

## PARENTAL ALIENATION AS CHILD ABUSE: THE REGULATING OTHER

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Note: narcissistic and borderline personality processes are outward variations of the same underlying personality organization (see Kernberg, 1975)

### The “Regulating-Other”

In attachment-based “parental alienation,” the child is being used by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to regulate the emotional and psychological state of the parent.

(see my blog on [Attachment Foundations: Regulation Systems](#) for more on the construct of “regulation”)

The clinical phrase for this process is that the child is being used as a “regulating-other” for the parent. The child must express the attitudes and behavior desired by the parent or else be exposed to parental displays of narcissistic or borderline anger and rejection.

**Narcissistic anger** is very intense, although it can be subdued on the surface, and it combines signals of hostile-rejection with disgust (a visceral repulsion). The combination of intense parental anger, rejection, and disgust can be extremely disturbing for a child. Children exposed to parental narcissistic anger (commonly referred to as “**narcissistic rage**,” Kohut, (1972) find the experience so psychologically disturbing that they become strongly motivated to avoid venturing outside of the psychological state desired by the narcissistic parent.

This requires that the child continually monitor the internal psychological state of the narcissistic parent to remain aware of the emotional and psychological needs of the parent, so that the child can then meet the parent’s needs and avoid the retaliation of narcissistic anger and rejection should the child fail to be what the narcissistic parent needs the child to be.

One of the primary needs of the narcissistic parent is for continual admiration, called “**narcissistic supply**,” in which the narcissistic parent is perceived to be the all-wonderful, perfect and ideal parent. This creates the surface appearance of a seemingly hyper-bonded parent-child relationship, with the child expressing uncritical adoration for the parent. Rather than an authentically bonded relationship, however, this superficial appearance of bonding actually reflects the child being used by the narcissistic parent as a “regulating other” to maintain the narcissistic parent’s own grandiose self-image as the ideal and perfect parent/(person).

“To the extent that parents are narcissistic, they are controlling, blaming, self-absorbed, intolerant of others’ views, unaware of their children’s needs and of the effects of their behavior on their children, and require that the children see them as the parents wish to be seen. They may also demand certain behavior from their children because they see the children as extensions of themselves, and need the children to represent them in the world in ways that meet the parents’ emotional needs.” (Rappoport, 2005, p. 2)

**Borderline anger** is more chaotic and disorganized in its intensity, and will typically be combined with tearful displays of supposed victimization because of the alleged “abuse” supposedly being inflicted on the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. The borderline personality cannot organize or modulate its hyper-intense emotional experiences, leading to chaotic swings of intense emotional displays.

In addition, the thought processes of the borderline personality, the “cognitive structure” of the borderline personality, breaks down in response to the intensity of the emotional experience and the over-arching need of the impaired borderline personality structure to regulate the intensity of the emotions. If truth and reality needs to be changed in order for the borderline personality to regulate the intense emotions, then the borderline personality simply asserts a different truth, a different reality. For the borderline personality, “truth is whatever I assert it to be.” Truth and reality are fluid constructs for the borderline personality, subject to the changing moment-to moment emotional needs of regulating the intensity of the emotional experience.

Within this context of volatile parental anger and an ever-changing definition of truth and reality that is based on the shifting moment-to-moment needs of the borderline parent, the child learns to continually monitor the emotional state and needs of the borderline personality parent in order to be what this parent needs, so that the parent remains in a regulated emotional state and the child can avoid the parent's volatile displays of anger and hostility.

Because the truth and reality asserted by the borderline parent are continually in flux based on the shifting emotional needs of the parent, the child is unable to anchor his or her own perception of truth and reality in any stable frame of reference. And in the context of unpredictable and intense displays of parental anger based on an ever changing reality, the child ultimately surrenders to the truth and reality asserted by the borderline parent in order to keep the anger and emotional volatility of the parent regulated and in check. If the borderline parent asserts that the sky is red, the child agrees. An hour later, if the borderline parent asserts that the sky is yellow, the child agrees. No mention is made by the child regarding the inconsistency, because this would only provoke the parent into a tirade. The child learns to surrender completely to the reality defined by the needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

## Role-Reversal Relationship

In the child's relationship with a narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child becomes a "regulating other" for the psychopathology of the parent. The child is used by the parent to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the parent. When a parent uses a child to meet the parent's needs, this is called a "**role-reversal**" relationship (note: there are several different types of role-reversal relationships). In healthy parent-child relationships, the parent meets the needs of the child. In a role-reversal relationship, the child is used by the parent to meet the needs of the parent.

The prototype exemplar of a role-reversal relationship is incest, in which the child is used to meet the psychological-sexual needs of the parent.

- A role-reversal relationship is the product of relationship patterns contained within the internal working models of the attachment system (Macfie, McElwain, Houts, & Cox, 2005).
- The development of borderline personality structure is linked to distorted relationship patterns contained within the internal working models of the attachment system (Agrawal, Gunderson, Holmes, & Lyons-Ruth, 2004; Fonagy, Target, Gergely, Allen, & Bateman, 2003)
- Borderline personality organization is also linked to childhood sexual abuse victimization (Hodges, 2003; McLean & Gallop, 2003; Ogata, et al., 1990; Trippany, Helm, & Simpson, 2006; Zancarini, et al., 1990) and to role-reversal relationships (Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005).

While other developmental factors can lead to a role-reversal relationship (such as parental alcoholism), the symptomatic presence in "parental alienation" of **both** a role-reversal relationship and borderline personality organization in the parent suggests the possible presence of sexual abuse "source code" in the internal working models of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent's attachment system that was inserted into the trans-generational transmission of attachment patterns (Benoit & Parker, 1994; Bretherton, 1990; Jacobvitz, Morgan, Kretchmar, & Morgan, 1991).

"There is evidence for the intergenerational transmission of boundary dissolution within the family. Adults who experienced boundary dissolution in their relationships with their own parents are more likely to violate boundaries with their children" (Kerig, 2005, p. 22)

"A maternal history of sexual exploitation has emerged as a significant predictor of boundary dissolution at 42 months" (Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005, p. 75)

Parent-initiated boundary dissolution in early childhood instantiates a pattern of relationship disturbance in the child. Role reversal is apparent by early adolescence and the available data suggest links to psychopathology in later adolescence, particularly as a result of sexualized behavior observed at age 13. (Shaffer & Sroufe, 2005)

The analogy would be to a computer virus infecting the "source code" of files in the internal working models of the attachment system, that is then passed on inter-generationally as the regulatory networks of the attachment system are "downloaded" from the parent to the child through the distorted parenting practices

created by the corrupt “files” in the internal working models of the parent’s attachment system (see my blog, [Attachment Foundations: Regulation Systems](#)).

The internal working models of the attachment system mediate all close, emotionally bonded relationships throughout the lifespan. Distortions in the parental attachment system will distort the parenting practices of this parent, leading to the inter-generational transmission of distorted attachment patterns from the parent to the child (Benoit & Parker, 1994; Bretherton, 1990; Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991; Fonagy & Target, 2005; Jacobvitz, Morgan, Kretchmar & Morgan, 1991)..

The possible sexual abuse origins of this “source code” may be at the generational level of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, representing the possible childhood sexual abuse victimization of this parent, or the “source code” may have entered the trans-generational transmission of attachment patterns a generation earlier, with the parent of the current narcissistic/(borderline) parent whose distorted parenting practices then produced the narcissistic/(borderline) personality organization of the current parent, so that this particular “phrase” of the “source code” (i.e., a role-reversal relationship in which the parent uses the child to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the parent) is being passed on inter-generationally through several generations following the incest victimization trauma.

### Psychological Child Abuse

The child-initiated cut-off of the child’s relationship with a normal-range and affectionally available parent as a consequence of the distorted pathogenic parenting practices of a narcissistic/(borderline) parent in which the child is being used by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent in a role-reversal relationship to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the personality disordered parent (i.e., “parental alienation”) may represent a trans-generational iteration of child sexual abuse victimization that occurred a generation (or two) prior to the current child, but that is continuing to severely distort parent-child relationships through the distorted parenting practices of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent (whose own disordered personality organization likewise represents the impact of the prior sexual abuse victimization).

There is evidence to suggest that the severely distorted parenting practices associated with an attachment-based model of “parental alienation” represent a variant of child sexual abuse/incest that is being transmitted inter-generationally to the current child in a non-sexualized, but still psychologically abusive form.

Our response should be commensurate with this possibility, i.e., that what we are dealing with is a form of non-sexualized psychological-(sexual) abuse victimization of the child in a trans-generational iteration. Attachment-based “parental alienation” is not a child custody issue; it is a child protection issue.

Even if the distortions to the child’s attachment bonding motivations toward a normal-range and affectionally available parent as a consequence of pathogenic parenting by a narcissistic/(borderline) parent are not the product of the trans-generational transmission of sexual abuse trauma, the severely distorted parenting practices of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent in which the child is being used as a “regulating other” to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent nevertheless rise to the level of psychological child abuse that is severely distorting the child’s healthy emotional and psychological development.

What may superficially appear to be a bonded parent-child relationship between the child and the allied and supposedly “favored” narcissistic/(borderline) parent actually represents a role-reversal relationship that is a symptomatic expression of the severe pathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Attachment-based “parental alienation” is not a child custody issue, it is a child protection issue.

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Note: I want to be entirely clear. I am in **NO WAY** suggesting that the currently allied narcissistic/(borderline) parent is sexually abusing the child. What I am saying is that there is evidence suggesting that the psychological processes currently being manifested through an attachment-based model of “parental alienation” could very possibly represent the trans-generational iteration of **prior** sexual abuse victimization that occurred a **generation or two earlier**, and that is continuing to severely distort

parent-child relationship processes through the influence of pathogenic “source code” contained in the internal working models of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent’s attachment system

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“One [subgroup of borderline patients, namely, the narcissistic personalities](#)... seem to have a defensive organization similar to borderline conditions, and yet many of them function on a much better psychosocial level.” (Kernberg, 1975, p. xiii)