

Alienation And Attachment: Bridging Theory, Assessment & Intervention

by

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There is little doubt that some of the most contentious and problematic cases that evaluators, mediators, attorneys and judges face involve allegations of alienation. The ever growing literature on alienation dynamics attempts to delineate the complex set of questions inherent in these cases. Concurrently, the rich research on child-caretaker attachment relationships is evolving in terms of its application to child custody matters. Attachment theory offers practitioners a paradigmatic shift in understanding the way these relations can be understood. Attachment is fundamental to all human children as it is rooted in the biological underpinnings of an evolutionary-based behavioral system (Bowlby 1969/1982; van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 2008), and not just the product of the personality style of the parent and the child's temperament (Vaughn, Bost, & van IJzendoorn, 2008). We posit that the classification and constructs of disorganized attachment can lend considerable understanding to situations in which children refuse visitation with a parent and in which alienation dynamics are suspected. We also contend that conceptualizing the relationship between the child and the rejected parent as a disrupted attachment is helpful in terms of reestablishing the connection of the dyad.

Attachment research describes different and distinct patterns of attachment, called classification groups, which reflect consistent, organized behavior in terms

of how an infant interacts with specific caregivers upon reunion after separation from them in a laboratory assessment procedure called the Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978). There are infants whose response to the Strange Situation is contradictory and whose response patterns during the Strange Situation do not fit within the framework of organized attachment. Main and Solomon (1986, 1990) proposed the category of disorganized attachment to describe relationships in which the child's ability to make the transitions between exploration, separation and reunion and to approach, signal or avoid the parent is seriously interrupted. The process of establishing physical and psychological contact with the parent is compromised by fear, severe conflict or the expectation that the parent will be unable to soothe the child and reestablish security. When the core dynamic in a child-parent relationship is "fear without solution" (Main & Hesse 1990), one is likely observing disorganization in the attachment relationship. Though disorganized attachment is often used to describe infants and toddlers, older children can also become dissociated, disoriented, and show infant-like disorganized behavior. This can result in a loss of objectivity and awareness of the actual situation.

From the vantage point of the caretaker, studies show that risk for disorganization is associated with frightening, intrusive, frightened or helpless forms of parenting. This is seen most dramatically with abused children, where up to 80% of them are assessed as having disorganized attachments. From our perspective, within the high conflict divorce population, there is a striking prevalence of disorganized attachment relationships in children who do not have obviously abusive, hostile and violent parents. (Lee, Kaufman and George 2009). A child who rejects an abusive or violent parent would be described as "estranged" rather than "alienated" as the rejection

would be seen as a reasonable reaction to realistically threatening behavior. In these instances, the child is not distorting their experiences with the rejected parent (Drozdz & Olesen, 2004).

Even under the best of circumstances, divorce leads to at least temporary or short-term distress in all family members. Attachment systems for both parents are activated (Feeney & Monin, 2008) and there is potential for less effective parenting, compromised attunement and poorly regulated emotional reactions. However, most parents are able to re-establish their equilibrium and return to effective parenting. We contend that parents with a helpless state of mind (Solomon & George, 2006) and/or unresolved trauma are more likely to develop disorganized attachment relationships with their children. In the context of the continuous stress of conflict laden divorce, these parents lack appropriate attunement to their children's independent needs, and/or have compromised parental insightfulness into their child's experience of the divorce. It is this broader view of attachment disorganization that may help child custody evaluators identify and understand the risk for disorganization in divorcing families, even when parent-child or parent-parent interactions are not more obviously frightening to outside observers.

We note risk factors that could make a parent more vulnerable to establishing disorganized attachment relationships with one or more of their children.

Some parents lack an attachment figure in their own childhood who could care for them sufficiently in situations that threatened their emotional or physical safety. These parents are at substantial risk of experiencing helplessness in the face of their own child's distress. A parent who has been exposed to traumatic events, but has not adequately dealt with or come to some

resolution of the trauma, is also at risk for developing disorganized attachments. In these instances, the child's normative distress triggers an extreme reaction in the parent that prevents the parent from being able to remain attuned to the child's needs in the moment. The parent's early traumatic experiences are activated, and they may even experience dissociation. In the process, the parent is further unable to differentiate and maintain adequate insight into the child's experiences and behaviors. As a result, the parent is unable to implement timely, accurate and truly empathic interventions at the child's time of need.

While the attachment literature has primarily focused on child-caretaker relationships involving infants, toddlers and very young children, the effects of these early dyads may be evidenced at later developmental stages. Older children with histories of disorganized attachment relationships are characterized by boundary diffusion, role reversal, failure to develop an integrated sense of self, compromised reality testing and catastrophic fantasies. These characteristics are strikingly parallel to the characteristics of children who refuse visitation with a parent and who appear to be caught in the web alienation dynamics. The alienated child maintains proximity and attunement with the aligned parent by adopting that parent's view of the other parent, which runs counter to the child's actual experience of the rejected parent. Aligned parents typically develop distorted views of the other parent, seeing the other parent as more dangerous and malevolent than they are. The aligned parent is frequently highly anxious about the child being in the care of the other parent and conveys this anxiety, either directly or indirectly to the child. We posit that the rejected parent may become a



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trigger for the aligned parent's earlier, unresolved trauma that has been re-stimulated by the divorce and ensuing conflict.

Cases in which children refuse visitation with a parent, or insist on extremely limited visitation, and in which alienation dynamics are present, are a small subset of high-conflict divorce (Johnston, 2005). However, the potential deleterious effects on children are very serious, both in the short term, and in the long run, as their internal templates for establishing sound intimate relationships have been harmed. By way of example, when a child takes on the task of healing the unresolved wounds of the previously traumatized parent, the child experiences internal pressure to validate or reinforce the parent's pathological beliefs. In the process, they often engage in reversal of roles similar to what develops in disorganized attachment relationships.

The child's individual experience of significant others is compromised and the alienated child often demonstrates the kind of regressed, poorly regulated and highly reactive behaviors that are emblematic of disorganized attachment. Furthermore, what previously may have been a reasonably sound or even very important relationship with the rejected parent

also suffers, and begins to take on the features of attachment disorganization. That parent is experienced by the child as frightening, evil or dangerous, with the child exhibiting phobic reactions.

Viewing alienation dynamics through the lens of attachment helps clinicians understand better approaches to healing these scarred family relations. In the scenarios described above, it is clear that interventions must be aimed at repairing the various attachment relationships. Therapeutic approaches must go beyond traditional views of family therapy. For example, our understanding of disorganized attachment suggests that the aligned parent's unresolved trauma is a significant contributor to the family dysfunction. Thus part of the treatment program should be work with that parent to understand at a deeper level and come to some functional resolution of the impact of the prior trauma. Clear differentiation of the impact of those harmful early relations versus the distress of the failed marriage or partnership will also be important. Addressing wounds in the various attachment relationships, including each parents' shortcomings in true parental insightfulness and identifying strengths and vulnerabilities in the alienated child, are critical components of a comprehensive intervention plan. This view is consistent with the Multi-Modal Family Intervention model developed by Walters, Friedlander and Johnston (Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001). Additional parts of that plan would be to re-establish the severely disrupted attachment relationship between the child and the rejected parent through education, hands-on coaching, and creating a secure therapeutic zone where the child can allow him/herself to engage with the rejected parent. Work with the aligned parent again would include

steps towards resolution of prior trauma, assistance with affect regulation, supporting authoritative and insightful parenting and establishing firmer interpersonal boundaries.

Rebuilding relations in families where alienation dynamics are present is a formidable task. Clinicians must think deeply, strategically and creatively in the face of these challenges. Utilizing constructs of attachment theory, and in particular disorganized attachment, shed light on the complexities of the relationships, and help define more precisely the multi-faceted tasks involved in addressing alienation dynamics. ♦♦

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