A Cross-Generational Coalition: The “Perverse Triangle”

The construct of “parental alienation” represents a variant of a more familiar and elaborated clinical construct of the child’s “triangulation” into the spousal conflict, in which the child is being drawn into the two-person spousal conflict to form a three-person, triangulated, conflict that includes the child.

“Anxiety within either husband or wife or both may arise, for example, as they attempt to balance their needs for closeness with their needs for individuation… One way to resolve such an anxious two-person relationship within the family, according to Bowen (1978), is to triangulate – draw in a significant family member to form a three-person interaction.” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996, p. 173; emphasis added)

“During periods when anxiety is low and external conditions are calm, the dyad or two-person system may engage in a comfortable back-and-forth exchange of feelings. However, the stability of this situation is threatened if one or both participants get upset or anxious, either because of internal stress or from stress external to the twosome. When a certain moderate anxiety level is reached, one or both partners will involve a vulnerable third person.” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996, p. 173; emphasis added)

The twosome may “reach out” and pull in the other person, the emotions may “overflow” to the third person, or that person may be emotionally “programmed” to initiate involvement.” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996, p. 173; emphasis added)

Should anxiety in the triangle increase, one person in the triangle may involve another outsider, and so forth until a number of people are involved. Sometimes such triangulation can reach beyond the family, ultimately encompassing social agencies and the courts.” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996, p. 173; emphasis added)


The specific type of “triangulation” involved in the construct of “parental alienation” is called a “cross-generational parent-child coalition” of the child with the allied and supposedly favored parent against the other parent.

One of the leading figures in family systems theory, Jay Haley (1977), defined this type of cross-generational coalition as comprised of three primary features,

1. “The people responding to each other in the triangle are not peers, but one of them is of a different generation from the other two” (Haley, 1997, p. 37; emphasis added)

2. “In the process of their interaction together, the person of one generation forms a coalition with the person of the other generation against his peer. By ‘coalition’ is meant a process of joint action which is against the third person.” (Haley, 1997, p. 37; emphasis added)

3. “The coalition between the two persons is denied. That is, there is certain behavior which indicates a coalition which, when it is queried, will be denied as a coalition.” (Haley, 1997, p. 37; emphasis added)

Haley refers to a cross-generational parent-child coalition as a “perverse triangle”.

“In essence, the perverse triangle is one in which the separation of generations is breached in a covert way. When this occurs as a repetitive pattern, the system will be pathological.” (Haley, 1997, p. 37; emphasis added)
The “Perverse Triangle”

The reason that Haley refers to this particular variant of the child’s triangulation into the spousal conflict as “the perverse triangle” is that the coalition crosses generational boundaries. The crossing of generational boundaries should never occur.

The prototype exemplar of a generational boundary violation is sexual abuse/incest. Now I want to be entirely clear on this, I am NOT suggesting that the cross-generational parent-child coalition involved with “parental alienation” involves the sexual abuse of the child. I am merely highlighting the high degree of clinical concern associated with cross-generational boundary violations. Cross-generational boundary dissolutions are highly pathological and damaging to the development of the child. Cross-generational boundary violations, whether physical or psychological, are of a high degree of clinical concern.

In her article in the “Journal of Emotional Abuse,” Kerig (2005) describes the psychological damage to the child of a cross-generational “boundary dissolution.”

“The breakdown of appropriate generational boundaries between parents and children significantly increases the risk for emotional abuse.” (Kerig, 2005, p. 6)

“When parent-child boundaries are violated, the implications for developmental psychopathology are significant (Cicchetti & Howes, 1991). Poor boundaries interfere with the child’s capacity to progress through development which, as Anna Freud (1965) suggested, is the defining feature of childhood psychopathology. (Kerig, 2005, p. 7)

“In the throes of their own insecurity, troubled parents may rely on the child to meet the parent’s emotional needs, turning to the child to provide the parent with support, nurturance, or comforting (Zeanah & Kitzke, 1991). Ultimately, preoccupation with the parents’ needs threatens to interfere with the child’s ability to develop autonomy, initiative, self-reliance, and a secure internal working model of the self and others (Carlson & Stroufe, 1995; Leon & Rudy, this volume).” (Kerig, 2005, p. 6)

“A theme that appears to be central to the conceptualization of boundary dissolution is the failure to acknowledge the psychological distinctiveness of the child… Examination of the theoretical and empirical literatures suggests that there are four distinguishable dimensions to the phenomenon of boundary dissolution: role reversal, intrusiveness, enmeshment, and spousification… Enmeshment in one parent-child relationship is often counterbalanced by disengagement between the child and the other parent (Cowan & Cowan, 1990; Jacobvitz, Rigg, & Johnson, 1999). (Kerig, 2005, pp. 8-10)

“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 (Hazen, Jacobvitz, & McFarland, this volume; Shaffer & Stroufe, this volume).” (Kerig, 2005, p. 22)

“Lethal” Strain of Parent-Child Conflict

What makes the perverse triangle processes of “parental alienation” different from less severe forms of parent-child coalitions is the presence of a narcissistic/(borderline) personality disordered parent who introduces significantly distorted psychopathology into the parent-child coalition.

Note: the formation of a narcissistic/(borderline) personality organization very likely involved “boundary dissolution in their relationships with their own parents,” thereby making these parents, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, “more likely to violate the [psychological] boundaries of their children.”

The cross-generational coalition creates increased child conflicts with the other parent, the targeted parent. However the significant degree of psychopathology introduced by a narcissistic/(borderline) parent greatly amplifies and transmutes the “ordinary” levels of increased parent-child conflict with the other parent into a lethal strain of parent-child conflict, in which the child seeks to completely terminate the child’s relationship with the other parent.
Essentially, the child is psychologically "killing" the other parent in the child's heart and attachment motivations. It is the "lethal" nature of the parent-child conflict created by the severity of the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent that transforms the family processes of "parental alienation" into a qualitatively different level than less virulent forms of the "perverse triangle" of the child’s cross-generational coalition with one parent against the other parent.

What is classically referred to as "parental alienation" is not some form of exotic family process, but actually represents a variant of a fairly standard family dynamic involving the formation of a cross-generational parent-child coalition against the other parent (i.e., a "perverse triangle"; Haley, 1977), that includes an enmeshed relationship of the child with the allied and supposedly favored parent and a corresponding disengagement of the child from the other parent.

What makes the family processes of "parental alienation" distinctive is the addition of narcissistic/(borderline) personality disorder psychopathology that creates a particularly virulent and "lethal" strain of the family relationship dynamics in which the induced parent-child conflict toward the targeted parent results in the child’s motivation to completely terminate, or cut-off, the child’s relationship with the targeted parent.

What is traditionally described as "parental alienation" is not some strange and exotic psychological process (although the psychological processes of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent are a complex and interwoven knot of psychopathology manifesting across multiple levels). What is classically described as "parental alienation" is simply the child’s triangulation into the spousal conflict by the distorted parenting practices of the allied and supposedly favored parent that creates a cross-generational parent-child coalition against the other parent (i.e., a “perverse triangle”).

The variation factor that elevates "parental alienation" into a qualitatively different presentation from a typical cross-generational parent-child coalition is simply the introduction of significant parental psychopathology in the form of parental narcissistic/(borderline) personality organization that distorts, elevates, and transmutes the child’s conflict with the other parent into a particularly virulent and “lethal” form of parent-child conflict in which the child seeks to completely terminate (cut-off) the child’s relationship with the other, targeted, parent.

The presence of parental narcissistic/(borderline) personality processes will be evident in the child’s symptom presentation of prominent narcissistic and borderline personality traits in the child’s relationship with the targeted parent. Parental influence of the child by a narcissistic/(borderline) parent will leave "psychological fingerprints" in the symptom display of the child (see my blog: Legal: “Psychological Fingerprints”).

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Supplemental Quote:

The following quote by Juni is technical and dense, but I include it for professionals because of its linkage of triangulation with narcissistic parenting.

"From the perspective of object relations, it is clear that the triangulated person is not valued as a person in his own right; rather his function is solely that of a repository of transferential affect from the dyad which cannot be affectively elaborated at its natural source. Thus, Alanen’s (1977) depiction of the double bind victim in terms of Kohut’s (1977) narcissistic object, insofar as he is depersonalized and used in the service of the perpetrator's own needs, seems quite applicable in defining the role of the triangulated as well.” (Juni, 1995. p 93)

References:

Family Systems Constructs:


Role-Reversal and Boundary Dissolutions