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To: Karlene Murray-Gordon

Re: Covert domestic violence in “parental alienation” pathology

Dear Ms. Murray-Gordon

You are absolutely on the right track in recognizing the domestic violence component in some forms of the pathology traditionally called “parental alienation.” The pathology of “parental alienation” represents a manifestation of narcissistic and borderline personality pathology into family relationships surrounding the divorce. Classic conceptualizations of domestic violence also commonly entail the expression of a narcissistic personality disturbance in the abusive spouse.

In the “parental alienation” variant of domestic violence, the divorce triggers a narcissistic injury in the narcissistic-personality spouse (typically, but not necessarily always, the husband/father), which prompts his narcissistic rage and a desire for revenge against the rejecting and abandoning attachment figure of the other spouse (typically the wife and mother). Since the divorce and spousal separation prevents the narcissistic personality spouse from expressing his rage and retaliation directly toward the now physically separated ex-spouse, the narcissistic personality spouse uses the children to exact his retaliatory revenge by triangulating the children into the spousal conflict through the formation of a “cross-generational coalition” against the ex-spouse, now the targeted parent. The narcissistic parent uses the children as weapons to inflict a retaliatory suffering on the ex-spouse as a means of satisfying a revenge motivation and as a means to reestablish his or her narcissistic defense against the exposure of primal feelings of self-inadequacy that were triggered by the divorce.

The underlying psychological themes expressed in this “parental alienation” variant are:

- “Now aren’t you sorry you divorced me. I’ve taken your children from you. I’ve killed your children. You don’t have your children anymore because you’re such a bad and inadequate person (spouse). You’re sorry now, aren’t you. You deserve to suffer for leaving me. You deserve this.”
- “I’m not the rejected parent (spouse/person), you are. You’re the inadequate parent (spouse/person) not me. I’m the ideal and all wonderful parent (spouse/person). The children have chosen me, and they’ve rejected you because I’m the wonderful and ideal parent (spouse/person) and you’re inadequate and you deserve to be rejected.”

The children are incorporated into the cross-generational alliance (called a “perverse triangle” by the preeminent family systems therapist, Jay Haley) through a variety of manipulative communication and relationship techniques employed by the narcissistic personality parent. Essentially, the children are placed into a loyalty conflict by the narcissistic parent in which the children must choose sides. If they choose the mother’s side (typically this

domestic violence “parental alienation” pathology is expressed as a narcissistic father and targeted mother), then the narcissistic father retaliates against the children with displays of cold and hostile rejection and contempt which can be displayed in a variety of contexts but that carry the subtext. “Displease me and I’ll make you suffer.” If, on the other hand, the children surrender to the desire of the narcissistic father that they display hostility and rejection toward the targeted mother, then the children are rewarded with parental displays of narcissistic charm from the father and with narcissistic indulgences of expensive gifts and adult-like privileges because they’re “good children.”

The pathology of this covert “parental alienation” domestic violence is an incredibly horrific form of violence against the targeted spouse (typically the mother). In retaliation for the divorce, the narcissistic husband is essentially killing the mother’s children. Prior to the divorce, she was a loving mother with loving children. After the divorce and the “alienation” of her children, she has lost her children, she no longer has her children. The children (supposedly) no longer want to have visitations with her because of her supposed inadequacy (the narcissistic theme of the father), and when they do visit with her, their attitudes are of open contempt and hostility (the narcissistic themes of the father).

Domestic violence is centered around themes of power, control, and domination. This variant of the “parental alienation” pathology is similarly centered around themes of power, control, and domination, with prominent components of revenge sought by the narcissistic spouse on the divorcing spouse (often the wife and mother) for having rejected the supposed narcissistic magnificence of the psychologically and emotionally abusive husband.

I would highly recommend that any domestic violence center include a component to recognize and address this covert expression of psychologically abusive domestic violence perpetrated by the narcissistic personality ex-spouse using the children as weapons to inflict profound suffering on the now ex-spouse, typically the mother.

Please feel free to contact me for further consultation if you believe this might be helpful in identifying or treating the pathology of covert domestic violence thorough the pathology of “parental alienation.”



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