

Meaning Construction, the Developing Brain, and Parental Alienation

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One of the primary features of parental alienation is the influence exercised by the alienating parent over the beliefs and attitudes of the child that are then expressed through the child's actions toward the targeted parent. In trying to demonstrate the alienation processes, the targeted parent tries to prove that the child's verbalizations and behavior are indicative of the negative parental influence of the alienating parent. Meanwhile, the alienating parent seeks to have the child's expressed attitudes, beliefs, and desires relative to the rejected parent considered as paramount in making visitation and custody decisions.

This argument is often taken up by treating mental health professionals and forensic evaluators, who seek to determine the degree of authenticity and influence involved in the child's expressed beliefs and attitudes. Meanwhile, the child adamantly asserts that his or her attitudes are authentic and are not being influenced by the alienating parent, so that some mental health professionals will side with the assertions of the child and declare that the child's expressions of his or her inner experiences need to be recognized and validated, while others perceive a more prominent role for external influences that are inducing the child's attitudes and beliefs toward the targeted parent.

The question the Court must decide becomes a difficult issue of authenticity and influence. However, from a developmental neuro-biological perspective, this represents a false question. Authenticity of self-experience is intimately blended with influence from others, so that making such a determination becomes irrelevant. In order to understand this process of authenticity and social influence requires an understanding for how the brain develops and functions in childhood.

The Meaning of Experience

Emotions serve as the ground for self-experience and involve two components. The first component is the identity of the emotion; the "what am I feeling." The second component is the meaning of the emotion; the "why am I feeling this." We are usually fairly adept at identifying what emotion we are feeling, although sometimes the blend of feelings can make an exact specification more challenging. However, we are highly vulnerable to misattributing the meaning of why we are experiencing a particular emotion. The meaning we attribute as to why we are having a particular experience has proven to be an elusive construct, and overwhelming research has consistently demonstrated that our construction of meaning is heavily influenced by the meaning construction of others within the social field (Asch, 1952;¹ Hornik, Risenhoover, & Gunnar, 1987; Mineka, Davidson, Cook, & Keir,

¹ "The paramount fact about human interactions is that they are happenings that are psychologically represented in each of the participants. In our relation to an object, perceiving, thinking, and feeling take place on one side, whereas in relations between persons these processes take place on both sides and in dependence upon one another."

1984; Schachter & Singer, 1962; Sherif, 1958; Sorce, Emde, Campos, & Klinnert, 1985; Walden, & Ogan, 1985).

A basic study in this regard involved the formation of the fear of snakes in monkeys (Mineka, Davidson, Cook, & Keir, 1984). These researchers wondered how monkeys developed their fear of snakes. It couldn't be through the direct experience of being bitten by snakes since this would simply result in dead monkeys, not fearful monkeys. So researchers conducted an experiment in which they placed a baby monkey alone in a cage with a snake and found that the baby monkey was completely unconcerned by the snake's presence and exhibited no fear of the snake. The researchers then placed a baby monkey and its mother into the cage with a snake. The mother showed strong signs of fear; climbing the side of the cage and making distress calls. From that point on, the baby monkey showed a fear of snakes. The baby monkey acquired the fear of snakes from adopting the mother's construction of meaning regarding the snake.

In another study (Schachter & Singer, 1962), a series of adult human participants were given a drug (adrenaline) that simply made their heart beat faster, but the research subjects were not told what effect the drug would have. The research participants were then placed in a waiting room along with another person whom the research participants were told was also a subject in the research study, but who was actually an experimental confederate of the researchers. In one condition, the experimental confederate began to act euphoric and silly. In this condition, the authentic research subjects also began to laugh and act silly, and after the study's completion the research subjects reported that the drug had induced a feeling of happiness and euphoria. In the second condition, the experimental confederate began to act angry, and in this condition the actual experimental subjects also began to act angry, and after the experiment the subjects reported that the drug had induced feelings of anger. The authentic experience of the research participants had been exactly the same in both conditions, yet the subjects' attribution of meaning depended on the meaning construction provided by referencing the social responses of others.

The social referencing for attribution of meaning is particularly prevalent with children (Walden & Ogan, 1988) and the recent discovery of the underlying neural substrate for forming an interpersonally shared psychological experience, the "mirror neuron" network² (Iacoboni, et. al., 2005; Kaplan & Iacoboni, 2006), has significantly advanced our understanding of shared psychological experiences and the co-construction of meaning. Based on these recent discoveries, a leading researcher in the field of child development, Daniel Stern (2004), has commented that,

Our nervous systems are constructed to be captured by the nervous systems of others. Our intentions are modified or born in a shifting dialogue with the felt intentions of others. Our feelings are shaped by the intentions, thoughts, and feelings of others. And our thoughts are cocreated in dialogue, even when it is only with ourselves. In short, our mental life is cocreated... The idea of a one-person

² See online video by PBS-NOVA at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/mirror-neurons.html>

psychology or of purely intrapsychic phenomena are no longer tenable in this light (p. 76).

Brain Maturation, Immaturity, and Children's Social Referencing of Meaning

The neuro-development of brain systems is use-dependent (Kleim & Jones, 2008; Perry, et al., 1995). Whenever brain cells and brain systems are used in association with each other, structural and chemical changes take place in the used brain systems that strengthen connections among the brain cells and brain systems that are used. With regard to wiring-up the brain during developmental maturation, we essentially "build-what-we-use." The renowned neuroscientist, Donald Hebb, referred to this as "neurons that fire together, wire together" (Hebb, 1949). The brain is a complex self-organizing system that employs use-dependent neuro-developmental processes to form the integrated neural connections between brain systems.

The use-dependent approach to the development of integrated brain systems entails certain implications for how the brain functions during childhood maturation. In order to integrate the functioning of its various brain systems through use-dependent processes, the brain brings on basic levels of each system first, keeping more advanced elements of each system "off-line" so that these more advanced system elements don't compete with the more basic elements for the use-dependent development of neural connections. So the basic elements of each system are allowed to be used in association with each other, and so wire-up their interconnections together (Bjorklund, 1997).

Then, after a period of time, the brain brings online the next more advanced element of each system and uses these "next-level" elements of each system together, so that these "next-level" elements wire-up together through use-dependent neural processes, and these "next-level" elements of each system wire-up on top of the basic levels of each system that were themselves wired-up during the previous period. During this intermediate phase of the developmental process, the more advanced levels of each system remain "off-line" so that the more advanced levels don't compete for use-dependent wiring with the developmentally targeted components of each system.

This process of a phased-sequencing of activating system elements is repeated until all elements of all brain systems are online and functional. During any specific developmental period, however, only the targeted developmental level of each brain system are active together, are used together, and so wire-up their integrated functioning together, while more advanced elements of each system are kept dormant so that these more advanced levels do not compete for use-dependent wiring with the targeted developmental level of each system. This entire process is called "immaturity" and "maturation."

One of the primary implications of this use-dependent approach to organizing the maturation of integrated brain system functioning is that the brain is "intentionally" not fully functional during this maturation process (Bjorklund, 1997). The brain in childhood "recognizes" that it is keeping advanced elements of important brain systems off-line, and the brain "recognizes" that it is not fully functional. This less-than-full functionality of the

child's brain threatens the survival of the child. In an effort to address the child's increased vulnerability during this developmental period, the maturing brain refrains from independently imposing meaning on events and situations, but instead actively references the meaning construction provided by the more mature nervous systems of the parental caregivers (Walden & Ogan, 1988).

Now the brain doesn't actually make these "decisions," but instead the development of this process is embedded in an evolutionary context. Children whose brains independently attributed meaning during the developmental period of maturation tended to make poorer decisions that limited their survival chances. Those genes were gradually removed from the gene pool. On the other hand, children whose brains referenced the meaning constructions provided by the more mature nervous systems of their parents made better decisions that enhanced their survival chances, and those genes were selected for survival in the gene pool (Mineka, Davidson, Cook, & Keir, 1984). Over millions of years of evolutionary pressure, the brains of children have come to rely heavily on socially referenced meaning construction during the developmental maturation period of childhood (Walden & Ogan, 1988).

As children "mature" (i.e., as basic elements of brain systems become integrated through use-dependent processes and as more advanced elements of their brain system operation are brought online), they increasingly participate in the co-construction of meaning, but it is not until early adolescence, somewhere around 12-14 years old, that a sufficient extent of brain system development is online to allow for the beginnings of more fully "independent" attributions of meaning, and so begins the developmental period of adolescence. But even this "independent" attribution of meaning by adolescents remains gently nested within the social context of a peer group of seemingly identical attributions of meaning. Adolescent subgroups dress alike, wear the same haircuts, and they display the same badges of "independent," peer group social identity. It is only in young adulthood, beginning around age 17 and extending to around age 22, that a more fully independent self-attribution of meaning develops that is capable of withstanding the influence of others' attribution of meaning. Yet even in adulthood, we continue to reference social constructions of meaning to bolster our own personal attributions of meaning (Asch, 1952; Sharif, 1958; Schachter and Singer, 1962), particularly when confronted with ambiguous situations.

While children may be able to identify some basic elements of their inner experience, such as "this thing makes me comfortable and this thing makes me uncomfortable," they tend to rely on parental attributions of meaning regarding more complex situations because that's what the developmental processes of brain maturation motivate them to do. In addition, children will respond emotionally to situations but they may not understand the complex reasons for why they are having their emotional experience, so that they are highly vulnerable to misattributing the meaning of their emotional experience.

For example, all children love their parents. This is a consequence of a neuro-biologically embedded relationship system called the "attachment system" (Bowlby, 1980) that strongly promotes parent-child bonding in order to provide children with parental protection from predators. The divorce process represents a highly ambiguous situation

that will prompt children to engage in social referencing of parents for meaning. If one parent provides a meaning construction that the other parent is dangerous or problematic, and that the child should not display the natural attachment bonding that the child experiences toward the other parent, then the child may come to adopt this meaning construction, much like the baby monkey socially referenced the meaning constructions of the mother monkey regarding the snake (Mineka, Davidson, Cook, & Keir, 1984).

Yet the child's authentic attachment system will continue to serve its function by motivating the child toward emotional-psychological bonding with the now-rejected parent. Under these circumstances, the child will feel love for the rejected parent but also sadness, grief, and loss at the inability to express and receive love from the rejected parent because of the adopted meaning constructions of the alienating parent that demand that the child not display attachment bonding with the rejected parent. The child's inner experience becomes one of unrecognized love mixed with sadness and grief. This is a painful inner experience that the child authentically feels, and the child accurately identifies his or her feelings of hurt that are somehow associated with the targeted-rejected parent.

A problem, however, can emerge from the child's attribution of meaning regarding this painful inner experience. The child recognizes that this emotional pain is associated with being in the presence of the rejected parent. So the child's basic attribution of meaning is that the inner experience of pain is somehow being triggered by the rejected parent. In response to an authentic experience of emotional pain, the child might then adopt the meaning construction of the other parent, the alienating parent, that misattributes the reason the child hurts when he or she is with the rejected parent to the belief that the rejected parent is somehow bad or abusive. In the absence of an alternative construction of meaning, the neuro-developmental maturational biases of the brain toward socially referencing parents for meaning construction may easily motivate the child toward adopting this parent-organized misattribution of meaning regarding the meaning of the child's inner experience.

Courts will sometimes struggle to answer whether a child is being influenced by the beliefs of a parent. Of course the child is being influenced. That's exactly the way the immature brain of the child is supposed to work. The attribution of meaning that parents ascribe to a situation ABSOLUTELY influences the child's attribution of meaning. The question is not whether a parent is influencing the child's attribution of meaning. Of course the child is being influenced by the meaning constructions of parents. The true question is whether the child is receiving a BALANCED and normal-range construction of meaning from both parents that will allow the natural expression of the child's inherent attachment system relative to both parents.

Recognizing Deviant Attributions of Meaning

In the world of the child, the dissolution of the marriage and family during divorce represents a highly ambiguous situation. Under these circumstances, the child will naturally turn to the attribution of meaning provided by the parents in order to provide the

child's own meaning construction regarding this highly ambiguous event. We don't need to wonder if the child is being influenced. Of course the child is being influenced, that's how the brain works.

What the child needs is a balanced attribution of meaning from both parents that allows for the child's natural functioning and expression of attachment system bonding to both parents. Difficulties can emerge, however, when a semi-dormant psychopathology of one parent becomes activated by the divorce, and that parent begins to maintain a deviant construction of meaning regarding the other parent. This deviant construction of meaning becomes highly problematic when it is imposed upon and adopted by the child, thereby suppressing the normal and healthy developmental functioning of the child's attachment system.

The signs of this deviant and unbalanced construction of meaning will be evident in the child's symptom display. When the child adopts the aberrant construction of meaning provided by a pathological parent, the child will also evidence signs of the underlying psychopathology of that parent which is prompting the formation of the deviant construction of meaning. In the case of family processes described by the term "parental alienation," the underlying psychopathology of the alienating parent is a narcissistically organized personality disorder with prominent borderline features that triggers strong abandonment fears and excessive anxiety within the Borderline and Narcissistic personality disorder dynamics of the pathological parent in response to the divorce and dissolution of the marriage and family. In an effort to manage the intense abandonment fears and excessive anxiety, the pathological parent resorts to the defensive process of "splitting" that involves an exclusive separation of the positive from the negative representational features for the other person, so that the pathological parent becomes the self-perceived "all-good" spouse/parent, while the other parent becomes the "all-bad" spouse and parent, and the child will similarly adopt this pathologically "split" construction of meaning, identifying the pathological parent as the idealized "all-good" parent, while the rejected parent becomes the demonized-devalued "all-bad" parent.

In a similar way, the child's symptoms will express the additional Personality Disorder traits of the pathological parent whose aberrant meaning constructions are being adopted by the child. One prominent meaning construction of the pathological parent's that will be adopted by the child is that the rejected parent is somehow being abusive. This meaning construction emerges from the excessive anxiety activated by the pathological parent's abandonment fears that are triggered by the divorce. Anxiety signals threat. In attributing meaning to the experience of the excessive anxiety, the pathological parent identifies the other parent as the triggering source of the anxiety, and so attributes that the other parent must somehow represent a threat. This misattribution of meaning by the pathological parent is then imposed upon and transferred to the child, in much the same way as the baby monkey adopted the parent monkey's attribution of meaning regarding the threat posed by the snake. The child then expresses this aberrant parental construction of meaning in the child's own attributions of meaning toward the rejected parent.

This co-construction of meaning relative to the rejected parent being abusive, or as representing a threat of abuse, represents a false belief driven by the personality disorder processes of the pathological parent, which is then adopted as a meaning construction by the child. When this false belief is maintained despite the contrary evidence that the rejected parent is actually a loving parent who engages in normal-range parenting with the child, the child's false construction of meaning becomes elevated into a delusional belief. Inasmuch as the pathological parent and the child share this delusional construction of meaning, this process will meet the DSM-IV TR³ diagnostic criteria for a Shared Psychotic (delusional) Disorder, Persecutory Type.

Pathogenic Parenting

The term "pathogenic parenting" refers to parenting behavior that is so deviant that it induces a psychopathology in the child (patho = pathology; genic = genesis, creation; pathogenic parenting – the creation of a psychopathology in a child through aberrant parenting behavior).

In the family relationship processes described as "parental alienation," the child adopts the meaning construction of a pathological parent relative to the other parent. This results in the child expressing the psychopathology of the disordered parent that includes a psychotic delusion and prominent Personality Disorder traits. This represents significant psychopathology that is being transferred to and induced in the child through the aberrant parenting of the pathological parent.

With regard to the diagnosis of a Shared Psychotic Disorder, the DSM-IV TR describes the pathological parent as "the inducer" who "gradually imposes" the delusion onto the child. The DSM-IV TR further discusses how the child's delusion will resolve if the child is separated from the psychopathology of the primary case, but that without treatment the course of the disorder is usually chronic in that the child's induced psychopathology will not independently resolve on its own.

Pathogenic parenting that results in the transfer to and induction in the child of significant DSM-IV TR Axis I and Axis II psychopathology is of significant developmental and clinical concern, and would warrant serious consideration of a child protection response, consistent with the DSM-IV TR recommendation for the child's separation from the pathological parent, until a resolution in the child's symptoms can be achieved.

³ American Psychiatric Association. (2000). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (Revised 4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

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