

## **Old Wine in Old Skins: A Commentary on 'Foundations: An Attachment-Based Model of Parental Alienation' by C.A Childress Psy.D.**

William Bernet & Kathleen Reay

*The article below represents the views of the authors, William Bernet and Kathleen Reay only, and does not necessarily reflect the views of the PASG.*

In the July 2015 issue of *Parental Alienation International*, PASG member Craig Childress described his new book, *Foundations*. Craig's work brings to mind an interesting aspect of the history of parental alienation (PA), that is, the multitude of names that have been applied for the same clinical phenomenon. It also gives a new take on the parable having to do with wine and wineskins.

In the 1940s, David Levy never heard of PA, but he described it in his book on "maternal overprotection." About the same time, Wilhelm Reich explained that some divorced parents defend against narcissistic injury by using PA to attack the other parent. In the 1950's, Louise Despert alluded to PA in her book about children of divorce. In the 1960s, Murray Bowen identified PA – without using that term, of course – as a form of triangulation, a condition in some dysfunctional families. In 1970, PASG members Jack Westman and Douglas Kramer and others were the first authors to describe the PA phenomenon in a peer-reviewed journal. Also in the 1970s, E. James Anthony and Therese Benedek described PA in a discussion of *folie à deux*. In the 1980s, Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee used "Medea-like rage" to describe the emotional state of alienating parents. Stanley Clawar and Brynne Rivlin used the terms "programming" and "brainwashing" to describe how PA is brought about. PASG member Barry Bricklin used the term, "Not-Based-On-Actual-Interactions" (NBOAI) to designate the opinions of children who had been manipulated into believing non-events. Of course, Richard Gardner introduced the term "parental alienation syndrome" in 1985. In 1990, Frank Williams introduced the term "parentectomy."

Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, PA has been described and studied through many perspectives, each with its own terminology. When Joan Kelly and Janet Johnston reformulated the concept in 2001, they preferred to use the term "alienated child" rather than PA. In Poland, PA is called "Zespół Gardnera" or "Gardner Syndrome." PASG member Guglielmo Gulotta and his Italian colleagues studied PA through psycholinguistic analysis. PASG member Lena Hellblom Sjögren and other European writers have emphasized that inducing PA is a violation of the child's human rights. Peter Jaffe and his colleagues have said that PA is one of the coercive strategies used by perpetrators of domestic violence to control their family members. PASG member Robert Gordon and his colleagues studied the features of PA with the Minnesota

Multiphasic Personality Inventory–2. Of course, authors in many countries have identified PA as a form of child psychological abuse. Most members of PASG simply use the term “parental alienation.”

Now, Craig Childress has introduced a new set of terms because he wants to avoid using “parental alienation” or other terms associated with Richard Gardner. Craig has introduced the term “attachment-trauma reenactment disorder” for the child, which he says is the same as shared psychotic disorder or shared delusional disorder. For the parent, he uses the term “pathogenic parenting.” Craig would agree, we think, that he is packaging old wine (the phenomenon that most people think of as PA) in old skins (attachment theory and personality disorders). We agree, of course, with Craig, that sometimes it is helpful to conceptualize the child’s condition as being a disorder of attachment. And sometimes it is helpful to emphasize the narcissistic or borderline personality disorder of the alienating parent.

What we do not understand is Craig’s insistence that his perspective is the only one that counts. We do not understand his insistence that his attachment-based theory is totally different from and has nothing to do with parental alienation syndrome, when there is much overlap between his writings and the publications of Gardner. It seems to us that David Levy, Barry Bricklin, Janet Johnston, Guglielmo Gulotta, Richard Gardner, and Craig Childress are all talking about the same group of children. They have developed theories and constructs that are complementary, interactive, and mutually supportive. There is no need to badmouth the beliefs of other writers in order to promote one’s own theory regarding PA.

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## **Of Wine and Elephants: Response by C.A Childress Psy.D to Drs. Bernet and Reay Commentary on 'Foundations: An Attachment-Based Model of Parental Alienation'**

C.A. Childress, Psy.D.

Drs. Bernet and Reay used a parable to make their point, let me use another one to respond. There is the story of the blind men describing the elephant. One feels the ear and says an elephant is like a fan. Another feels the leg and says an elephant is like a tree trunk. Another feels the elephant's trunk and says an elephant is like a snake. But no one sees or understands what the elephant actually looks like. Are each of those descriptions true? Yes, and no. A part of the elephant is like a fan, like a tree trunk, like a snake, but an elephant is not like a fan, or tree trunk, or snake.

Is there a pathology that people have been identifying? Yes. Is it a new and unique type of pathology representing a new syndrome in psychology? No. Then what is it? It is a manifestation of established and existing forms of pathology. What type of pathology? That is what Foundations describes. Why does one person say the elephant is like a fan and another says an elephant is like a tree trunk? Because they do not see the elephant. They are feeling different parts of the elephant in the darkness and describing different aspects of it. What Foundations does is describe the entirety of the elephant from toenails to the individual hairs on its back. Is it like a fan? Parts of it. Is it like a tree trunk? Parts of it. But no one has described the elephant. Foundations ends our blindness and describes the entire elephant for what it actually is.

Gardner proposed that the pathology of "parental alienation" was such a new and unique form of pathology that it represented a "new syndrome" within professional psychology, which he said could be identified by a set of eight anecdotal clinical indicators that he made up based on his clinical experience and which had no association with any other form of established psychological pathology in all of mental health. Gardner was wrong. The pathology traditionally called "parental alienation" is not a new and unique type of pathology. It is a manifestation of fully established and existing forms of family systems pathology, personality disorder pathology, and attachment trauma pathology.

Foundations describes the nature of this pathology in detail, integrating the three levels of analysis and revealing how the attachment-trauma pathology of the alienating parent (disorganized attachment) creates the trauma reenactment narrative and the personality disorder pathology that drives the "parental alienation" process, and how the personality disorder pathology creates the family systems pathology in which the addition of splitting transmutes an already pathological cross-generational coalition into a particularly malignant

and virulent form that seeks to entirely terminate the child's relationship with the other parent.

Foundations describes in detail how the pathology is induced in the child through a role-reversal relationship in which the child is used as a regulatory object by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to stabilize the parent's pathology. Foundations describes in detail the process by which the child's natural attachment bonding motivations are suppressed by defining the other parent as "the predator" threat. Foundations describes the entirety of the pathology from completely within standard and established, scientifically supported, constructs and principles of professional psychology.

Returning to the parable offered by Drs. Bernet and Reay regarding wine and wineskins, I'm not sure if it was intentional but they actually got the parable wrong. It is from the Bible:

"And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins. (Mark 2.22)"

What Drs. Bernet and Reay seemingly fail to realize is that words convey ideas. New terms means new ideas. An attachment-based reformulation for the pathology traditionally described as "parental alienation" proposes that the pathology is, at its core, the trans-generational transmission of attachment-trauma (disorganized attachment) from the childhood of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to the current family relationships, manifesting in the attachment trauma pattern of "abusive parent"/"victimized child"/"protective parent." This is new wine. It needs to be poured into a new wineskin. If we try to pour it into the old wineskin of Gardnerian PAS it will "burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined." But I prefer the parable of the blind men describing the elephant.

Actually, what I'd prefer is to move beyond dueling parables into discussing the actual content of an attachment-based model of "parental alienation" and the immediate solutions to the pathology of "parental alienation" that this new model of the pathology provides. An attachment-based model of "parental alienation" offers an immediate solution to the pathology of "parental alienation" that can be actualized today. This instant. The moment that the citadel of establishment mental health becomes aware that an attachment-based model of "parental alienation" exists, the pathology of "parental alienation" will be solved. The longer the Gardnerian PAS model remains the primary paradigm, the longer it will take to enact the solution. I've described all this on my blog.

I don't care one whit for playing nice in the professional sandbox (essentially the argument of Drs. Bernet and Reay is that I'm not sharing and allowing other kids to play in the sandbox). The only thing I care about is enacting a solution to the pathology of "parental

alienation” as quickly as possible. Each day that passes is one day too long. My goal is to enact the solution to “parental alienation” for all children and all families by Christmas of 2016. The reason it will take me this long is because I am just a single psychologist without influence and without power trying to create fundamental systems change in the broken mental health and legal systems. I could use some help.

My challenge to Drs. Bernet and Reay is, I wonder how much faster we can achieve the solution to “parental alienation” offered by an attachment-based model (as described on my blog) with your active support in making establishment mental health aware of the new paradigm offered by an attachment-based reformulation for the pathology traditionally called “parental alienation.”

With your active support could we achieve the seven-step solution to “parental alienation” which I describe on my blog by Christmas of 2015? By this Christmas? That’s only three months away, but with your active support it might be possible. There is nothing that stands in the way of a solution to “parental alienation” other than the ignorance of establishment mental health that an attachment-based reformulation of the pathology from entirely within established and accepted psychological principles and constructs exists.

*By C.A. Childress, Psy.D for Parental Alienation International*