

Recovering the Adult Survivor of Childhood Alienation

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The central feature of “parental alienation” for the children is grief and guilt, and the pathology generally would fall into the category of “disordered mourning” (Bowlby, 1980).¹ In order for an adult child to become open to restoring a relationship with the targeted parent, the child must be willing to become open to the pain of unresolved grief and guilt. Typically, adult children are reluctant to open the doors to their buried sadness.

Understanding the Pathology

The attachment system is a set of brain networks that manage all aspects of love and bonding, including grief and loss. The attachment system functions in characteristic ways, and it dysfunctions in characteristic ways. Mary Ainsworth, one of the premier experts in the attachment system describes the functioning of the attachment system:

I define an “affectional bond” as a relatively long-enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual and is interchangeable with none other. In an affectional bond, there is a desire to maintain closeness to the partner. In older children and adults, that closeness may to some extent be sustained over time and distance and during absences, but nevertheless there is at least an intermittent desire to reestablish proximity and interaction, and pleasure – often joy – upon reunion. Inexplicable separation tends to cause distress, and permanent loss would cause grief.

An “attachment” is an affectional bond, and hence an attachment figure is never wholly interchangeable with or replaceable by another, even though there may be others to whom one is also attached. In attachments, as in other affectional bonds, there is a need to maintain proximity, distress upon inexplicable separation, pleasure and joy upon reunion, and grief at loss. (Ainsworth, 1989, p. 711)²

In the family pathology described as “parental alienation” in the common culture, everyone, including the child, experiences sadness and grief surrounding the loss of the intact family structure following divorce. Even if the marriage was unhappy and filled with conflict, still the attachment system will initiate a grief response in coping with loss.

The allied narcissistic/(borderline) parent, however, cannot process grief and loss. The origins of this parent’s personality characteristics is in childhood attachment trauma, called “disorganized attachment,” in which the child is unable to organize a coherent strategy for establishing a secure attachment bond to the parent or for repairing a breach in the attachment bond when this occurs. Edward Tronick describes the parent-child relationship dance in healthy parent child bonding called the “breach-and-repair” sequence:

¹ Bowlby, J. (1980). Attachment and loss: Vol. 3. Loss: Sadness and depression. NY: Basic.

² Ainsworth, M.D.S. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *American Psychologist*, 44, 709-716.

In response to their partner's relational moves each individual attempts to adjust their behavior to maintain a coordinated dyadic state or to repair a mismatch. When mutual regulation is particularly successful, that is when the age-appropriate forms of meaning (e.g., affects, relational intentions, representations) from one individual's state of consciousness are coordinated with the meanings of another's state of consciousness -- I have hypothesized that a dyadic state of consciousness emerges. (Tronick, 2003, p. 475)³

Unlike many other accounts of relational processes which see interactive "misses" (e.g., mismatches, misattunements, dissynchronies, miscodinations) as indicating something wrong with an interaction, these "misses" are the interactive and affective "stuff" from which co-creative reparations generate new ways of being together. Instead there are only relationships that are inherently sloppy, messy, and ragged, and individuals in relationships that are better able, or less able, to co-create new ways of sloppily being together. The co-creation of relational intentions and affects and the recurrence of relational moves generate implicit relational knowing of how to be together. (Tronick, 2003, p. 477)

A second kind of unique implicit knowledge is knowing how we are able to work together (e.g., how we repair sloppiness) no matter the content of the errors. (Tronick, 2003, p. 478)

Out of the recurrence of reparations the infant and another person come to share the implicit knowledge that "we can move into mutual positive states even when we have been in a mutual negative state." Or "we can transform negative into positive affect." (Tronick, 2003, p. 478)

Tronick is describing the process of normal and healthy parent-child breach-and-repair sequences in which the parent and child work together in a coordinated way to repair, often sloppily yet nevertheless successfully, their relationship. This is healthy. It creates an implicit understanding about how to repair relationships when things go awry.

However, in the parent-child relationship that produces the disorganized attachment of the narcissistic/(borderline) personality, the child's parent is both a source of danger and simultaneously a source of comfort for the child, creating an incompatible motivational set for the child for both avoidance and bonding. Beck describes the parent-child relationship that leads to a disorganized attachment:

Various studies have found that patients with BPD [borderline personality disorder] are characterized by disorganized attachment representations. Such attachment representations appear to be typical for persons with unresolved childhood traumas, especially when parental figures were involved, with direct, frightening behavior by the parent. Disorganized attachment is considered to result from an unresolvable situation

³ Tronick, E.Z. (2003). Of course all relationships are unique: How co-creative processes generate unique mother-infant and patient-therapist relationships and change other relationships. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 23, 473-491.

for the child when “the parent is at the same time the source of fright as well as the potential haven of safety.” (Beck et al., 2004, p. 191)⁴

When the parent is simultaneously both the source of threat and the source of comfort, the child is motivated both to avoid and to seek this parent. The child’s incompatible motivations to simultaneously avoid and seek bonding to the threatening-comforting parent prevent the child from developing an organized strategy for how to repair relationship mismatches and breaches to the relationship – leading to what’s called a “disorganized” pattern of attachment. Since the disorganized attachment cannot repair breaches to the relationship when they occur, the person with a disorganized attachment is strongly motivated to avoid a breach in the relationship by creating “enmeshed” relationships of continual psychological fusion, and the person will respond to breaches in the relationship by entirely cutting off the other person once a breach occurs (i.e., not trying to repair the relationship). Relationships for this person (the allied parent) exist in a polarized all-or-none state of either continual psychological fusion or entirely cut off.

In the pathology commonly called “parental alienation,” the allied parent has a disorganized attachment created in childhood attachment trauma that subsequently coalesced in late adolescence and early adulthood into the narcissistic and borderline personality traits of the adult phase.⁵ When the divorce occurred, this parent’s underlying disorganized attachment was unable to implement a strategy for responding to the loss experience. The sadness and grief surrounding loss, caused by a breach in the attachment bond, triggered the incompatible motivations of the childhood trauma experience surrounding a breach in the attachment bond with a frightening-nurturing parent. The disorganized attachment networks of the narcissistic/(borderline) personality are unable to process the resulting sadness and grief surrounding the loss experience, and instead translate sadness and grief into anger and resentment. According to Kernberg, a leading expert on the narcissistic and borderline personality:

They are especially deficient in genuine feelings of sadness and mournful longing; their incapacity for experiencing depressive reactions is a basic feature of their personalities. When abandoned or disappointed by other people then may show what on the surface looks like depression, but which on further examination emerges as anger and

⁴ Beck, A.T., Freeman, A., Davis, D.D., & Associates (2004). Cognitive therapy of personality disorders. (2nd edition). New York: Guilford.

⁵ The narcissistic and borderline personality styles are simply external variants of the same underlying disorganized attachment. In the borderline personality style, the child sought to maintain an attachment bond to the frightening parent, resulting in tremendous anxiety and fear of abandonment (disorganized attachment with anxious-ambivalent overtones). In the narcissistic-style personality, the child selected the avoidance motivation, choosing to sacrifice attachment bonding for safety, resulting in psychological isolation and devaluation of attachment bonds (disorganized attachment with anxious-avoidant overtones). The core of both the narcissistic and borderline personality is a disorganized attachment, with the difference being whether the child emphasized the attachment bonding motivation (borderline personality) or the avoidance motivation (narcissistic personality).

resentment, loaded with revengeful wishes, rather than real sadness for the loss of a person whom they appreciated. (Kernberg, 1975, p. 229)⁶

With the divorce, all of the family members, including the children, experienced grief and sadness surrounding the loss of the intact family. That's how the attachment system responds to loss. However, the disorganized attachment networks of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent cannot process grief and sadness surrounding loss. As a result, this parent's psychological organization began to collapse into chaos and disorganization. In order to maintain psychological coherence, the sadness and grief were translated into anger, since anger is a cohesive emotion that prevents fragmentation and holds self-structure together. This parent then triangulated the child into the spousal conflict to help stabilize the fragile psychological structure of the parent which is collapsing in response to the exposure of core-self inadequacy (narcissistic vulnerability) and abandonment fears (borderline vulnerability). By manipulating the child into rejecting the other parent, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent makes the other spouse the inadequate and rejected-abandoned spouse-person-parent, and restores the fragile narcissistic defense against psychological collapse.

Narcissistic/(Borderline) Parent: "I'm not the inadequate parent (spouse-person); you are. I'm not the abandoned parent (spouse-person); you are. The child is rejecting you because of your inadequacy and the child is choosing me because I'm the ideal parent (spouse-person)."

(Projective displacement of self-inadequacy and abandonment fears which were triggered by the divorce onto the other spouse, and a restoration of the grandiose narcissistic defense as the ideal and all-wonderful person who will never be abandoned.)

Under the manipulative guidance of the allied narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child's grief and sadness are similarly transformed into anger and resentment directed toward the other parent. The other parent is blamed for the dissolution of the family, for "causing" the child's hurt and sadness, and as therefore "deserving" the child's anger and rejection.

Once the child is led into becoming angry and rejecting toward the targeted parent, this rejection of a parent then triggers a second wave of grief and loss from within the attachment system. Not only has the child lost the intact family which triggered the initial round of grief and sadness, the child has now also lost an affectionally bonded relationship with the beloved-but-now-rejected targeted parent. On the surface the child is angry, hostile, and rejecting. Underneath the child's attachment system continues to function and continues to produce a grief response at the loss of an affectionally bonded relationship the beloved-but-now-rejected parent.

The attachment system is a "goal-corrected" motivational system, meaning that it always maintains the goal of forming an attached bond to the parent (even a bad parent – a

⁶ Kernberg, O.F. (1975). Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism.. New York: Aronson.

bad parent is still better than the predator. In fact, children are even more strongly motivated to bond to a bad parent; called an “insecure attachment”). Throughout the child’s overt rejection of the targeted parent, the child’s attachment system continues to motivate the child toward bonding with this parent and will continuously produce a grief response at the loss of an affectionally bonded relationship with this parent.

As a result of the continued normal-range functioning of the child’s attachment system beneath the surface while it’s overt expression is being suppressed, whenever the child is in the presence of this beloved-but-now-rejected parent, the child’s attachment system will motivate the child toward bonding with this parent. However, because the child is refusing to bond to the parent, the child’s attachment system will produce a grief response that leads to the child hurting more when in the presence of the beloved-but-rejected parent. In contrast, whenever the child is away from the targeted parent the attachment bonding motivations toward this parent are less since this parent is not available in the environment, so the grief response lessens and the child hurts less when the child is away from the beloved-but-now-rejected.

What the child experiences is a rise and fall in emotional pain. The emotional pain (grief) increases when the child is with the targeted parent, and the emotional pain (grief) decreases when the child is not with the targeted parent. Under the distorting parental influence of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child is then led into a misinterpretation of this authentic self-experience of rising and falling pain that it must be something the targeted parent is doing that is causing the child more hurt, since the hurt increases when the child is with this parent and decreases when the child is away from this parent. The child’s cognitive-thinking system then constructs various reasons and justifications to explain what the targeted parent is supposedly doing to hurt the child.

It is impossible to convince the child that these constructed reasons are not true, because the child authentically feels the rise and fall in emotional pain associated with the presence and absence of the targeted parent. The core issue is that the child is misinterpreting the natural grief response arising from the child’s attachment networks at the loss of an affectionally bonded relationship with the beloved-but-now-rejected targeted parent. The solution is to correct the child’s misattribution of causality; that it’s not something the targeted parent is doing that is creating the child’s pain, but that the child is hurting because the child is not allowing affectionate bonding to the beloved-but-now-rejected targeted parent, that’s what hurts. The child simply misses, and grieves, an affectionate relationship with the targeted parent.

The unprocessed and misunderstood grief response results in a paradoxical feature of this form of family pathology (disordered mourning) in which the kinder and nicer the targeted parents becomes with the child, the angrier and more hostile the child becomes. When the targeted parent becomes kinder and nicer, this increases the child’s attachment bonding motivations. Yet because the child is not bonding, the increased motivation toward attachment bonding created by the kindness of the targeted parent increases the child’s grief response, which then increases the child’s hurt and pain. The kinder the targeted parent is, the more the child hurts, so the angrier and more rejecting the child becomes.

The core of the pathology traditionally called “parental alienation” is disordered mourning and unresolved grief. In the normal grief process, a parent dies and the child grieves. However, in “parental alienation” there is no available way for the child to ever process and resolve the child’s grief because the parent isn’t actually dead but is continually available for bonding – so the child remains in a continual state of active grieving for years and years. In “parental alienation,” the child grieves and so the child must psychologically kill the parent in order to be able to resolve the grief response. As long as the parent remains available for bonding (psychologically alive to the child) then the child is in a continual state of grief. In order to resolve the grief, the child must psychologically kill the parent.

The Guilt

Children love both parents. That’s just the way the attachment system works. With the divorce, the psychological structure of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent begins to collapse into disorganization. The targeted parent, on the other hand, has normal-range attachment networks and so is better able to process and resolve the grief and loss experience of divorce. The psychological stability of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent is more fragile, the targeted parent is psychologically stronger and healthier.

The narcissistic/(borderline) parent needs to triangulate the child into the spousal conflict in order to stabilize the collapsing psychological structure of this parent. The child loves this parent. The child intuitively recognizes that this parent psychologically needs the child to support this parent (by forming an alliance with this parent) in order to stabilize the fragile psychological structure of this parent. The child unconsciously selects to sacrifice himself or herself to the parent out of loyalty and love for this fragile parent.

But in selecting to stabilize the psychologically fragile parent, the child must reject and lose a relationship with the beloved healthier parent. This is the loyalty bind of the child. The narcissistic/(borderline) parent is asking the child to choose a side in the spousal conflict. The child realizes that to choose the side of the beloved but healthier targeted parent will result in the psychological collapse of the more fragile narcissistic/(borderline) parent who needs the child more. If, however, the child chooses to support the more fragile narcissistic/(borderline) parent then the child must reject and betray the love of the targeted parent. Either way, the child will betray and abandon a parent. Either way, the child will experience tremendous guilt at betraying the child’s love for a parent and that parent’s love for the child.

In a noble choice of self-sacrifice, the child selects to support the more fragile parent at the expense of the child’s relationship with the healthier and beloved targeted parent. The child must then cope with the tremendous guilt at having betrayed the deeply beloved targeted-rejected parent. In order to cope with this tremendous amount of guilt, the child tries to make the targeted parent “deserve” to be rejected. If the targeted parent “deserves” to be rejected, then the child is not betraying the love of this parent.

The child then creates a variety of reasons why the targeted parent “deserves” to be rejected, supported in this constructive process by the jubilant guidance of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

- The targeted parent is responsible for causing the divorce, so the targeted parent “deserves” to be punished.
- The targeted parent is selfish and self-centered, and doesn’t really love the child, so the targeted parent “deserves” to be rejected.
- The targeted parent is mean and critical and emotionally “abusive” of the child, so the targeted parent “deserves” to be rejected.
- The targeted parent did some “unforgivable” act (such as calling the police to enforce custody orders), so the targeted parent “deserves” to be rejected.

This theme, that the targeted parent “deserves” to be rejected, is a prominent and highly characteristic theme of the disordered mourning of “parental alienation” pathology. Its origins are in the child’s efforts to manage the child’s guilt at betraying the beloved targeted parent.

Resolution & Restoration

The challenge for restoring the adult child’s relationship with the beloved-but-now-rejected targeted parent is twofold.

First, the child’s efforts to cope with the tremendous guilt of betraying the beloved targeted parent rides the surface of the child’s defensive process. When the child opens up and restores a relationship with the beloved targeted parent the child is going to feel this tremendous guilt at having betrayed the love of the targeted parent in choosing the alliance with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. If, however, the child continues to maintain the constructed belief that the targeted parent “deserves” to be punished – “deserves” to be rejected – then the child can hold the feelings of guilt at bay.

Second, the path to restoring a loving and bonded relationship with the targeted parent leads directly through grief and mourning. The principle issue is the child’s unresolved grief and sadness, surrounding first the loss of the intact family and then surrounding the loss of an affectionally bonded relationship with the beloved-but-rejected parent. The core pathology is disordered mourning. In order to resolve the pathology and restore the child’s relationship with the beloved targeted parent, the child will need to experience the grief and sadness surrounding this lost relationship. In many cases, this pain is too great and the presence of this emotional pain continues to feed the false belief that it is something the targeted parent is doing (or did) to cause the pain, leading to the justification for the rejection that the targeted parent “deserves” to be rejected for causing the child such emotional pain – for not adequately loving the child.

This knot of grief and guilt is complex and difficult to unravel for the adult child. The child has coped with the pain of unprocessed and unresolved grief by psychologically killing the parent. This is a coping strategy that has worked, to some extent. It limits the extent of the pain even if it doesn’t entirely eliminate the grief. Just like when a parent authentically dies and

the child grieves, eventually the grief and sadness recedes into the background, although the sadness and loss never disappears entirely. So too in the constructed psychological death of the “parental alienation” pathology, the child has achieved a resolution by psychologically killing the targeted parent, which has allowed the grief to recede into the background.

To restore a relationship with the beloved-but-rejected targeted parent will require that the now-adult survivor of childhood alienation becomes voluntarily willing to re-open the grief and sadness at the core of the parent-child relationship, and the adult survivor of childhood alienation is not optimistic that this will produce positive results. The child learned to respond to relationship breaches by cutting off the other person, the child has not learned the process of how “we can transform negative into positive affect.” So the adult child will often choose to continue the cutoff in the relationship with the targeted parent rather than open the painful grief and guilt surrounding the relationship.

However, the actual therapy for this form of disordered mourning is actually quite simple. We just need to provide the child with an accurate interpretation of his or her pain as an unprocessed grief response, dispose of the “deserves to be rejected” defense, and foster the child’s emotional release and bonding to the targeted parent. Once the child bonds with the beloved targeted parent the attachment system will no longer produce the grief response and the child’s pain vanishes immediately. Poof. All gone. If the pain ever begins to reemerge, possibly around feelings of regret and loss, all the child needs to do is express affectionate bonding with the beloved targeted parent and – poof – this new round of emotional pain also vanishes. It’s actually quite simple.

As for the guilt... empathy and a focus on the present resolves this. No need for the psychological archeology of digging up past conflicts and blame. The past was a difficult time, there were a lot of things that people might have done differently, but we’re all frail people doing the best we can. Even the pathology of the allied narcissistic/(borderline) parent was born in childhood trauma. Blame is destructive. Empathy is healing. No need to resolve the past, just stay focused on sharing affection and bonding now. Life is good. Love is good. Remain solution focused, remain in the present. Love, hugs, and bonding are good things.