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Denial of ambivalence as a hallmark of parental alienation

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Abstract: Parental alienation is a construct which describes a campaign of disenfranchisement from children on the part of one parent against another, particularly during divorce. It has been at the forefront of child custody research aimed at explaining its short- and long-term effects on the children affected by it. During a time when tension between parents is at its highest and conflict regarding parenting responsibilities and parenting time arises, parents resort to parental alienation in an effort to control and hinder the emotional relationship the children would otherwise forge with the other parent. This paper is a review and integration of established ambivalence and parental alienation theory incorporating clinical examples. The clinical examples are cited from real interviews conducted by the authors from 2010 to 2016. The purpose and diagnostic utility of the examination of this subject matter is to exemplify the need for making a fine grain clinical analysis of ambivalence in order to most accurately assess the existence of parental alienation in a clinical situation with children. Specifically, the expressed lack of ambivalence as manifested by the alienated child serves as an observable defining characteristic of the presence of parental alienation. The understanding of this phenomenon provides predictive criteria for clinicians and forensic experts to establish or rule out the existence of parental alienation in clinical and forensic settings with implications for treatment and custody recommendations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alan M. Jaffe, clinical and forensic psychologist, is an assistant professor of Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in the Department of Psychiatry for the last 35 years. Jaffe's expertise has been in the areas of family dysfunction, divorce-related issues, custody evaluations, and addictive disorders. In collaborative effort with Melanie Thakkar and Pascale Piron the research into parental alienation serves to advance the knowledge of child custody, child abuse assessment, and family issues.

An international author of articles and book chapters dealing with forensic psychology, psychological testing, substance abuse, and compulsive disorders, Jaffe is a leading expert witness in the psychological evaluation of individuals involved in legal matters. A consulting editor to *Complete Guide to Women's Health*, an American Medical Association Publication encyclopedia, his work as an expert witness has been noted by his recognition in the *Jury Verdict Reporter*.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The number of divorces is progressively increasing in Western countries. When divorce proceedings are tense, the change in family structure can be particularly challenging for children. In difficult cases, children are pulled into disagreements affecting the family as a whole. They find themselves in situations of having to side with one parent against the other at the detriment of their own well-being. Through the use of clinical examples and data from forensic evaluations, this paper explores the role of ambivalence in the parent-child relationship, describes the concept of parental alienation, manipulation, and the effect it has on children. When children no longer present with mixed feelings or contradictory ideas regarding one of their parents, this lack of ambivalence may signal the presence of parental alienation. This presentation can aid in identifying cases of parental alienation during clinical assessments and psychological evaluations and help with treatment recommendations and parental responsibility suggestions.

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1. Introduction

Divorce is a particularly difficult time in families, where parents and children, as well as extended family are negatively affected. The conflict occurring between parents and the observed negativity of one parent toward another affects children's perception of their parents and sets the landscape for conflicted loyalty. While the tension during and after divorce generally subsides two to three years post-divorce, there are instances where parents are unable to decrease the conflict. The ongoing negative parental relationship is considered more hurtful to children than the actual divorce. Children that are part of highly contentious divorces find themselves divided in allegiance between their parents (Moné & Biringen, 2012).

Research indicates that in 11 to 15% of divorce cases, parental alienation has found to be present ranging from mild to extreme cases. It is estimated that 1% of children are subjected to some form of parental alienation with an equal distribution between fathers and mothers being alienated and doing the alienation (Bernet, von Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Kruk, 2011). Parental alienation has been described as the psychological manipulation of children by one parent, in an effort to distance the other parent.

Additional statistical data points to a prevalence of 20–25% of parents engaging in parental alienation tactics even six years after their divorce (Lowenstein, 2013). The presence of parental alienation in families can manifest itself in themes of complete rejection of one parent by the children, a lack of finding anything positive to say about the alienated parent, and no longer presenting mixed feelings toward the parent (Gardner, 1998). In order to understand the underpinnings of this presentation within divorce settings, the aim of this study is centered on a theoretical examination based on supportive clinical data regarding the exploration of ambivalence and the lack thereof in cases of parental alienation.

2. Parental alienation

As a way to guard or distance themselves and stay unaware of negative feelings and thoughts, individuals are equipped with defense mechanisms to help circumvent disorganization and psychological pain (Jaffe, 1981). Individuals in a position of lesser power, stripped of independence, and their lives under full control of a dominating figure, so are the lives of dependent children looking to their parents for all basic needs of survival. As victims of hostage situations struggle for survival, children during a time of divorce do the same, relying on and identifying with the one that holds the power, the captor in the former, parent in the latter (De Fabrique, Romano, Vecchi, & Van Hasselt, 2007).

Research indicated that alienation is prevalent in both genders with the most common age range stated as between 9 and 15 years old. Due to their developmental stage, adolescents are typically more likely to be alienated from a parent than younger children (Fidler & Bala, 2010; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). The most common parental alienation strategy is when the alienating parent uses the child to constantly express negativity toward the target parent. Baker (2005), Baker and Ben-Ami (2011), and Ben-Ami and Baker (2012), consider parental alienation as a way to psychologically abuse children. Alienation tactics can range from mild to severe, and along this range, children continue to be exposed to the conflict between their parents, especially in cases where divorce is litigious.

Parental alienation is further described as the programming of children to distance themselves emotionally, and to learn to despise the targeted parent (Kruk, 2011). In cases where there is prolonged divorce litigation and the court's long-lasting involvement centers on issues of parenting time and responsibility, instances of parental alienation are the most rampant, manifesting itself in

a variety of forms. As a working model, parental alienation presents when children think in black and white patterns about their parents, idolizing one, rejecting the other, including patterns of erasing the past experiences (Baker, Burkhard, & Albertson-Kelly, 2012).

In mild cases, parental alienation presents as passive-aggressive comments by one parent about the other parent in the presence of the children, blocking some forms of communication, or ensuring periodic unavailability of the child to visit with the alienated parent. At the onset, mild parental alienation forms the foundation upon which moderate and severe cases of parental alienation can further extrapolate. In moderate cases of parental alienation, children get caught up in the arguments between the parents, often guilted into taking sides with the alienating parent, and pushed into pathological alignment (Lowenstein, 2013). In the more severe cases of alienation, the parent is determined to undermine the relationship between the children and the other parent that they will go to great lengths to put pressure on the children to reject the other parent entirely and demand allegiance.

Other examples of parental alienation present as children during high conflict divorces suddenly reject a parent they once adored. In one instance, the alienating parent will indoctrinate the child by criticizing the absent parent, sharing information relating to the conflict between the parents, pointing out where the targeted parent falls short, extending the shortcomings to the extended family, and the child, losing any ambivalence, and forced into survival, aligns with the alienating parent.

While the concept of parental alienation was first termed by Richard Gardner, it was classified by him as a specific syndrome rather than a process. Gardner defined Parental Alienation Syndrome as having eight criteria encompassing a campaign of denigration of the nonresident parent, a lack of sense of guilt, the presence of borrowed scenarios, absurd reasons for the behavior, independent opinion of the child, reflexive support of the resident parent, extension of the hostility to the family of the nonresident parent, and lack of ambivalence (Viljoen & van Rensburg, 2014). Here, the focus centers on understanding parental alienation as a process as it offers distinct advantages both in the identification and recognition of its presence. As a process parents undertake a series of actions and steps in order to achieve a particular end and as such the presence of parental alienation tactics are more readily transparent.

Parental alienation is a process that transcends multicultural and diverse groups. Research conducted by Bernet confirmed the presence of parental alienation in 30 different countries (Giancarlo & Rottmann, 2015). The study by Baker and Verrocchio (2013) centered on the self-reports of Italian college students and the presence of experienced parental alienation during their parent's separation and divorce as well as the effect on their mental health in adulthood. Overall the process of parental alienation is a global issue that can be found in multicultural families where parental conflict is at the forefront of separation rather than the well-being of the children.

3. Problems caused by parental alienation

The process of parental alienation obstructs the ability to foster a practical and cooperative parenting arrangement. As parents fight, children suffer emotionally and psychologically, and more so as they are subjected to continuous conflict (Baker, 2005). Several studies focused on the long-term effects of being subjected to parental alienation in childhood. The outcomes revealed that the more severe the experienced alienation, the more children were at risk for substance use disorders, depression, anxiety, relational issues, impulse control issues, and self-esteem issues in adulthood (Lowenstein, 2013).

Research centered on the effects of parental alienation points to serious mental health issues later in life and long-term negative harmful consequences due to learning hostile and manipulative behavior in relationships. The relationship between the children and the targeted parent is damaged through the alienating behaviors by the parent that spends the most time with the child, holding the power in their hands, and as a result affecting the future close relationships forged by the child (Moné & Biringen, 2012).

The inability of parents to separate themselves from the conflict with their spouse or partner is at the basis of their unhealthy attachment to their children. In turn, the children cannot effectively develop healthy attachments to their parents, and are unable to please either parent. This process leads to negative long-term effects on the children's mental health. Based on the psychological maltreatment, it is hypothesized that children exposed to parental alienation will develop unhealthy attachment patterns, low self-regard and self-sufficiency, and be at higher risk for depression in adulthood (Baker, 2005; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). Adults that were exposed to parental alienation techniques as children reported having adjustment issues in their relationships and a higher incidence of mental health issues.

Baker (2005) conducted a qualitative retrospective study involving adults subjected to parental alienation during childhood. The researcher interviewed 38 participants between the ages of 19 and 67 years old and found six areas of concerns. Participants who experienced parental alienation reported having low self-regard, depression, substance abuse, trust issues, alienation from their own children, and were also divorced themselves. These outcomes were believed by the participants to be related to the parental alienation they experienced as children.

Furthermore, adults who endorsed a higher number of parental alienation strategies reported having lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression, as well as having insecure attachment styles. Baker and Ben-Ami (2011) compiled 19 previously empirically studied parental alienation strategies and used their self-developed Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ) to determine the frequency and impact of these strategies on the adult participants. They found that 90% of participants indicated that bad-mouthing was the primary parental alienation strategy. As children, the participants reported that they internalized the message that the targeted parent did not love them and that they were unlovable.

Additionally, the children internalized the negative feedback related to the targeted parent as their own negative attributes. Baker and Ben-Ami (2011) stated that their study confirmed an association between the degree of exposure to parent alienation, insecure attachment styles, and psychological negative self-regard.

Finally, participants with lower self-esteem were more likely to state that the alienating parent contributed to their low self-esteem and reported higher rates of major depressive disorder. Ben-Ami and Baker (2012) examined the degree of conflict between parents during divorce proceedings and the effects of parental alienation techniques on adult children. Their study was important for understanding how past parental behavior affected the children in the present and found that participants reported long-term negative psychological effects. Studies further highlighted that prolonged conflict results in higher levels of psychological, behavioral, and educational issues for the children, including negative attitudes relating to future relationships rooted in aggression and low self-regard (Toren et al., 2013).

Further research points to a connection between the experience of parental alienation techniques in childhood and a higher self-reported prevalence of low self-esteem, low self-sufficiency, insecure attachment styles, and higher levels of depression. The conclusive data point to the inability of children to develop in normative ways. Instead of being able to fully express their love and concern for their parent, and believe that their home environment provides a safe psychological environment, the children have to learn to deny their own instincts in the ways they would like to communicate with their parents (Baker, 2010; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). In turn, the evidence points to the link between an inability to trust oneself and low self-esteem, as well as depression and low self-esteem. The more that parental alienation techniques experienced by the participants were endorsed, the lower self-esteem, the higher depression, and the poorer attachment styles were reported (Baker, 2005).

As children learn that they cannot trust their own instincts, they end up with poor identification and self-esteem problems. These children internalize the hatred of the targeted parent, and as they realize that they are genetically part of that parent, they identify with the hatred they project. The rejection of the alienating parent toward the targeted parent is also internalized as a rejection of self. This effect is intensified if the child and the targeted parent are the same gender, and the child bears strong physical resemblance to that parent. When parental alienation takes place at a very young age, children incorporate the negative self-feelings into the core of their self-worth (Baker, 2005).

4. Ambivalence

Ambivalence is defined as uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by an inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite or conflicting things. In the field of psychology, it is referred to as the coexistence within an individual of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object, or action, simultaneously drawing him or her in opposite directions.

Historically, Eugen Bleuler introduced ambivalence as a consequence of schizophrenic association disturbance. He argued that there is a propensity for people with split personality to experience and apply different feelings or affective ambivalence, intentions or ambivalence of the will, and thoughts or intellectual ambivalence to situations, objects, or people. A hallmark example is experiencing love and hatred for the same person. Bleuler described ambivalence as one of the four primary symptoms of schizophrenia and defined it as experiencing both positive and negative emotions at one and the same time (Corradi, 2013; Thylstrup & Hesse, 2009). It is inherent that affective ambivalence is the most commonly understood, however all of the above-mentioned forms are present in an individual. Bleuler sustained that in neurotic populations, ambivalence was present and manifested as procrastination (Corradi, 2013).

As a psychoanalytical view of ambivalence, Sigmund Freud offered that ambivalence is the simultaneous existence of love and hate toward the same object. The presence of ambivalence can be found intertwined in all stages of Freud's psychosexual development theory. It is most notably present in the oedipal stage where the feelings of a child toward the same-sex parent are highly ambivalent. Freud regarded ambivalence as inherent in the active and passive aims of the pre-oedipal instinctual drives, and as representing the struggle between the drives of life and death (Corradi, 2013).

Kurt Lewin's view of ambivalence was present in his approach and avoidance viewpoint, elements of stress theory. According to Lewin, individuals are driven to simultaneously desire success and avoid failure. Lewin conceived that goal objects in life have positive or negative valences, thus attracting or rejecting, and creating a dynamic conflict as a result of mismatched valences. The push and pull of the approach and avoidance creates an internal conflict when events produce simultaneously positive and negative characteristics. As such, the events can be at the same time desired and undesired by individuals (Elliot, 1999).

However, the implication of ambivalence in the context of parental alienation is best viewed through Freud's love and hate model. Ambivalent feelings are present in the pre-oedipal stages between mothers and children, but most importantly present during the oedipal stage between both parents and the child. It is at this time that children develop feelings of hostility or rivalry toward their same-sex parent. When a son's attachment to his mother becomes stronger, he develops negative feelings toward his father, whereas a daughter's feelings for her father strengthen and she becomes jealous of her mother. The coexistence of the negative feelings alongside the affection for the same-sex parent results in ambivalence for the child. Concurrently, the negative feelings create anxiousness in a child, and fearing repercussion of the same-sex parent, the child activates defense mechanisms of identification, thereby identifying with the same-sex parent (Corradi, 2013).

One of the development tasks for humans is to balance the primary love and hate drives as to tolerate ambivalence toward a loved object. When this task is unsuccessfully accomplished, psychopathology can ensue. Individuals with Borderline Personality Disorders fail to accomplish the task of ambivalence. They are unable to be simultaneously angry at someone they love, without destroying the love (Corradi, 2013). This construct is equally present in parental alienation. Children are unable to tolerate the ambivalence, and are indoctrinated to choose. Despite feeling love for their alienated parent they let go entirely of the loved object. This creates an occasion for the development of ego defenses in the child referred to as “splitting.”

As a way of understanding splitting, a common feature of Borderline Personality Disorder, is described as “a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 663). The presence of conflict can be evidenced as the perception of a person as either all good or all bad, or split between two individuals, one good and the other bad. Individuals may idealize caregivers or partners, demanding to spend a lot of time together, sharing extremely intimate details at the early onset of the relationship, to swiftly and drastically turn, and suddenly devaluing the very same individuals. Additionally, they are prone to abrupt changes in their opinion of others, seen as either beneficent supporters or as malevolent and punitive. These shifts may reflect disillusionment with primary caregivers as their nurturing qualities had previously been idolized or expecting their rejection and abandonment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The lack of being able to tolerate ambivalence and the intolerance for conflicting feelings toward one same individual, manifests as the process of splitting, and pushes borderline individuals to destroy the relationship. They are unable to tolerate the feelings of love and hate which triggers defensive movement. As such, the inability to trust presents itself and these individuals are laden with a legacy of failure and abandonment expectations. Since the primary caretaker failed them, they cannot trust anyone in current or future relationships, and acted out through transference, these individuals express the results of ambivalence in splitting (Corradi, 2013). Borderline individuals and parentally alienated children share similar characteristics of object relatedness to specific love objects.

As one of the most important core defensive operations in the ego, serving to keep object representations of opposite affective valences separated, both forms of splitting, i.e. self and others’ images are highly prevalent in individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder (as well as children whose splitting defense has been actively facilitated by an alienating parent). Primitive psychological defenses or borderline defense mechanisms are projection, denial, dissociation, or splitting. Splitting can be a useful defense as children face traumatic experiences, specifically when caused by the adults that they are insecurely attached to or dependent on (Perry, Presniak, & Olson, 2013).

Denial as a strategy of dealing with ambivalence was investigated by Anna Freud within the context of the primitive defense psychoanalytical theory. Freud described that the infantile ego, for a good many years, can free itself through denial, of any unwelcome facts all while keeping reality testing unimpaired. This power is used and applied to a world of fantasy both in thinking and acting out. Freud classified denial as a mechanism of the undeveloped mind, conflicting with the ability to learn from reality and subsequently developing appropriate coping mechanisms. She theorized that children will deny reality by means of fantasy, transforming reality to fit their own purposes, through use of fantasy or play. It is then, at that point and only then, Freud claims, that children can accept their reality (Freud, 1966).

It is very common to experience ambivalence about people, situations, and all types of things. In fact, it is normative and even desirable to have mixed feelings about much of what we perceive in the world, including parents. Identifying mixed feelings represents the individual’s ability to accurately perceive the world as possessing many coexisting conflictual attributes. However, many of us are taught to believe that we should be confident in our life experiences and feelings about

relationships with others, especially our families of origin. Many of us are also taught at an early age that our first loyalty is to our parents and that negative feelings toward them are forbidden and are certainly an insular affair not to be shared with the outside world. We are typically taught to suppress the negative feelings that accompany positive ones, and to deny ambivalent thoughts and feelings we naturally experience toward parents and family. The psychologically healthiest of parents encourage their children to accept their ambivalent experiences as normally expected occurrences. Despite the dissonance that ambivalence creates for us, and as undesirable as it may feel at times, ambivalence has long been considered to be a normal experience even by the earliest psychoanalysts.

Ambivalence may be defined as a peculiar mental state, being dominated by both a negative and positive emotional tone, and these opposite tendencies not infrequently in conflict with each other. Ambivalence may be purely an affective or intellectual type, although such differentiation is not often possible. Such phenomena are observed not only in the abnormal but in the normal. (Bleuler, 1914, p. 466)

Sigmund Freud's adoption of the term ambivalence to describe a hypothesized normal developmental function shifted the concept of ambivalence away from the original description of a symptom. Bleuler had said that ambivalence was found in normal people but Freud later said that it was expected, even necessary, that everyone experiences ambivalence (Costello, 1993). Mahler subsequently held that ambivalence toward the parent or caretaker on the part of the toddler is normal. She claimed that normative ambivalence was related to a "fear of reengulfment" (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975).

"Normal affection seems to Freud an adequate explanation for cases of normal and ordinary ambivalence. But, Freud also tells us that there are abnormal types—extraordinary cases when the contradictory feelings are pushed to the list of hatred and veneration" (Oughourlain & Lefort, 1978, p. 362). This denial of acceptable ambivalence is the type that is typically seen in cases of parental alienation where normal affection is substituted with unrelenting devaluation and negative bias.

5. Denial of ambivalence illustrated

Gardner highlighted denial of ambivalence as a hallmark of parental alienation, and normalized ambivalence as being present in all relationships between individuals, parents, and children being no exception. Within the construct of parental alienation, varying feelings are non-existent, and while the alienating parent is all good, the targeted parent is all bad. Usually, children will be able to provide qualities for each of their parents, however in parental alienation cases the list will contain only negative attributes for the alienated parent. In contrast, the indoctrinating parent will only be ascribed the best qualities. Despite the bond that may exist between the children and the alienated parent, and despite the loyalty and dedication displayed over the years by this very parent, the attachment disappears instantly when parental alienation is taking place. Additionally, where ambivalence was once present toward the indoctrinating parent, this too transforms instantly, however here into idealization. Lack of ambivalence can feel comfortable and familiar to children, the good versus bad characterization in many children's stories, therefore decreasing their feelings of uncertainty and putting them more at ease with their alignments (Gardner, 1998).

Following is an adapted case example taken from a sample of forensic child custody interviews court ordered and conducted by the authors between 2010 and 2016 in a private practice setting. Below is the excerpt from Amy's clinical interview:

The examiner asked, "What can you say that's positive about your mother?" Amy responded, "She's not ugly." The examiner stated, "About her as a person." Amy stated, "The last evaluator asked the same question." Amy paused then stated, "I'm trying to think of a nice thing; she doesn't have empathy, she can walk into a room full of people crying and not feel anything." Amy continued, "She provided food for us and didn't kick me out of the house." The examiner asked, "That's it?" Amy

responded, “Everything I have to say is a backhanded comment.” Amy stated, “She knows how to use retail therapy.” The examiner asked, “Did you identify anything positive about your mom in the previous evaluation?” Amy replied, “I think I said nothing.”

Amy is unable to list anything positive about her mother (Margaret) as a person. In fact, as Amy states above, the only qualities she can describe have a “backhanded” feature to them. “Sometimes the lack of ambivalence presents itself with the kind of symmetry that is so attractive to children” because it lessens “the confusion they often feel about their lives” (Gardner, 1998, p. 95). The father, Thomas, is conflict averse and gratifies the wishes of his children in order to avoid being in conflict with them. By adopting this position with his children he is perceived by them as “good” while Margaret is perceived as “bad.” The memories of any positive experiences that Amy may have had with Margaret have been relegated to her unconscious.

“Many children involved in parental alienation proudly profess that their decision to reject the targeted parent is their own. They deny any contribution from the programming parent, who supports this ‘independence’ vociferously. Alienators often claim that they want the child to visit with the other parent and profess recognition of the importance of such involvement, however the indoctrinator’s actions indicate otherwise” (Gardner, 1998, p. 96). As such, these children lessen the guilt of the alienating parents and protect them from criticism of others. In turn, the indoctrinating parent will remind the children that having a mind of their own is important and that they are brave to state how they feel. Furthermore, the refutation of the alienating parent regarding the child’s opinion of the alienated parent serves to encourage and support the child’s illusion of their own independent thoughts (Gardner, 1998).

The following is an excerpt from Amy’s clinical interview:

The examiner asked, “Are you worried that if you say anything nice to us or anyone about your mom or if you’re nice to her that the courts will force you to spend time with your mom?” Amy stated, “No, I just wouldn’t go.” Amy expressed, “I don’t care what this report or any other says.” Amy stated, “I’d say, grab and drag me there.” Amy stated, “If I’m nice to my mom she’ll have a delusion or irrational thinking and think we have a relationship when we don’t, it’s a lie.” The examiner asked, “Have you ever had a relationship with your mom?” Amy responded, “No, never.”

The one person from whom Amy learned her “rights” in the form of rebellion and by stating she simply “wouldn’t go” if the courts forced her to spend time with her mother, is her father, Thomas, whom she is clearly mimicking. “Programming parents who induce the independent thinker phenomenon in their children often invoke their ‘rights’ in the service of this goal. The programming parent who repeatedly denies that he has programmed his children contributes to the independent thinker phenomenon” (Gardner, 1998, p. 96). Basically, Thomas is telling the children that “the animosity is not coming from him (the programming parent) and therefore it must be coming from them, because where else could it have come from?” (Gardner, 1998, p. 97). This mechanism has been further intensified due to the fact that per his clinical interviews Thomas has made comments such as:

I’ve said to Amy for many years, I always said your mother loves you ... uh ... the way she knows how. Before the divorce Margaret never hugged the kids or said I love you, since this started she’s been doing it more, I don’t know if it’s a fake it to make it.

I think if I look at Amy, she’s gone through grieving, I think she always hoped she would have a relationship with Margaret like her friends had with their moms. All children need acceptance from their moms and dads.

I think my children don’t believe when bad things happen to them. Our son Daniel committed or tried to commit suicide when he was younger. He thought he was drinking bleach but he wasn’t. He couldn’t take it anymore with Margaret. Amy tried to commit suicide in July, she has no relationship with her mother.

The kids need quality experiences with their mom. We have babysitters who have horror stories about Margaret, she would just walk in and play with the dog.

It should be noted that collateral statements from former nannies and caretakers discredit Thomas's notion of any "horror stories" having taken place due to Margaret.

In cases with parental alienation, children may claim that one parent is enough, or that all negativity that was present in their lives is due to the alienated parent. Even if proof of a once strong parent-child alliance is presented to these children, they will deny it happened, claim it forgotten, or sustain it an obligation at that time. This lack of ambivalence not only presents as an internal factor, but manifests in denial of any previous relationship, pleasure, connection, or experience. During clinical interviews, questions that elicit a child to share positive and negative information about their parents might bring to the foreground borrowed-scenario language. This type of language will stand outside the normative level of development for the child, and is indicative of indoctrination by older children and adults, geared at distancing the targeted parent (Gardner, 1998).

The primary manifestation of parental alienation is the child's campaign of defamation against a parent, a campaign, which has no justification. This results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions (and scenarios of disparagement) to the vilification of the target parent. Parental alienation is applicable only when the target parent, Margaret, has not exhibited anything close to the degree of alienating behavior that might warrant the campaign of vilification exhibited by the child. The hallmark of parental alienation is the exaggeration of minor weaknesses and deficiencies. Typically, children involved in situations of parental alienation provide irrational and often ludicrous justifications for their alienation from the targeted parent. The child may justify the alienation with memories of minor altercations experienced in the relationship with the estranged parent, even years after they have taken place. These are often trivial and are experiences that children quickly forget (Gardner, 1998). During her clinical interview, Amy stated the following:

Miss T., our babysitter who cooks for us now said that Daniel and I used to scream constantly when my mom was around. From age 4-8 we were babysat by her. We would then cry anytime my mom walked in the room. At 4 years old, why would I cry? I don't remember it.

Amy stated to the examiner that she did not recall that any of these incidents had occurred, yet she provided this example to the examiner to substantiate her justification for being alienated from her mother. When this examiner asked Amy to give more compelling reasons for her rejection of Margaret, she was unable to provide them. Thomas shared the belief with Amy that these professed reasons justify the ongoing animosity that Amy has toward her mother. This examiner's observations of the interaction between Thomas and Amy revealed a disturbing appearance of an egalitarian relationship. Amy had an extremely manipulative and overly familiar relationship with her father.

Following is an excerpt from Stacey's clinical interview, Amy's younger sister:

The examiner asked, "You went to a concert, where was it and who did you see?" Stacey responded, "Taylor Swift." Stacey stated, "My mom, my friend Megan, and her friend." The examiner asked, "Ellie didn't go?" Stacey reported, "She kept texting and changing her mind, she didn't go." The examiner asked, "But she was informed?" Stacey stated, "Yeah, my mom got the tickets." The examiner asked, "Was it fun?" Stacey reported, "Yeah it was really fun." The examiner asked, "What about your mom?" Stacey reported, [recovering from a positive statement about Margaret] "... she cooks, but she doesn't even cook what I like." Stacey stated, "I tell her I don't like tomatoes or potatoes." Stacey expressed, "My sister knows that I don't like that stuff and my mom doesn't." Stacey stated, "It's not nice." Stacey further stated, "My mom never let Amy go to concerts on weeknights." The examiner asked, "Did Amy say anything to you?" Stacey reported, "We were talking and Amy said that she can [now] go to concerts on weeknights too."

This is a clear example of a weak and unreasonable rationalization. Stacey reported that she had fun at a concert that she attended with her mother, yet almost in the same breath, when asked about her mother, Stacey begins to describe that her mother does not cook certain things she likes and also stated Margaret will not let her watch television during dinner. This is an example of how normal, healthy parenting behavior on the mother's part is perceived as malevolently motivated and is then converted into a reason to justify feelings of alienation. Furthermore, Stacey brought up the fact that Amy was not allowed to go to concerts on weeknights. It would be common for a seventh grader to choose to attend a pop concert during a weeknight in the absence of good parental judgment and supervision. Stacey is no exception. The fact that Stacey invokes Amy to buttress her position is not only absurd, but it is clear evidence that Amy has and continues to exert a large amount of influence on her younger siblings. Irrationality is one of the important manifestations of parental alienation. In addition, in situations involving parental alienation younger children often become the parrots of their older siblings (Gardner, 1998).

Michael, the youngest child, also reported a number of frivolous and absurd excuses for non-visitation. Per his clinical interview, Michael stated the following:

At dad's house we're more free. At mom's house there are specific rules like breakfast at mom's. Their all opposites, like no iPad at mom's, but iPad at dad's. Need to be dressed in the morning before I use electronics. I don't always do that at dad's, but dad gets me dressed. Mom doesn't care about us as much.

The following is an excerpt from Michael's clinical interview:

When asked, "Do you like spending time with your mom?" Michael stated, "Yeah." Michael further stated, "But I want to go when I want, because all my stuff is at my dad's." The examiner asked, "What if your stuff was at your moms?" Michael stated, "My mom has a townhouse, my dad has a big house; I need space."

In cases involving parental alienation, older children can often be relied upon by the programming parent to program the younger children, down the line. Based on reports, observations, and clinical interviews Michael and Stacey are able to relax, forget their scenarios, and involve themselves benevolently with Margaret when they visit their mother, due to the fact that the older children, Katie (two years younger than Amy and two years older than Stacey) and Amy are not present. An older, well-programmed child can serve as a monitor to the younger ones and prevent any "relapses" (Gardner, 1998). Amy is obsessed with the "hatred" of her mother, yet there are still a number of tender and loving feelings felt toward the allegedly despised parent, Margaret, that are not permitted to be expressed. Amy continues to denigrate Margaret without embarrassment or guilt and has a profound yet detrimental influence over the younger children.

The following is an excerpt from Amy's clinical interview:

The examiner asked, "Tell me about your siblings." Amy stated, "Michael is eight, he's the happiest I've seen him the past week." Amy reported, "He gets angry very fast, but this week he's been on better behavior I think because he hasn't seen my mom for awhile." Amy stated, "He's going to see her soon though and he gets upset." Amy further stated, "Also, she'll buy him stuff so of course he likes that."

In this case, Margaret has been reduced to bribing or buying Michael's affection. It is Thomas and subsequently Amy who has labeled these efforts in this way, a label that was picked up by Amy as a borrowed-scenario element in Thomas' campaign of denigration. There is no appreciation by Thomas or the older children, that overtures such as buying concert tickets, or getting something for Michael represents anything but a desperate attempt on Margaret's part to maintain her loving relationship with her children.

During the course of this evaluation, the presence of borrowed scenarios witnessed during observation sessions and clinical interviews have made it abundantly clear that parental alienation is taking place. Not only was there a rehearsed quality to the children's litanies, but in addition, phrases were uttered that are not commonly used by children. Proof of alienation is established when expressions by children are identical to those used by the indoctrinating parent (Gardner, 1998).

The following is an excerpt from Amy's clinical interview:

This examiner asked, "... To your mind, what is this [the current evaluation] all about?" Amy stated, "I think it means someone thinks the first evaluator's report isn't truthful, valid, I don't know it seemed fair, but I didn't read it." Amy stated, "So either my mom, dad, lawyers, someone didn't like it." The examiner asked, "You didn't get any inkling about the first evaluator's report?" Amy responded, "I heard that she really liked us so she wrote the report fast, she tried to get things going quickly."

A teenager would only be aware of such information if he/she was inappropriately provided with the information by the indoctrinating parent.

Per her clinical interview, Amy stated the following:

I know how I talk about my dad and my mom seems like parental alienation but it's not. My mom alienates my dad. My dad tried to paint my mom in the best light. There is NEVER a time when I had a good relationship with my mom. Emotional and physical abuse; she didn't beat us all the time, but she'd push me into the wall and say she didn't do it.

The fact that Amy brought up and was even aware of the phrase "parental alienation" indicates that parental terms and phrases such as this one have been scripted into Amy's vocabulary.

Frequently alienating parents will exhort their children to tell them the truth regarding whether they really want to visit with the alienated parent. The child will usually appreciate that "the truth is the profession that they hate the vilified parent and never want to see him (her) ever again" (Gardner, 1998, p. 98). The children who have been effectively alienated from Margaret therefore provide that answer, (the alleged "truth") which protects them from alienating Thomas. If any of the children were to ever state the real truth that perhaps they would prefer to have a good relationship with Margaret, they would invoke the withdrawal of parental love and rejection from Thomas (Gardner, 1998). It is important to note as it is common to psychological indoctrination, after a sufficient period of programming, the children no longer know what the truth is anymore and can come to actually believe that Margaret deserves the vilification being imposed upon her. This is unfortunately the case with the older children and this places all of the children in a psychological state of endangerment.

When the children are upset Thomas has very limited resources with which to deal with their distress. In order to avoid becoming the object or target of the children's negative feelings he deflects them in a very subtle and insidious way toward Margaret. He "helps" them to understand that their problems are somehow due to their mother, and that if only she were more emotionally responsive she would (unrealistically) gratify whatever their wishes, desires, or needs are in that moment. However, consistent with this position, due to the fact that Margaret is a responsible parent and does not gratify their every wish she is defined as being disinterested, uncaring, and emotionally underinvested in them. In order to maintain his good guy persona Thomas avoids engaging in behaviors that would cause him to be perceived as an authority figure. This naturally compromises his ability to effectively parent his children in a meaningful way.

During the observation sessions, it was apparent that the children relate to Thomas as if he is a peer, mocking him, deriding him, and being generally very chummy with him. Thomas deals with this

treatment by smiling sheepishly and shrugging his shoulders. The net result of this interpersonal interaction is that particularly the older children have developed a cavalier, confrontational, and grandiose approach to adults in general. They consider themselves as having peer status with adults at best, and at worst they are disrespectful and condescending. This disrespect and condescension is acted out in a dogmatic fashion toward Margaret, which serves to keep Thomas out of the line of fire. In order to maintain their overly familiar relationship with their father they are unconsciously required to share a common illusion, that is, that their mother does not love them. This illusion justifies expressions of anger toward Margaret that are both verbally and aggressively violent at times, as highlighted by the examples given above.

6. Utilizing evidence of denial of ambivalence

As the practice of forensic psychology differs in important ways from more traditional practice areas, Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychologists were developed by the American Psychological Association and informed by the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. These guidelines serve to increase the quality of psychological services in the area of forensic evaluations and assessments and to provide guidance on professional conduct within the legal system (American Psychological Association, 2013).

The guidelines stipulate that forensic practitioners strive for accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in the science and do not provide services that might be misleading or inaccurate. Furthermore, they “are encouraged to recognize the importance of documenting all data they consider with enough detail and quality to allow for reasonable judicial scrutiny and adequate discovery by all parties. This documentation includes, but is not limited to, letters and consultations; notes, recordings, and transcriptions; assessment and test data, scoring reports and interpretations; and all other records in any form or medium that were created or exchanged in connection with a matter” (American Psychological Association, 2013, p. 8).

The guidelines further highlight the use of appropriate methods, procedures, and multiple sources of information. Forensic practitioners are guided to avoid relying on one source of data, and substantiate important data when possible (Jaffe & Mandeleew, 2008). Additionally, “when relying upon data that have not been corroborated, forensic practitioners seek make known the uncorroborated status of the data, any associated strengths and limitations, and the reasons for relying upon the data” (American Psychological Association, 2013, p. 14).

Evidence of the denial of ambivalence can be used by clinicians to identify parental alienation. As outlined in the Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychologists, meaningful data must be collected to ensure ample and satisfactory discovery. The clinical interviews with children serve to understand their reaction to the divorce, their awareness of their role in the divorce, their perception of their parents, their view of how the divorce has affected their relationship with their family and friends, their understanding of a new social life, and how they are coping with the separation. During the interview rapport is created, the children’s ability to answer questions is assessed, interview ground rules are explained, practice questions are asked, and specific topic questions are introduced through open-ended and more directive questions (Ackerman, 2010). While children may not be used to this style of questioning at first, allowing the child to offer up this information spontaneously and in his or her own time during the interview tends to allow for more detailed descriptions of the events in question as well as longer responses (Thakkar, Jaffe, & Vander Linden, 2015).

Questions that elicit ambivalence are geared toward understanding if children can share something negative but also something positive about their parents with regard to their personality. Children might share details they perceive as negative when it pertains to a normative form of discipline. Furthermore, questions can be asked to draw a general explanation of how the children perceive their parents, or if one parent interferes with the relationship of the other parent, and where themes of a lack of ambivalence can be uncovered.

The observation of children with parents is another key element in the assessment of lack of ambivalence. Here the construct of time can be crucial to allow for a longitudinal viewpoint. It is essential to see the children interact with both of their parents at the onset of the evaluation and over durations of weeks and even months. Given that children may be coached by the alienating parent, with time the impact of the coaching may lessen to give way to less guarded behavior in observation. Time also allows for a deviation of present negative behavior when compared with past positive behavior.

Collateral reports are part of gathering data for an evaluation and are to be considered valuable information specifically if the content is unfavorable (Ackerman, 2010). Using collateral information in the context of observable denial of ambivalence will help to discover maladaptive behavior from one parent toward another. Attention can be drawn to the frequency and recency of events.

It is important when examining cases of potential parental alienation to review the history of the relationship between children and parents. It is commonly revealed that the un-ambivalent posture of the child vis-a-vis the despised parent has a discernible point of origin. Most often the rupture in the relationship between the parent and child corresponds temporally to the first occurrences of the empathic break between mother and father's deteriorated relationship. When examining the parent-child relationship over a timeline the astute clinician observes a notable contrast between past and present behavioral attitudes of the child as well as differences in the quality of the interaction with the negatively perceived parent. This proves to be true in spite of the child's often observed protestations to the contrary; claims that the relationship with the alienated parent have never been remotely satisfactory for even the shortest period of time.

7. Conclusion

The observable absence of normally expected ambivalent feelings toward a parent should be considered a high probability diagnostic indicator of the presence of parental alienation process. The likelihood of the existence of an active campaign of parental alienation when denial of ambivalence is represented by children is heightened further if a divorce action is the backdrop of a clinical investigation. Clinical evaluators, guardians ad litem, and judges are too often in a position of attempting to discern whether or not parental alienation can explain a deteriorated relationship between a child and a parent. Being aware of the subtle nuance of the persistent denial of ambivalence on the part of a child can provide valuable clues into the developmental genesis of a child's negativistic perceptions. Ambivalence is a normal experience, and it is expected for children to have both positive and negative perceptions and feelings toward their parents. When these normal range experiences of parents are absent in the representations of children, it must lead the clinician to consider the hypothesis that parental alienation has been taking place.

There are a number of diagnostic factors that should be taken into consideration to determine whether or not parental alienation can be accurately assessed. It is our position that the presence of a child's denial of ambivalence toward a parent is a hallmark of parental alienation, and should therefore be considered very seriously in the evaluation process. Denial of ambivalence, (when parental alienation exists), is a particularly reliable clinical phenomenon when evaluating children, because it is a construct too subtle and abstract for children to deliberately edit and misrepresent in the clinical assessment process. Therefore, clinician evaluators should be actively testing for manifestations of denial of ambivalence in order to most accurately assess parental alienation for the purpose of determining the best interests of children.

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