responsive fit between a child's experience of idealized parent and his own picture of idealized self, he has a good chance of growing into a "self who can risk both hope and disappointment" (DeYoung, 2015, p. 28). If there's a bad fit, the child carries forward a depleted self burdened by an unrealistic and tenuous ideal image of self and self-esteem. What happens if a notion of ideal self is developed from caregivers that cannot or do not reflect the beauty of our unique subjectivity or constitutional self? Our boy tends to split off or deny that specialness, to hide his felt difference in an effort to be more like the idealized parent; and this will uniquely set him up for a faulty selfobject function and make him uniquely prone to a deep shame experience.

Nathanson (1987) provided the following explanation of how shame affect becomes negative self image, and it is vitally important to the understanding we are coming to. He wrote that, “when a child experiences the sudden un-relatedness of shame, he also experiences incompetence, a bad and dangerous state. In a bid for safety, the child links the unbound shame affect with the unbound image of badness and dangerousness. The experiences cohere and coherence is always safer than random chaos” (p. 55). Nathanson describes this safe linkage as an ideo-affective complex of bad-me; “following the establishment of this linkage any experience of shame now brings with it images defining one as defective, weak, or incomplete” (p. 55). There are a few key ideas here to underline as we begin to explore this idea from the perspective of our young gay male: a sense of unrelatedness and its relationship to “bad me,” and the notion that any source of that unrelatedness (such as sexual difference in this case), if not honored in primary caregiving can be linked to this notion of faulty self.

I remember idealizing my father for his strength, courage, and manliness. Qualities I thought I didn't have. Among the memories of him that still burns in my mind is leaving a store with him one afternoon. A man was raising money for some charity or other. When my father refused to donate he called after my dad saying, “You are cheating your kids!” My father lost it. He grabbed this man by the throat and pushed him up against a wall. My father was half this guy's size but I could see the terror in this man's eyes. I could not have been more proud. I wanted to be just like my dad. I wanted to be tough and strong and scary. I was not. At home my mother spoke with pride of my gentleness and my “sweet, kind nature.” She saw me for what I was—more like her than my dad—and when we were alone, I reveled in knowing she truly saw *me* and I could simply be myself. I suppose, in this story, I can glimpse a bit of a tenuous self-concept; I was looking outside for a cohesive experience with a lot of self-doubt. Sweet,

kind, and gentle may as well have been code words for gay, they succinctly describe masculine gender role violations. When my father heard my mother speak about me as gentle and kind, I thought I could see him look away in confusion or scoff at the notion. He couldn't see himself reflected in that description and I couldn't stand the incoherence of not seeing self reflected in my idealized father. I felt only shame.

DeYoung spoke to me about feeling special in the eyes of her father. Recalling Kohut's (1971) notion that a gleam in the mother's eye supported development of self, DeYoung recalled a gleam in her father's eye when she played basketball or shot her bow and arrow (Patricia A. DeYoung, personal communication, January 10, 2020). I related to that idea. I remember that gleam in my mother's eyes when I was playing pretend or putting on plays in the backyard as a child. These are the kind of glorious moments when our unique subjectivity was seen, when our differences were honored even if our parents couldn't necessarily relate to those aspects in themselves. What about those other times, when we may have unconsciously longed for mirroring of our emerging constitutional self, but instead felt shame? Returning to Nathanson's (1987) ideas, I proposed that when we look into our parent's eyes and don't find relatedness for any number of aspects of our unique emerging self, we also link that bad and dangerous shame state to another potentially threatening state (or *Real state*, as Lacan may have put it), that of our emerging sexuality. Our difference becomes bad and dangerous long before it is a conscious aspect of self. Sexual difference may, at first, become split off and unreachable for how it threatens alignment with the idealized self and idealized other. Later in life, when sexuality is a more present and conscious aspect of self, even if it is mirrored socially as a good and beautiful thing by others, that fundamental linkage of sexual self to shame and doubt can prove confounding and difficult to separate; as difficult, perhaps as separating out the strands of a rope.

The question arose then: Aren't all gay people subject to this process of attaching a dangerous state to sexual identity? After all, most of us come from caregivers that cannot offer adequate mirroring of our sexuality or gender role differences? This is one of the big questions I struggled with throughout this exploration, but I have come to believe the answer is: *No, I do not believe that to be true.* In this project I chose to explore shame using two distinct but certainly related perspectives: (a) an "Inside Out" process that accounted for early relational attunement and mirroring of self, and (b) an "Outside In" processes that accounted for socio-cultural and systemic shame imposed from the world around us. In my conversation with Walt Odets, I heard a very different kind of shame story, one more closely aligned with the "Outside In" process.

Walt grew up in a home with only one living parent, his playwright father. Odets doesn't remember a time when he did not know or have gay people around him who were loved and respected as good, valuable, and special men. Among the first stories Odets told me during our conversation was about the time his father discovered him "playing" with another boy in his bedroom when they were about ten or eleven years old. "Oh, I didn't realize you kids were busy," Walt's father said, and gently walked away. Later, Odets recalled asking his father about same-sex attraction and his father told him to enjoy the exploration and assured Walt that, eventually, it was just something that he would make up his mind about. It was simple. It was natural.

When Odets grew up and announced to other family members that he was gay, some of them responded terribly. When he searched the local bookstore for gay books and realized for the first time that many saw homosexuality as pathologic, he "simply never took that on." He lived his life as an openly gay man and never felt shame surrounding his sexuality. "I had shame but it was about other aspects of myself," he said, "areas that my father couldn't understand or be a

part of, but not about my being gay” (Walt Odets, Ph.D., personal communication, November 26, 2019). To be clear, its not as if Odets was not aware of or subject to sexual minority stress or cultural bias. His writings contain deft explorations of these concepts and how they affected him, his patients, and the gay men around him; but they did not seem to impact his sense of self in the way that others, including myself, talk about. A sense of shame was not linked to his sense of sexuality.

To contrast, Patricia A. DeYoung told me a different story that aligns with what I have proposed. She talked about growing to understand the importance of not “hanging too much shame” on her queerness. “The chronic relational shame I think and write about,” she told me, “it’s all relational,” and by relational she meant fundamentally relational in the *Inside Out* sense (related to primary caregiving, attachment, and early self-development). DeYoung felt certain that when relational origins are adequate, then shame is largely a cultural experience, not a chronic self experience (Patricia A. DeYoung, personal communication, January 10, 2020).

So, while it is likely true that we could speak about a whole continuum of shame, I do believe, when it comes to gay men, it makes sense to distinguish between at least two different experiences of shame: (a) a fundamental relational shame related to inadequate mirroring of a constitutional self that becomes ideo-affectively linked to self and sexuality, and (b) shame where the force of cultured bias can be shameful and harmful, but not essentially threatening. As DeYoung told me, “If you come from a family that sees their kids clearly for whoever they are, then the relational side of shaming is only through the eyes of peers, its not about seeing self reflected in culture” (Patricia A. DeYoung, personal communication, January 10, 2020). Furthermore, she concurred that this Outside In experience is not as intense as when you grow up in a family where you are not seen emotionally for your core self.

Given all that has been proposed here, I offer that the unique sexual expression of gay or pre-gay boys must be mirrored in the context that surrounds its emergence in some way, or else risk a linkage to shame and a notion of self as inherently damaged. So, how does this come about in the traditional family structure that many of us grow up in? As Odets' story suggests, one way is through the attitudes and actions of our parents. When attitudes and behaviors commonly considered gender transgressing are not met with rejection and admonishment but with openness and allowing, research suggests that shame does not mediate the relationship between conformity, self-doubt, and dysregulation (Pollack, 1998; Rice et al., 2016). Evolutionary theory and psychology may also point to another way.

Kin Selection Hypothesis, better known as the "Gay Uncle" theory, suggested that gay men are biologically predisposed to help raise their siblings' children as well as the offspring of other family members. By doing so, kin were more apt to succeed and grow to reproductive age, thereby passing on more of the genes they shared with their gay family members. Arguments rooted in evolutionary psychology are notoriously difficult to test but, a recent survey of 300 Samoan fa'afafine (effeminate, third-gender "men" exclusively attracted to other men), found that they were significantly more likely to be altruistic towards their nieces and nephews than single men, women, or parents, and are more altruistic to siblings' children than other children generally (Vasey, Pocock, & Vanderlaan, 2007).

It is important to note that the fa'afafine are generally well accepted within the Samoan culture. Past attempts to test the theory among gay male populations in Western cultures with biases against male homosexuality found no effect, but Vasey (2011) recently found support for the hypothesis among Canadian men. These results suggest an interaction between social tolerance of same-sex attraction and an evolutionary process that might predispose gay men

towards strong interactions with their kin. Vasey suspects that conditions just aren't right in modern Western societies for this tendency to express itself, "Even if many Western gay men wanted to be doting uncles," he was quoted as saying, "their families might not always encourage it" (Moskowitz, 2010, para. 20).

I mention the gay uncle theory because it strikes me as significant to my own hypothesis. If what I have considered here is accurate, when we have access to a social structure that honors sexual difference as real and good then we, at the very least, minimize the possibility for a shame inducing relational misattunement in early childhood; our family and social structure contains an evolutionarily designed social mechanism to support that necessary mirroring function—one that modern Western culture has lost, if it ever had it at all.

### **A Final Reflection**

I started this project telling you a bit about my own shame journey and God, yet I have said very little about religion. Broucek (1991) wrote that, "We cannot thoroughly understand the deeper significance of shame and humiliation in our culture without paying some attention to the influence of Christianity on the collective western psyche" (p. 77). I certainly agree, but for myself it is also true that, in many ways, my relationship with shame and with God is really about my relationship to my father.

I told you about how I idealized my father for his strength and toughness. I also idealized many of the religious people around me—the church and its leaders. There was a time when I wanted nothing more than to be close to God, yet I somehow felt God shamed me for my sexuality just as my father shamed me as I strained to watch other men showering in the bathroom stalls at our summertime campground. I always wanted my father to be proud of me. I wanted him to see me as a good athlete when I simply wasn't. I wanted him to smile and hug me

tight and teach me things with a gentle reassurance. I wanted to believe he understood me and I wanted to know from him that I was good. My father was also the man who terrified me with the same rage that frightened that man outside the grocery store. It was my father who shamed me so badly, when he found me playing naked with my neighbor, that I could not look at him for weeks. It was likely my father that I compared myself to when I looked at my own penis and held it with a focused hatred that I could never understand at such a young age. It was my idealized father I wanted to know and to be like after some of the most special parts of me could not be mirrored in my infant world. It was likely my father I saw hanging on that cross and calling me to a closeness that promised forgiveness, and him I saw idealized in a group of Christian film makers decades later.

Certainly, there are important implications for how my mother held my “specialness,” but on the day I came out to my parents as gay my mother seemed as though she felt she was supposed to cry but could not, “Well,” she said to me, “I always thought you were too cute not to have a girlfriend.” That was it. She struggled in her own way, worrying if my life would be harder without a wife or children, but for the most part, for her their just wasn’t much to say. I was the same son she loved and knew and thought of as good and special. That was that. My father, however, could not look me in the eyes after I came out to him. I saw tears streaming down his face, perhaps for the first time in his stoic life. What I saw reflected back in his eyes was shame. In this moment of coming out, when I felt tremendous pride for who I was, he wondered what he had done wrong. He looked at me but he could not really see me, and he could not see himself or his culture reflected back, and so... fragmentation and pain. My father was crushed with shame and I knew in that moment that all I ever really wanted was his love and acceptance—something I thought would never come.

A recent study was among the first to explore childhood and adolescent memories of warmth, safeness, and shame among heterosexual and gay men. It found that gay men reported fewer feelings of safety, acceptance, and being cared for during childhood and found that gay men felt that shame memories were more central to their self-identity than heterosexuals (Matos et al., 2017). Another study found that childhood rejection was strongly related to anxious attachment styles for gay men. The researchers explored how childhood gender nonconformity and recollected quality of childhood relationships with parents and peers predicted anxious and avoidant attachment in gay men's adult attachment relationships. Gender nonconformity was significantly associated with paternal, maternal, and peer rejections in childhood. Peer and paternal rejection independently predicted anxious attachment, and peer and paternal rejection also mediated the association between gender non-conformity and attachment anxiety (Landolt et al., 2004).

The story didn't end with my father's tears and our shared shame, however. As I grew with pride, and with shame, they both brought beautiful and sometimes awful colors into my life. I met a man and we fell in love. My father got to know him well and, eventually, he came to love him. I'll never forget the day California voted to allow gay marriage. My father called me to tell me he voted against the amendment that would have made gay marriage unconstitutional. "I just don't see how you and your partner getting to marry has anything to do with me and my marriage," he said to me. I think it was the first time he ever went against the teaching of the Catholic Church. Just today my father called to make sure the man in my life will be there for his 80th birthday party. "Mike has to be there, you know, the whole family does," he said. So, yes, we change. Colors fade and new ones emerge, even if the faded ones don't completely go away.

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