

“Alienation Revisited”

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ALIENATION REVISITED.

SYNOPSIS.

A child's attachment to a parent is a naturally occurring process that has evolved to meet the basic human needs of the child including survival and developmental needs.

Unsurprisingly it is remarkably resistant to parental inadequacies and intrusions.

Despite the robust nature of the attachment process, a mounting body of evidence suggests that when one parent enlists a child in battle against the other parent the attachment process can be reversed - at considerable cost to the child. This process, first identified by Gardner in 1985, is commonly described as "parental alienation" or in severe cases "Parental Alienation Syndrome".(1)

Unlike attachment theory, which is underpinned by a forty year history of systematic research, (Ainsworth et al) the organised study of parental alienation is comparatively new and controversial.

Nevertheless the notion of alienation is a pervasive presence in counselling rooms and court rooms and, in it's severest manifestations, often defies the best efforts and intentions of both.

It is therefore relevant and arguably imperative that the phenomena receives our concentrated attention as a field of study. Consideration might also be given to the development of programmes and interventions that specifically address it's many and various manifestations in the Family Court.

THEORY AND DEFINITION.

According to Gardner PAS is “a disturbance in the child who, in the context of divorce, becomes preoccupied with deprecation and criticism of one parent, which denigration is either unjustified and/or exaggerated. PAS arises primarily from a combination of parental influence and the child’s active contributions to the campaign of denigration”. In describing PAS as a syndrome he considers that a cluster of symptoms can be identified - most or all of which must be observed to justify the diagnosis. The eight “symptoms are :-

- The child is aligned with the alienating parent in a campaign of denigration against the target parent , with the child making active contributions.
- Rationalisations for deprecating the target parent are often weak, frivolous or absurd.
- Animosity toward the rejected parent lacks the ambivalence normal to human relationships.
- The child asserts that the decision to reject the target parent is his or her own, what Gardner calls the “independent thinker” phenomena.
- The child expresses guiltless disregard for the feelings of the target parent.
- Borrowed scenarios are present ie. the child’s statements reflect the themes and terminology of the alienating parent.
- Animosity is spread to the extended family and others associated with the hated parent.

Whilst Gardner’s “typology” is a useful evaluative tool it is probably best used as a guide to analysis and judgement. How many of these features must be present to establish the syndrome remains an unanswered question - confounded further by the suggestion that PAS operates on a continuum from mild to severe. Exactly where the cut off point between mild/severe alienation to full blown PAS is not clear.

As with most prescribed classification systems the danger is that it can be used inflexibly thus including or excluding families from appropriate interventions on a superficial numerical basis. This is probably more of a comment on the hazards of evaluation in a very complex area than on Gardner's typology.

In practice a problematic issue with the use of the notion of a syndrome or typology is that it is tempting to supplement it for thorough analysis of a process that thrives on obfuscation.

In the language used there is a fairly dramatic intensity that suggests that the most florid presentations are a primary characteristic of PAS. Clinical experience suggests that behaviours that could not be described as a "campaign of denigration" can be very destructive but might not have a dramatic quality. The extent and variety of such behaviours is unlimited and context specific.

THE INCIDENCE OF PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME.

Processes akin to Parental Alienation seem to occur as a feature of most destructive conflicts. Campaigns of misinformation, disinformation and the cultivation of alliances can be seen in conflicts between countries, in industrial conflicts, in neighbour conflicts and in the schoolyard.

It is not surprising therefore that several commentators have found that the process is widespread amongst the separating population.(Gardner, Clavar and Rivkin) - particularly given the intense emotions generated by family breakdown. Gardner himself claims its existence in "the majority" of custody disputes. Clavar and Rivkin, in a twelve year study of 130 children and families, identified "parental programming" to varying degrees in eighty per cent of their subjects.

The suggestion of a significantly raised incidence of frivolous abuse allegations in Family Court proceedings also has some support. The research unit of The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (USA) found that sexual abuse allegations in Family Court type proceedings were valid only fifty percent of the time. The Office of Child Abuse Prevention (USA) revised their manual for mandated reporting to include a section on false allegations in which the coaching of children during custody disputes is described as a major problem.

In this setting the perceived need to include in orders injunctions against a parent discussing material that reflects negatively on the other parent is common enough - indicating that we are conscious of the problem even if parental alienation is not always named as such.

Allegations of “brainwashing” are also frequent in family report evaluations and conciliation counselling - often in defence of allegations of poor parenting up to and including abuse. Distinguishing between fact and fiction for the purpose of family reports and other evaluative processes is a most challenging task requiring comprehensive and objective analysis.

It is noticeable that the above findings rarely make a distinction between parental alienation as an common consequence of high conflict and the PAS as described by Gardner. Making this distinction is critical as PAS may require strong interventions - sometimes including removal of the child from the alienating influence. It could be most destructive to apply the same criteria and remedies to families whose alienation processes are crisis driven and time limited. This is not to say that even shortlived attempts to turn a child against a parent are not serious but rather that they are more receptive to change when parents have the capacity to recover from

feelings of hurt and loss. As will be seen later it is the parent who does not have the innate capacity for such resolution who features highly in severe alienation scenarios.

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ALIENATION.

If parental alienation processes (not necessarily PAS) are prevalent in separating families, in which the residence of and contact with children is a matter of conflict, it is reasonable to ask why this should be at this time. Possible explanations are to be found in the current social / legal context.

The shift in emphasis from “the tender years” presumption to the “best interest of the child” presumption may well be an inadvertent contributor. In simple terms the former assumed that one parent, commonly the mother’ was naturally the main caregiver - until recently perhaps considered an unchallengeable proposition . The best interest presumption opened up the possibility of a range of parenting options and thus far more contestable parenting issues. Arguably parents in contested children’s matters now have more to fight about!

Similarly it can be argued that the removal of “fault” from the divorce process allowed for the displacement of angry hurt feelings onto the only remaining issues - children and property.

It is also suggested that the distinctions between the “father role” and the “mother role” are for many families now less rigid - perhaps fostering increased competitiveness in matters of nurturing and child care.

Ironically, society’s increased vigilance with respect to child protection may also be relevant.

Few social phenomena will generate the degree of moral outrage that accompanies the physical and sexual abuse of children. While this reaction is totally appropriate, in the hands of an alienating parent in the midst of family conflict it can be manipulated to great effect. Society's vigilance in this regard has been accompanied by other notions that have important protective functions but which also provide fertile ground for parental alienation. These might include the unquestioned belief that children never lie and a reliance on circumstantial behaviours to demonstrate abuse.

More recently the rights of children to have more of a say in matters effecting their lives has presented Counsellors and Courts with a difficult dilemma. The age at which children can make informed, mature decisions and resist influence has some elasticity.

Nevertheless, developmentally, one would expect the average child to be able to articulate a position around nine years old - with out necessarily grasping it's implications for self and others. Ironically, for the same reasons a child between nine and twelve approximately is most vulnerable to the alienation process. Counsellors are often challenged by alienating parents of this age group to accept the child's views uncritically because they have "a mind of their own" and a "right" to have their position heard and acted upon. Gardner refers to this as "the independent thinker". Claims of independent thinking in younger age groups should alert evaluators to the possibility of parental alienation.

The relevance of a social perspective on sensitive issues such as alienation and child abuse is that we are all influenced by our social context and no doubt have our own ideas and moral perspective's. These must be available for analysis to avoid, as far as is possible, viewing subject families through a particular lens. Supervision is critical to this process.

PARENTAL ALIENATION AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS.

Over the last two years a group of counsellors at the Sydney Registry have tried to look more closely at the alienation process as it impacts on children and families. Having initially set about the task of responding to “intractable contact” cases in response to the Sidoti enquiry, the Sydney group moved to the premise that intractable contact and parental alienation were often overlapping phenomena.

This group also responded to the professional dissatisfaction of despatching matters to “court” when it seemed that approaches experienced in previous settings, such as family therapy, were potentially effective with “revolving door” matters.

For the most part those families that were identified as exhibiting behaviours suggestive of alienation were seen as family groups. Because the families were usually seen as units we were able to observe the alienation processes as they were occurring.

The families seen could all be described as moderate to severe, based on the criteria that they had all continued with alienation processes, often expressed through intractable contact issues, despite previous interventions - including legal and counselling interventions. The failure of previous interventions was suggestive of chronicity.

The following observations are based on this experience and on a review of the relevant literature. By and large our clinical experiences were consistent with the findings of the main commentators.

On a cautionary note, while it is possible to identify common trends, we found that there were also exceptions and that each family presented unique features. Unlike Gardner (at least in his early work) we found that the process was not necessarily gender specific; not necessarily the province of the “custodial” parent; and often subtle (but equally destructive) in terms of behavioural indicators.

Perhaps the most common finding in terms of risk factors is that the manner of the family breakup and separation is critical. Sudden “unanticipated” separations, especially involving infidelity, feature highly amongst acknowledged risk factors. The sense of “betrayal” experienced by the alienating parent is communicated as a betrayal of the family and the child.

While this will be the experience of many separating families some seem to “recover” at least to the degree that that the child does not remain in alliance with one parent against the other and contact at least continues.

One also has to look for factors in both the alienating *and* target parent to assess the potential for chronic alienation - the object of which is often to punish the parent perceived as responsible for the family demise by damaging his or her relationship with a child.

Generally the parent who does not recover from hurt and anger over time will be already be vulnerable to narcissistic injury and predisposed to “externalising”.or blaming. For the most part individuals who are thus predisposed will themselves have experienced significant deficits in their own parenting and/or have experienced significant previous losses that remain unresolved. At times the enmeshment between the child and the parent derives in the parents sadness and distress and at others the parent’s anger is too powerful a force for the child to resist.

While one could gain the impression from some of the literature that the alienated parent is a passive victim, our experience has been that this is an oversimplification. The scenario in which a “toxic” parent turns a child against an unambiguously “good” parent is comparatively rare. In my view, more often than is recorded, there is usually some mutuality in the alienating process.

One can readily see how this can occur. Rarely for example, is the separation process free of innocent parties with respect to angry, out of control behaviours. The probable difference is that an alienating parent will strive to keep the angry behaviours “alive” in the child's mind and/or embellish them. In some instances such behaviours become part of the family legend to be revived at strategic moments. It is as if the alienating parent is keeping an imaginary photo album - selecting and adding those “snaps” that show the other parent in the worst possible light.

It is also likely that the target parent will demonstrate behaviours, perhaps borne of frustration and/or sadness, that can be readily added to the album. In some instances this will involve retreat and avoidance which is translated as abandonment and is presented as such to the child. In others the constant fighting and bickering will produce ample behavioural evidence that the “target” parent is a “bad” person, not to be trusted or even dangerous.

The alienation process is also notorious for the pressure it places on other family members and friends to be “on side” leading to the notion of “tribal” conflict described by Janet Johnson. It is as if those who remain in the orbit of the offending parent have themselves been contaminated. Many a sad and confused grandparent will testify to this.

The notion of “tribalism” is not confined to family and friends. The pressure on professionals such as counsellors, lawyers, therapists and teachers to be “on side” is often irresistible. Of particular note in this regard is the role of the individual child therapist and in some instances the over zealous child protection worker who unwittingly confirms the “failings” of the target parent through uncritical acceptance of “borrowed” scenarios without contact with the alienated parent.

CHILDREN AND ALIENATION

Lampell (2) found that the “aligned child tested as more aggressive and less well adjusted but with a superior confidence”. Our experience at the Sydney Registry suggests that other likely presentations include chronic anxiety and disguised sadness.

Gardner’s typology includes the statement that alienated children “lack normal human ambivalence”. This is not borne out by our experience. It is, in my view, more accurate to say that the children can appear to lack ambivalence but that often, hostile expressions disguise deeper sadness and confusion.

The most obvious “finding” from the families seen in Sydney was that the children were universally miserable with the possible exception of those few adolescents who had become detached enough to be coolly dismissive of a parent who had been effectively absent from their lives for an extended period. Little is known, from a research perspective, about the impact of such complete detachment on future mental health or on future intimate relationships.

Gardner asserts that the designation PAS cannot be used without clear evidence that the child is aligned and participating. It is self evident that such participation distinguishes PAS from other childhood reactions to high, post separation conflict. The primary age for “participation”

to be most active(and functional with respect to the alienating parent) is often considered to be from approximately 9 to 12 years of age. This is partly because a child of this age has various “new” capacities relevant to the process. These include a clearer capacity to see themselves as their parents see them and to more clearly identify and articulate a parental perspective. Both factors can leave children vulnerable to strong pressure.

Children in this age range also have a developing moral perspective which is often black and white - “that’s not fair” is a common “crie de coeur” for this age group.

Younger children tend to be more malleable and can confuse and exacerbate family conflicts by adapting both parents’ scenarios depending who they are with and reporting back different stories to each parent. We nevertheless had experiences of five to seven year olds with disturbing alliances and even younger children who resonated with the “fears” and “anxieties” of an alienating parent.

Infants are not often mentioned in the context of parental alienation but they are nevertheless particularly vulnerable to the prolonged absence of a parent which is sometimes engineered in the service of interrupting a parent child relationship. As with all age groups the absence of a parent may be justified in some circumstances - particularly those involving abusive situations. It is doubtful nevertheless that such actions as child abduction can always be explained as justified flight.

It is also possible to “misinterpret”, deliberately or otherwise, normal developmental phases such as separation anxiety or “two year tantrums” as fear or dislike of the other parent.

At the other end of the spectrum some teenagers seem able to obtain an objective perspective on parental conflict and can thus achieve some distance. Others remain locked in with one parent physically and emotionally and as emerging adults assume protective and combative positions. Control and discipline may become especially confounding issues as adolescent rebellion is reconstructed as justified anger. Additionally amongst our group of families were adolescents whose role included ensuring the conformity of younger siblings to a parental view particularly if they had assumed a pseudo parenting role.

In summary it is suggested that parental alienation is a pervasive issue in Family Court proceedings. It is also suggested that parental alienation is a damaging and emotionally painful experience for children and if left to run its course will result in broken attachments and precipitate mental health problems. While it is often difficult to distinguish alienation from neglect and abuse, it is in and of itself, an emotionally abusive process, at least in its severe forms.

It is also suggested that its chronicity and severity correlates highly with the personality profile of the alienating parent. The latter's actions can precipitate behaviours in the child and the target parent that reinforce negative images of the target parent.

Finally, the behaviours of the alienating parent, the child and the target parent can interact with each other and with significant others in a destructive feedback loop that is increasingly resistant to change.

SOME SUGGESTED RESPONSES.

Central issues for the Court derive in the progressive and complex nature of parental alienation. Complex family issues such as alienation in its severest forms require comprehensive and resource intensive responses and it's progressive nature suggests that these should be delivered early.

- The assessment phase is critical. Failure to distinguish between parental alienation and justified reactions can have disastrous consequences, particularly if allegations of abuse have been raised. Investigations at least as thorough as those entailed in formal Family Report are probably necessary.
- It is suggested that this analysis should occur as early as possible in proceedings as parental alienation seems to gather momentum the longer it is ignored.
- There is no one intervention choice that is universally applicable but an most commentators support an approach that is case specific and based on a coherent counselling / legal plan. Devices such as Special Masters Schemes and detailed reportable supervision orders will add authority and flexibility to counselling and therapy. At times reunions between children and estranged parents need to be court ordered and therapeutically managed.
- With respect to counselling, the pervasiveness and complexity of the issues suggests a specialised team approach to further develop both knowledge and expertise and to provide a platform for supervision.
- Parental Alienation could be characterised as an interactive process commonly involving all family members including the children, extended family members and new partners and families. This suggests that family systems responses are indicated - at times supported by individual work with family members. This might include individual

work with children to restore more accurate perspectives and support for the target parent to limit disengagement.

- It is also suggested that the overall goal of interventions should emphasise and be guided by the restoration of contact as the primary objective. The group at the Sydney Registry can attest to therapeutic value of restored contact - even amongst some families with experience of failed previous interventions and prolonged parent child estrangement.

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