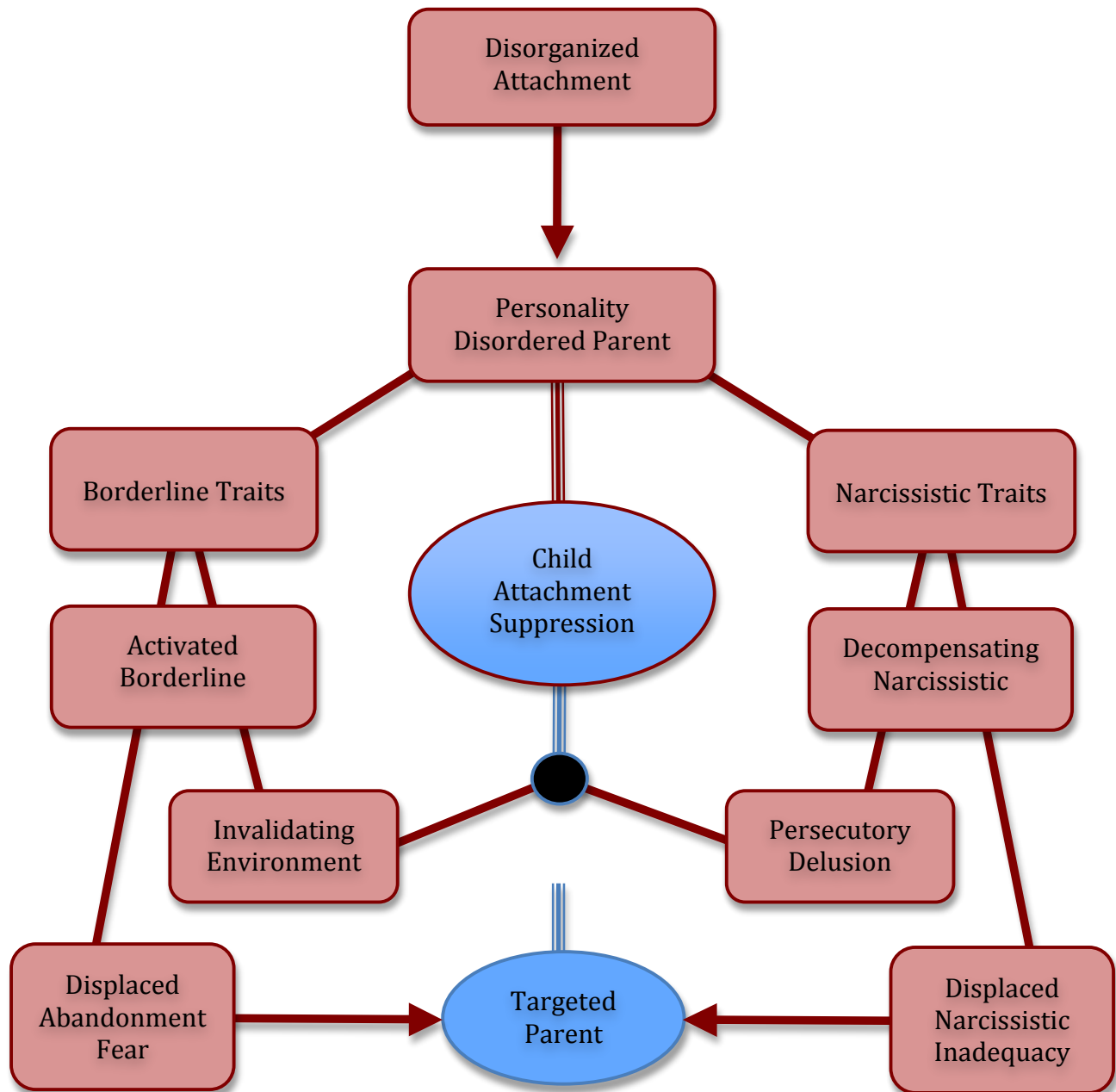


Parental Alienation Schematic

C.A. Childress, Psy.D. (2012)



The targeted parent is the abandoned parent

The targeted parent is the inadequate parent

Parental Alienation & Personality Disorder Dynamics

Narcissistic Processes

Millon, T. (2011). *Disorders of personality: introducing a DSM/ICD spectrum from normal to abnormal*. Hoboken: Wiley.

“Under conditions of unrelieved adversity and failure, narcissists may decompensate into **paranoid disorders**. Owing to their excessive use of fantasy mechanisms, they are disposed to misinterpret events and to construct **delusional beliefs**. Unwilling to accept constraints on their independence and unable to accept the viewpoints of others, narcissists may isolate themselves from the corrective effects of shared thinking. Alone, they may ruminate and weave their beliefs into a network of fanciful and **totally invalid suspicions**. Among narcissists, delusions often take form after a serious challenge or setback has upset their image of superiority and omnipotence. They tend to exhibit compensatory grandiosity and jealousy delusions in which they reconstruct reality to match the image they are unable or unwilling to give up. Delusional systems may also develop as a result of having felt betrayed and humiliated. Here **we may see the rapid unfolding of persecutory delusions** and an arrogant grandiosity characterized by verbal attacks and bombast. Rarely physically abusive, anger among narcissists usually takes the form of oral vituperation and argumentativeness. This may be seen in a flow of irrational and caustic comments in which others are upbraided and denounced as stupid and beneath contempt. These onslaughts usually have little objective justification, are often colored by delusions, and may be directed in a wild, hit-or-miss fashion in which the narcissist lashes out at those who have failed to acknowledge the exalted status in which he or she demands to be seen.” (pp. 407-408; emphasis added)

Borderline Processes

Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Cognitive-behavioral therapy of borderline personality disorder*. New York, NY: Guilford

“A defining characteristic of the **invalidating environment** is the tendency of the family to respond erratically or inappropriately to private experience and, in particular, to be insensitive (i.e., nonresponsive) to private experience... Invalidating environments contribute to emotional dysregulation by: (1) failing to teach the child to label and modulate arousal, (2) failing to teach the child to tolerate stress, (3) **failing to teach the child to trust his or her own emotional responses as valid interpretations of events**, and (4) **actively teaching the child to invalidate his or her own experiences by making it necessary for the child to scan the environment for cues about how to act and feel.**” (p. 111-112; emphasis added)

Millon, T. (2011). *Disorders of personality: introducing a DSM/ICD spectrum from normal to abnormal*. Hoboken: Wiley.

“The ideas proposed by J. Masterson (1972, 1976) draw heavily on the developmental theses of Bowlby and of Mahler. Stressing the belief that the mother may have been borderline herself, Masterson sees **the child as being encouraged to continue symbiotic clinging, while the mother threatens to withdraw love should the child persist in striving for autonomy**. Relating to mothers who are intensely conflicted about their child’s growing independence, these youngsters are faced with a dilemma: Becoming autonomous will mean a loss of maternal love. This ambivalence creates an intrapsychic schism, **any form of assertiveness threatens abandonment**. This deep template within the future borderline’s psyche sets the groundwork for unstable relationships, repeated intrapsychic ruptures, fruitless searches for idealized unions, and periodic states of emptiness and depression.” (p. 901; emphasis added)

Parental Alienation & Personality Disorder Dynamics

C.A. Childress, Psy.D. (2012)

From the perspective of clinical psychology, the construct of “parental alienation” is unnecessary. With sufficient clinical acumen, we are fully capable of describing the family dynamics and interpersonal processes associated with the construct of “parental alienation” entirely within the structure of standard, professionally validated psychological constructs.

I am currently completing a consultation report regarding a “parental alienation” situation in which I am providing analysis of a “treatment summary” report from the treating psychologist. This particular case involves two children, ages 15 and 12. The eldest daughter is displaying significant psychiatric symptoms along the Borderline Personality Disorder spectrum and she is being treated with Dialectic Behavior Therapy (DBT; Linehan, 1993).¹ In my report, I am linking the presence of borderline personality processes to the pathogenic parenting of the alienating parent. Linehan, in her formulation of the borderline personality process and DBT therapy, attributes the causal origins of Borderline Personality Disorder processes to an invalidating family environment, which she describes as follows:

“A defining characteristic of the invalidating environment is the tendency of the family to respond erratically or inappropriately to private experience and, in particular, to be insensitive (i.e., nonresponsive) to private experience... Invalidating environments contribute to emotional dysregulation by: (1) failing to teach the child to label and modulate arousal, (2) failing to teach the child to tolerate stress, (3) failing to teach the child to trust his or her own emotional responses as valid interpretations of events, and (4) actively teaching the child to invalidate his or her own experiences by making it necessary for the child to scan the environment for cues about how to act and feel.” (Linehan, 1993; p. 111-112).

Of particular relevance to “parental alienation” processes are,

- (3) “failing to teach the child to trust his or her own emotional responses as valid interpretations of events,” and
- (4) “actively teaching the child to invalidate his or her own experiences by making it necessary for the child to scan the environment for cues about how to act and feel.”

This seemingly represents a spot-on description of how the alienation process occurs within the parent-child relationship.

One of the difficulties faced by the construct of “parental alienation” is the expressed skepticism of opponents who question how parental influence induces the alienation. In my view, Linehan’s formulation of the “invalidating environment” provides the necessary explanatory construct. Within the “invalidating environment” created by the alienating parent, the child is taught not to trust his or her own self-experience regarding the targeted parent as being a “valid interpretation of events,” and is instead taught that it is necessary to

¹ Linehan, M. M. (1993). *Cognitive-behavioral therapy of borderline personality disorder*. New York, NY: Guilford

scan the interpersonal environment comprised of the alienating parent's responses for "cues about how to act and feel."

Linehan's construction of Dialectic Behavior Therapy, and the "invalidating environment" construct upon which she bases the therapy, is widely accepted within the established professional community as a model of "empirically validated treatment" and has received wide-spread support.

The key with regard to "parental alienation" processes is to establish the clinical diagnostic linkage from "parental alienation" to borderline personality disorder processes within the family. In this regard, there are the following diagnostic indicators of borderline personality processes within "parental alienation" family dynamics:

- The presence in the symptom presentation of the "splitting" dynamic (all-good/all bad, black-and-white thinking) that represents the classic diagnostic symptom characteristic of the borderline personality dynamic.
- The alienation process itself represents "frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment" on the part of the alienating parent, evidenced in the alienating parent's excessive and determined efforts to disrupt and undermine the relationship of the targeted parent with the child.
- The psychological expulsion through displacement of the core borderline personality fear of abandonment from the alienating parent (who becomes the "never-to-be-abandoned" parent) onto the targeted parent (who becomes the "entirely-abandoned-parent").
- The presence of additional personality disorder dynamics (i.e., narcissistically organized features of 1) the grandiose elevation of the child above the targeted parent in the family hierarchy whereby the child judges the adequacy of the parent, 2) the child's absence of empathy toward the experience of the targeted parent, 3) the exploitation of the child's symptoms by the alienating parent, 4) the child's haughty and arrogant attitude toward the targeted parent, and 5) the child's sense of entitlement relative to the targeted parent and the child's retaliation toward the targeted parent if the entitled expectations are not immediately met.
 - From a professional standpoint, it is increasingly acknowledged within the personality disorder professional community that personality disorders are spectrum blends rather than discrete categories, and Millon (2011) specifically identifies that borderline processes can often be clinically associated with narcissistic dynamics.²

² "Several personality disorders often covary with the narcissistic (CEN) spectrum. Most notable among these are the antisocial (ADA) (Gunderson & Ronningstram, 2001; P. Kernberg, 1989) and histrionic (SPH) spectrum variants. Also listed are covariations seen with the sadistic (ADS), paranoid (MPP), negativistic (DRN) personality spectra, as well as borderlines (Plakun, 1987; Ronningstram & Gunderson, 1991)." Millon, T. (2011). *Disorders of personality: introducing a DSM/ICD spectrum from normal to abnormal*. Hoboken: Wiley. p. 406

From the perspective of clinical psychology, “parental alienation” processes are the characteristic pattern associated with a parental narcissistic personality with borderline features decompensating into a fixed and false persecutory belief system in response to the stresses of the divorce (i.e., activation of borderline abandonment fears and narcissistic injury), in which the child is exposed to an “invalidating environment” (associated with the parent’s borderline personality dynamics that are activated by the triggering of the primal borderline fear of abandonment), whereby the child is taught not to trust his or her own self-experience as a valid interpretation of the other parent, and instead is taught that it is necessary to scan the interpersonal environment comprised of the alienating parent’s distorted responses for “cues about how to act and feel.”

In my view as a clinical psychologist, diagnostically, we simply need to make the linkage from parental alienation processes to borderline personality disorder dynamics within the family, and then to Linehan’s “invalidating environment” to explain how the alienation of the child actually occurs within the parent-child relationship with the alienating parent. Opponents of the “parental alienation” construct can, if they choose, take up the argument that the “invalidating environment” does not exist, or that the family processes do not evidence borderline personality disorder processes. Linehan’s construct of the “invalidating environment” represents the explanatory construct regarding the interpersonal processes by which the alienation is accomplished.

Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that the child has a borderline personality disorder, I am suggesting that the parent has a narcissistic personality disorder process with borderline features that is expressing itself within the family through the characteristic pattern of the “invalidating environment” associated with the development of borderline personality disorder processes.

To be more specific on this connection, the alienating parent likely had a disorganized attachment (or severely anxious-ambivalent attachment) that subsequently coalesced into a narcissistic personality organization with borderline features.³ The attachment system mediates relationship bonding and loss. The divorce reactivates the alienating parent’s attachment system to mediate relationship loss, thereby activating the narcissistic-borderline personality disorder dynamics that formed from the disorganized attachment (or from a severely anxious-ambivalent attachment).

The activation of the personality disorder dynamics, specifically the borderline personality’s primal fear of abandonment, results in the activation and reenactment within the relationship patterns of the current family of the “invalidating environment” that created the borderline processes in the first place (i.e., the “trans-generational transmission of attachment patterns”⁴). The enactment of the “invalidating environment” by the parent with borderline personality traits creates the interpersonal setting leading to the invalidation of the child’s

³ Millon, 2011; p. 900: “An important British contributor, John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1982) has proposed a model of childhood attachment and loss that has generated a powerful basis for research on the origins of later borderline behaviors. Children exposed to frightening, abusive, or even simple unpredictable, parental behaviors appear to result in an inability to respond to others within adaptively flexible and consistent manner.”

⁴ Fonagy, P. and Target, M. (2005). Bridging the transmission gap: An end to an important mystery of attachment research? *Attachment and Human Development*, 7, 333-343.

authentic self-experience of the other parent, making it necessary for the child to “scan the environment [i.e., the feelings and reactions of the personality disordered parent] for cues about how to act and feel.”

In this regard, the views of Masterson (as reported by Millon, 2011) are relevant,

“The ideas proposed by J. Masterson draw heavily on the developmental theses of Bowlby and of Mahler. Stressing the belief that the mother may have been borderline herself, Masterson sees the child as being encouraged to continue symbiotic clinging, while the mother threatens to withdraw love should the child persist in striving for autonomy. Relating to mothers who are intensely conflicted about their child’s growing independence, these youngsters are faced with a dilemma: Becoming autonomous will mean a loss of maternal love. This ambivalence creates an intrapsychic schism; any form of assertiveness threatens abandonment. This deep template within the future borderline’s psyche sets the groundwork for unstable relationships, repeated intrapsychic ruptures, fruitless searches for idealized unions, and periodic states of emptiness and depression.” (Millon, 2011; p. 901)

To reiterate, the child does not have a borderline personality disorder, but the family is expressing borderline processes through the mediation of the borderline personality disorder traits of the narcissistically organized parent. The borderline processes, however, are somewhat hidden from general view by the narcissistic capacity to present well in clinical interviews. The narcissistic personality presents as organized, confident, articulate, and assertive, far from the typical borderline presentation of disorganization and emotional dysregulation. The narcissistic features hide the prominent borderline dynamic, but it is the borderline dynamic of the “invalidating environment” that encourages the “symbiotic clinging” that is at the core of the alienation process.

The actual child rejection of a parent represents a fundamental distortion to the normal-range functioning of the child’s attachment system, and can be fully described from within an attachment system vocabulary whereby the targeted parent is being defined as a danger or threat (i.e., as “the predator” relative to the attachment system), causing the child to strive to flee from the predator (i.e., the rejecting behavior) and seek the “protective parent” (i.e., the hyper-bonding to the pathological parent, supported by the borderline processes of the parent described by Masterson). The induced suppression of the normal-range functioning of the child’s attachment system is evidenced in the absence of the two primary features of the attachment system, 1) possessive ownership of the relationship (my mother, my father, my child, my husband, my wife), and 2) the absence of a grief response by the child to the loss of the relationship with a parent.

In my view, the construct of “parental alienation,” and the controversy and divisiveness it entails, is a distraction from what could be a more productive conceptual effort of defining the processes of parental alienation within standard and broadly accepted mental health constructs, which would allow us to move the dialogue forward more quickly and with greater consensus agreement from within the mental health field, which would allow the legal system to act with greater clarity of focus.