

Center for Shared Parenting Conference
Novi Sad, Serbia – April 27, 2023

The Return of Clinical Psychology to
Court-involved Custody Conflict`

C.A. Childress, Psy.D.

1

There is no such thing as “parental alienation”

Craig Childress, Psy.D.

(C.A. Childress, Serbia 2023)

2

The use of “parental alienation” in a professional capacity is substantially beneath professional standards of practice in clinical psychology and is in violation of Standard 2.04 Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments of the APA ethics code.

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3

Everyone needs to STOP using the construct of “parental alienation” and use ONLY established professional knowledge.

There is no defined and accepted pathology called “parental alienation” in clinical psychology.

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4

There is:

- A shared persecutory delusion
- A Factitious Disorder Imposed on Another
- Child Psychological Abuse (DSM-5 V995.51)
- Spouse or Partner Abuse, Psychological (DSM-5 V995.82)
- Attachment pathology
- Dark personality pathology
- The child's *triangulation* into the spousal conflict through the formation of a *cross-generational coalition* with one parent against the other, resulting in an *emotional cutoff* in the child's attachment bond to the targeted parent.

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5

APA ethics code:

2.04 Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments

Psychologists' work is based upon established scientific and professional knowledge of the discipline.

6

The established scientific and professional knowledge of the discipline is:

- Attachment - Bowlby and others
- Family systems therapy - Bowen and others
- Personality disorders - Millon and others
- Complex trauma - van der Kolk and others
- Child development - Tronick and others
- Self psychology - Kohut and others
- DSM-5 diagnostic system - American Psychiatric Association

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7

Attachment Pathology

8

Internal Working Models

From Bowlby: “No variables, it is held, have more far-reaching effects on personality development than have a child’s experiences within his family: for, starting during the first months of his relations with his mother figure, and extending through the years of childhood and adolescence in his relations with both parents, he builds up working models of how attachment figures are likely to behave towards him in any of a variety of situations; and on those models are based all his expectations, and therefore all his plans for the rest of his life.” (Bowlby, 1973, p. 369).

Bowlby, J. (1973). Attachment and loss: Vol. 2. Separation: Anxiety and anger. NY: Basic.

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9

Four Relationship Types – Gender

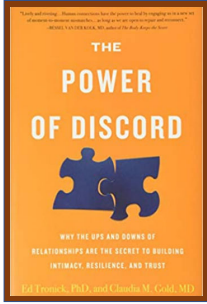
There are four types of relationship in the family and they depend on gender of the parent and gender of the child.

- Cross-gender high affection bonds
 - Father-daughter
 - Mother-son
- Same-gender values & identity bonds
 - Father-son
 - Mother-daughter

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10

Tronick & Gold: The Power of Discord Breach-and-Repair



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11

Tronick Still Face The Good – the Bad – and the Ugly



12

The Good: normal everyday breach-and-repair
The Bad: a breached attachment bond
The Ugly: an UN-repaired attachment bond

An un-repaired attachment bond is the
WORST possible thing we can do – the Ugly.

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13

Attachment Pathology:

- A child rejecting a parent is an attachment pathology, i.e., a problem in the love and bonding system of the brain.
- A child rejecting a parent is the WORST possible attachment pathology, i.e., a complete breach in the parent-child bond.
- Childhood is NOT the time when we want to see WORST possible attachment pathology in the child.
- We need to fix the breached attachment bond and restore a normal-range childhood to the child.

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14

Diagnosis guides treatment.
The treatment for cancer is different than the treatment
for diabetes.

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15

Attachment Pathology:

- The only cause of severe attachment pathology is child abuse by one parent or the other.
Problematic parenting creates an *Insecure* attachment that MORE strongly motivates the child to bond to the bad parent. Only child abuse creates rejection.
- The differential diagnosis for severe attachment pathology is child abuse.
- In all cases of severe attachment pathology displayed by the child - a proper risk assessment for possible child abuse needs to be conducted to the appropriate differential diagnosis for each parent.

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16

Differential Diagnosis:

- Targeted Parent Abusive
Is the targeted parent abusing the child, thereby creating the child's attachment pathology toward that parent?
- Allied Parent Abusive
Is the allied parent psychologically abusing the child by creating a shared persecutory delusion and false (factitious) attachment pathology in the child for the secondary gain of manipulating the court's decisions on child custody?

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17

When child abuse is a considered diagnosis, our diagnosis must be accurate 100% of the time. The consequences of misdiagnosing child abuse are too devastating for the child.

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18

In all cases of court-involved custody conflict involving severe attachment pathology displayed by the child (a child rejecting a parent), a proper risk assessment for possible child abuse needs to be conducted to the appropriate differential diagnosis for each parent.

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19

In the absence of child abuse, parents have the right to parent according to their cultural values, their personal values, and their religious values.

In the absence of child abuse, each parent should have as much time and involvement with the child as possible.

In the absence of child abuse, to restrict either parent's time and involvement with their child would damage the child's attachment bond to that parent, thereby harming the child and harming that parent.

Is there child abuse?

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20

Differential Diagnosis for Attachment Pathology

- Targeted Parent Abusive yes no
Is the targeted parent abusing the child, thereby creating the child's attachment pathology toward that parent?
- Allied Parent Abusive yes no
Is the allied parent psychologically abusing the child by creating a shared persecutory delusion and false (factitious) attachment pathology in the child for secondary gain of manipulating the court's decisions on child custody?

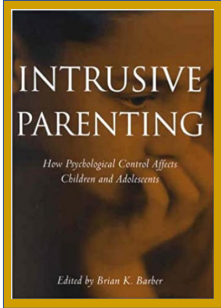
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21

Psychological Control

22

Barber: Intrusive Parenting: How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents



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23

Psychological Control Description:

From Barber & Harmon: "Psychological control refers to parental behaviors that are intrusive and **manipulative** of children's thoughts, feelings, and attachment to parents. These behaviors appear to be associated with disturbances in the psychoemotional boundaries between the child and parent, and hence with the development of an independent sense of self and identity." (Barber & Harmon, 2002, p. 15)

Barber, B. K. and Harmon, E. L. (2002). **Violating the self: Parenting psychological control of children and adolescents.** In B. K. Barber (Ed.), **Intrusive parenting** (pp. 15-52). Washington, DC: **American Psychological Association.**

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24

Psychological Control Description:

Stone, Buehler, & Barber: “The central elements of psychological control are intrusion into the child’s psychological world and self-definition and parental attempts to **manipulate** the child’s thoughts and feelings through invoking guilt, shame, and anxiety. Psychological control is distinguished from behavioral control in that the parent attempts to control, through the use of criticism, dominance, and anxiety or guilt induction, the youth’s thoughts and feelings rather than the youth’s behavior.” (Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002, p. 57)

Stone, G., Buehler, C., & Barber, B. K.. (2002) **Interparental conflict**, parental psychological control, and youth problem behaviors. In B. K. Barber (Ed.), **Intrusive parenting: How psychological control affects children and adolescents**. Washington, DC: **American Psychological Association**.

25

Psychological Control Description:

From Kerig: “Rather than telling the child directly what to do or think, as does the behaviorally controlling parent, the psychologically controlling parent uses indirect hints and responds with **guilt induction** or **withdrawal of love** if the child refuses to comply. In short, an intrusive parent strives to **manipulate** the child’s thoughts and feelings in such a way that the child’s psyche will conform to the parent’s wishes.” (Kerig, 2005, p. 12)

Kerig, P.K. (2005). Revisiting the construct of boundary dissolution: A multidimensional perspective. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 5, 5-42.

26

Creating “Sides”

Step 1: Put the child in the middle

Step 2: Create continual conflict surrounding the child

Step 3: Wait

The only way for the child to get out of the middle is to join the side of the pathological parent.

If the child tries to remain neutral, the pathological parent will keep the child in the middle of continual conflict surrounding the child.

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27

We cannot ask the child to reveal their authenticity until we can first protect the child from the withering psychological retaliation that is sure to follow.

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28

Narcissistic – Borderline – Dark Personalities

Dark Triad

Narcissism – Psychopathy – Machiavellian Manipulation

Paulhus, D. L., & Williams, K. M. (2002). The dark triad of personality: Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 36, 556–563.

Vulnerable Dark Triad

Vulnerable Narcissism – Borderline – Machiavellian Manipulation

Miller, J.D., Dir, A., Gentile, B., Wilson, L., Pryor, L.R., and Campbell, W.K. (2010). Searching for a Vulnerable Dark Triad: Comparing Factor 2 psychopathy, vulnerable narcissism, and borderline personality disorder. *Journal of Personality*, 78, 1529-1564.

Dark Tetrad

Add sadism to the Dark Triad

Book, A., Visser, B.A., Blais, J., Hosker-Field, A., and Methot-Jones, T. (2016). Unpacking more “evil”: What is at the core of the dark tetrad? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 90, 269-272.

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29

30

Dark Triad

From Giammarco & Vernon: "First cited by Paulhus and Williams (2002), the Dark Triad refers to a set of three distinct but related antisocial personality traits: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Each of the Dark Triad traits is associated with feelings of superiority and privilege. This, coupled with a lack of remorse and empathy, often leads individuals high in these socially malevolent traits to exploit others for their own personal gain." (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014, p. 23)

Giammarco, E.A. and Vernon, P.A. (2014). Vengeance and the Dark Triad: The role of empathy and perspective taking in trait forgiveness. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 67, 23–29.

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31

The Core of Evil:

Book, A., Visser, B.A., and Volk, A.A. (2015). Unpacking "evil": Claiming the core of the Dark Triad. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 73 (2015) 29–38.

Book, A., Visser, B.A., Blais, J., Hosker-Field, A., and Methot-Jones, T. (2016). Unpacking more "evil": What is at the core of the dark tetrad? *Personality and Individual Differences*, 90, 269-272.

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32

Virtuous Victim Signaling:

From Ok, et al: "Effective altruism requires the ability to differentiate between false and true victims. Credulous acceptance of all virtuous victim signals as genuine can also enable and reward fraudulent claims, particularly by those with antisocial personality traits... The findings of this study support our hypothesis that virtuous victim signaling is more frequently displayed by Dark Triad personalities." (Ok, et al., 2021)

Ok, E., Qian, Y., Strejcek, B., & Aquino, K. (2021). Signaling virtuous victimhood as indicators of Dark Triad personalities. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 120(6), 1634–1661.

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33

Narcissistic Pathology & Failure of Empathy

From Moor & Silvern: "The act of child abuse by parents is viewed in itself as an outgrowth of parental failure of empathy and a narcissistic stance towards one's own children. Deficiency of empathic responsiveness prevents such self-centered parents from comprehending the impact of their acts, and in combination with their fragility and need for self-stabilization, predisposes them to exploit children in this way." (Moor & Silvern, 2006, p. 95)

Moor, A. and Silvern, L. (2006). Identifying pathways linking child abuse to psychological outcome: The mediating role of perceived parental failure of empathy. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 6, 91-112.

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34

Narcissistic Pathology & Failure of Empathy

From Moor & Silvern: "Only insofar as parents fail in their capacity for empathic attunement and responsiveness can they objectify their children, consider them narcissistic extensions of themselves, and abuse them. It is the parents' view of their children as vehicles for satisfaction of their own needs, accompanied by the simultaneous disregard for those of the child, that make the victimization possible." (Moor & Silvern, 2006, p. 104)

Moor, A. and Silvern, L. (2006). Identifying pathways linking child abuse to psychological outcome: The mediating role of perceived parental failure of empathy. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 6, 91-112.

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35

Narcissistic Pathology & Delusions

From Millon: "Under conditions of unrelieved adversity and failure, narcissists may decompensate into **paranoid** disorders. Owing to their excessive use of fantasy mechanisms, they are disposed to misinterpret events and to construct **delusional** beliefs... **Delusional** systems may also develop as a result of having felt betrayed and humiliated. Here we may see the rapid unfolding of persecutory **delusions** and an arrogant grandiosity characterized by verbal attacks and bombast." (Millon, 2011, pp. 407-408).

Millon, T. (2011). *Disorders of personality: introducing a DSM/ICD spectrum from normal to abnormal*. Hoboken: Wiley.

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36

Borderline Pathology & Delusions

From Barnow et al: "This review reveals that **psychotic** symptoms in BPD patients may not predict the development of a psychotic disorder but are often permanent and severe and need careful consideration by clinicians. Therefore, adequate diagnosis and treatment of **psychotic** symptoms in BPD patients is emphasized... In conclusion, we therefore suggest that it is not a cognitive developmental deficit but rather a tendency to construe interpersonal relations as **malevolent** that characterizes BPD, and this may be shared with certain **psychotic** disorders." (Barnow et al., 2010, p. 186-187)

Barnow, S., Arens, E. A., Sieswerda, S., Dinu-Biringer, R., Spitzer, C., Lang, S., et al (2010). Borderline personality disorder and psychosis: a review. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 12,186-195

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37

Persecutory Delusion Definition

From the APA: "Persecutory Type: delusions that the person (or someone to whom the person is close) is being malevolently treated in some way." (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)

Google malevolent: having or showing a wish to do evil to others.

American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., Text Revision). Washington, DC: Author.

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38

Shared Persecutory Delusion Description

From the APA: "Usually the primary case in Shared Psychotic Disorder is dominant in the relationship and gradually imposes the delusional system on the more passive and initially healthy second person... Although most commonly seen in relationships of only two people, Shared Psychotic Disorder can occur in larger number of individuals, especially in family situations in which the parent is the primary case and the children, sometimes to varying degrees, adopt the parent's delusional beliefs." (American Psychiatric Association, 2000)

American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed., Text Revision). Washington, DC: Author.

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39

Persecutory Delusion in the Family Courts

From Walters & Friedlander: "In some RRD families [resist-refuse dynamic], a parent's underlying encapsulated delusion about the other parent is at the root of the intractability (cf. Johnston & Campbell, 1988, p. 53ff; Childress, 2013). An encapsulated delusion is a fixed, circumscribed belief that persists over time and is not altered by evidence of the inaccuracy of the belief." (Walters & Friedlander, 2016, p. 426)

Walters, M. G., & Friedlander, S. (2016). When a child rejects a parent: Working with the intractable resist/refuse dynamic. *Family Court Review*, 54(3), 424-445.

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40

Persecutory Delusion in the Family Courts

From Walters & Friedlander: "When alienation is the predominant factor in the RRD [resist-refuse dynamic], the theme of the favored parent's fixed delusion often is that the rejected parent is sexually, physically, and/or emotionally abusing the child. The child may come to share the parent's encapsulated delusion and to regard the beliefs as his/her own (cf. Childress, 2013)." (Walters & Friedlander, 2016, p. 426)

Walters, M. G., & Friedlander, S. (2016). When a child rejects a parent: Working with the intractable resist/refuse dynamic. *Family Court Review*, 54(3), 424-445.

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41

Unresolved Trauma Reenactment

From Pearlman & Courtois: "Reenactments of the traumatic past are common in the treatment of this population and frequently represent either explicit or coded repetitions of the unprocessed trauma in an attempt at mastery. Reenactments can be expressed psychologically, relationally, and somatically and may occur with conscious intent or with little awareness." (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005, p. 455)

Pearlman, C.A., Courtois, C.A. (2005). *Clinical Applications of the Attachment Framework: Relational Treatment of Complex Trauma. Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 18, 449-459.

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42

Unresolved Trauma Reenactment

From Pearlman & Courtois: "One primary transference-countertransference dynamic involves reenactment of familiar roles of **victim**-perpetrator-rescuer-bystander in the therapy relationship. Therapist and client play out these roles, often in complementary fashion with one another, as they **relive** various aspects of the client's early attachment relationships." (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005, p. 455)

Pearlman, C.A., Courtois, C.A. (2005). Clinical Applications of the Attachment Framework: Relational Treatment of Complex Trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 18, 449-459.

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43

Dark Personalities in the Family Courts

- Greenham & Childress: Darks & Delusions I: Solving the Gordian Knot of Conflict in the Family Courts
 ResearchGate DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.28643.22568](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.28643.22568)
- Greenham & Childress: Darks & Delusions II: Research Gap in the Family Courts
 ResearchGate DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.16477.90084/2](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.16477.90084/2)
- Greenham, Childress, & Pruter: Darks & Delusions III: The 12 Associated Clinical Signs (ACS)
 ResearchGate: DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.22558006](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22558006)

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44

In all cases of court-involved custody conflict involving severe attachment pathology displayed by the child (a child rejecting a parent), a proper risk assessment for possible child abuse needs to be conducted to the appropriate differential diagnosis for each parent.

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45

Differential Diagnosis for Attachment Pathology

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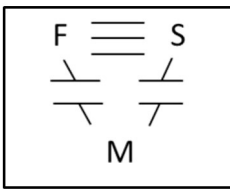
46

Family Systems

47

Minuchin: Structural Family Diagram

Triangulation
 Cross-Generational Coalition
 Emotional Cutoff
 Inverted Hierarchy
 Enmeshment



Minuchin, S. & Nichols, M.P. (1993). *Family Healing: Strategies for Hope and Understanding*, p. 42.

48

Triangles

From Bowen Center: "A triangle is a three-person relationship system. It is considered the building block or "molecule" of larger emotional systems because a triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system is unstable because it tolerates little tension before involving a third person. A triangle can contain much more tension without involving another person because the tension can shift around three relationships."

Bowen Center: <https://www.thebowencenter.org/triangle>

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49

Cross-generational Coalition

From Madanes: "In most organizations, families, and relationships, there is hierarchy: one person has more power and responsibility than another. Whenever there is hierarchy, there is the possibility of **cross-generational coalitions**. The husband and wife may argue over how the wife spends money. At a certain point, the wife might enlist the older son into a coalition against the husband. Mother and son may talk disparagingly about the father and to the father, and secretly plot about how to influence or deceive him."

Madanes, C. (2018). Changing relationships: Strategies for therapists and coaches. Phoenix, AZ: Zeig, Tucker, & Theisen, Inc.

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50

Cross-generational Coalition

From Madanes: "**Cross-generational coalitions** take different forms in different families (Madanes, 2009)... These alliances are most often covert and are rarely expressed verbally. They involve painful conflicts that can continue for years. Sometimes **cross-generational coalitions** are overt. A wife might confide her marital problems to her child and in this way antagonize the child against the father... This child may feel conflicted as a result, suffering because his or her loyalties are divided."

Madanes, C. (2018). Changing relationships: Strategies for therapists and coaches. Phoenix, AZ: Zeig, Tucker, & Theisen, Inc.

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51

Family Systems Description

The child is being **triangulated** into the spousal conflict through the formation of a **cross-generational coalition** with the allied parent against the targeted parent, resulting in an **emotional cutoff** in the child's attachment to the targeted parent.

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52

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53