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Parental Alienation in Light of Attachment Theory:
Consideration of the Broader Implications for Child Development, Clinical Practice, and
Forensic Process

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Abstract

Few ideas have captured the attention and charged the emotions of the public, of mental health and legal professionals as thoroughly as the concept of parental alienation and Gardner's (1987) Parental Alienation Syndrome. For all of this controversy, the alienation concept stands outside developmental theory and without firm empirical support. The present paper explores alienation and its conceptual counterpart, alignment, as the necessary and natural tools of child-caregiver attachment (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Bowlby, 1969) and of family system cohesion. This conceptual foundation offers developmentalists, clinicians, and family law professionals alike a common language and valuable instruments with which to understand those relatively infrequent but highly charged circumstances in which these tools are used as weapons, particularly in the context of contested custody litigation. The need to establish baseline measures, child-centered interventions, and legal remedies anchored in the attachment model is discussed.

Keywords: Alienation, attachment, forensic, development, PAS, alignment, custody, divorce

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The concept of the alienated child, Parental Alienation (PA), and Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) has sparked a firestorm of controversy among mental health and family law professionals concerned with the welfare of the children of divorce, often enough polarizing these professionals no less than the bitterly conflicted co-parents whose children's futures are at stake.¹

The construct's original presentation as "pathological alignment" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and its recent reformulation focusing on the alienated child (Kelly & Johnston, 2001) both seek to describe a family system dynamic wherein one parent (actor) exposes a child to words and/or actions that malign another parent (object), such that the child comes to resist or refuse contact with the latter for reasons that are disproportionate to the child's direct knowledge of that (object) parent's behavior. This relatively uncommon family drama may well have remained an obscure footnote in the study of child development and family systems were it not for its impact on contested custody litigation and the work of Richard Gardner.

Gardner's (1987, 1992a, 1992b, 1998, 2002) provocative introduction of PAS dramatically shifted the focus on this construct from that of a clinically useful, dynamic description to that of a pathological syndrome diagnosable among the children of divorce. In Gardner's view, PAS is a disorder most usually induced by divorcing mothers for the purpose of winning a child's custody as evident in the child's otherwise unwarranted campaign of denigration against the father. As such, PAS has been alternately lauded by groups representing fathers and vilified by groups representing mothers, effectively shifting the private process of

family relationships and the gut-wrenching issues of contested custody out of the home and the courtroom and into the spotlight of national politics.

Fueled by the emotions inherent to these issues, the construct of alienation persists in our courtrooms and clinics independent of developmental theory and despite a paucity of sound empirical research. Those few who purport to study the matter fail to describe their methods and measures (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991), assume the existence of the construct in the course of seeking to validate it (Dunne & Hedrick, 1994), and/or take too narrow a view within the larger family dynamic (Lampel, 1996).

Johnston's recent reports (2003; Johnston, Gans Walters, & Oleson, 2004) are perhaps the first to empirically examine children's post-divorce visitation resistance and refusal as these might substantiate the existence of alienation. She concludes that relatively few of the children studied evidence the extremely polarized alignment with one parent and rejection of the other that are characteristic of severe PA. Among these few, multiple systemic factors² including the rejected parent's own lack of empathy, support, and parenting skills, even more so than the aligned parent's denigration, accounted for the child's polarized position.

The present paper seeks to anchor these findings and the larger controversy concerning PA in the context of normal development and family system functioning consistent with Rybicki's (2001) charge that, "PAS and other forms of alienation are part of a larger set of ... family system dynamics that may become pronounced in times of marital conflict, separation, or divorce" (p. 2). By grounding the concept of alienation in developmental theory, the present goal is to offer mental health and legal professionals a common foundation upon which to build a constructive understanding of child-caregiver relationships and with which to begin to generate developmentally informed clinical interventions, judicial remedies, and public policy.

In the Context of Attachment Theory

Any discussion of alienation presupposes the existence of an emotional bond between a child and each of her³ caregivers. Attachment theory (e.g., Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Sroufe, Waters, & Matas, 1974) describes the development and vicissitudes of precisely these bonds.⁴ In general, the quality of a child's attachment to a particular caregiver refers to the child's willingness and ability to use the caregiver as a "secure base" from which to draw emotional comfort. Because attachment describes a dynamic and adaptive relationship specific to each caregiver-child pair, it should not be confused with dependency (Sroufe, Fox, & Pancake, 1983), bonding (Klaus & Kennell, 1976) or imprinting (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment has yet to be completely understood in relation to temperament (Vaughn & Bost, 1999; Vaughn et al., 1992) or psychopathology (Sroufe, Duggal, Weinfeld, & Carlson, 2000).

The Quality of Child-Caregiver Attachment

Bowlby's (1969, 1973) effort in developing attachment theory was to describe the child's learned ability to experience security in the presence of a specific caregiver. The caregiver is considered the child's emotional anchor or "secure base." An attachment relationship is deemed "secure" to the extent that an otherwise healthy child successfully uses the caregiver's presence and cues to manifest mature and adaptive cognitive, social, and emotional skills (e.g., exploring an unfamiliar environment, returning to the caregiver to be emotionally "refueled" and comforted when stressed).

By contrast, an insecure "resistant" attachment relationship describes a child who clings to her caregiver, apparently unable to separate in order to explore and play in a healthy and mature manner. An insecure "avoidant" attachment relationship describes a child who remains

apart or aloof and unable or unwilling to seek comfort from her caregiver. A fourth category of attachment behavior describing a distinct minority, “disorganized,” describes children who appear fearful, dissociative, and/or disturbed in the caregiver’s presence (Main & Solomon, 1986; Solomon & George, 1999a).

Recent work (Cummings, 2003, Fraley & Spieker, 2003a, 2003b; Sroufe, 2003) has begun to discuss the intuitively appealing idea that the quality of attachment exists along a continuum rather than as one of three or four distinct categories, a distinction that may come to have a significant impact on our understanding of how specific child-caregiver attachments evolve over time and how researchers and clinicians alike assess these changes and their causes.

Assessing the Quality of Attachment

The quality of a toddler’s attachment to a specific caregiver at a specific time can be reliably distinguished in Ainsworth’s Strange Situation (Ainsworth et al., 1974, 1978; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969), and in older children, teens, and adults using a variety of less well known self- and observer-report tools (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Cassidy, 1990; Collins & Read, 1990; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996; Kearns, Tomich, Aspelmeier, & Contreras, 2000; Waters & Deane, 1985).

The Strange Situation is a research-based observational paradigm that reliably assesses the quality of attachment between toddlers of 12-18 months of age and their caregivers. Seven sequential 3-minute epochs of parent-child interaction are videotaped across a series of scripted separations and reunions⁵ and subsequently analyzed in detail by trained observers.

Waters and colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Vaughn & Waters, 1990; Waters, 1987, 2002; Waters & Deane, 1985) has developed and validated (van Ijzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, in press) a more ecologically valid and economical

tool intended to assess the quality of child-caregiver attachment across a broader age range under more practical and naturalistic conditions. The Attachment Q-sort yields an assessment of attachment security that, "...can produce valid indexes of attachment security for infants and for older children, even when mothers, rather than trained observers, provide the Q-sort descriptions" (Vaughn et al., 1992, p. 463). According to Waters (personal communication, July 14, 2004), an observer rated Q-sort of caregiver and child in a naturalistic setting is an entirely appropriate and valid means of assessing the child's attachment with that caregiver.⁶

A number of other self- and observer-report instruments have been developed for the purpose of assessing attachment security for specific age groups and settings. Among these are a self-report questionnaire appropriate for late adolescence (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985), the Adult Attachment Interview (Main & Goldwyn, 1985-1994 [as cited in Main, 1996]), the Inventory of Adolescent Attachments (Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983), and the Parental Attachment Questionnaire (Kenny, 1987).

Stability of the Quality of Attachment

A great deal has been written about the stability and predictive validity of the quality of toddler-caregiver attachment (Bar-Haim, Sutton, & Fox, 2000; Connell, 1976; Erikson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 1985; Main & Weston, 1981; Rutter, 1995; Waters, 1978; but see, e.g., Belsky, Campbell, Cohn, & Moore, 1996; Touris, Kromelow, & Harding, 1995). Arguments have been made suggesting that the quality of attachment as young as twelve months old reliably predicts later cognitive skills (Bretherington, 1985), confidence (Laible, Gustavo, & Raffaelli, 2000), leadership skills (Deason & Randolph, 1998), peer relationships (Barnett, Butler, & Vondra, 1999; Schneider, Atkinson, & Tardif, 2001), anxiety (Thompson, 2000), psychopathology

(Belsky & Cassidy, 1994), family dynamics (Cook, 2000) and intergenerational security (Broberg, 2000).

In fact, the quality of a child's attachment security is, by definition, flexible and adaptive. A child's attachment security develops unique to each caregiver within time (Howes, 1999; Main & Weston, 1981) and to a single caregiver across time as a function of experience (Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Abersheim, 2000). Thompson (2000) is quite explicit in stating that, "...early attachment does not predict later behavior when intervening changes occur in the quality of parental care. A secure attachment does not predict more positive psychosocial functioning when, for example, the mothers of initially secure infants are later observed to behave intrusively and insensitively" (p. 146). Broberg (2000) describes the flip side of the same coin, noting that therapeutic interventions intended to improve the sensitivity of caregiving "may be effective in enhancing infant attachment security..." (p. 41).

The Child's Internal Working Model (IWM)

Recognition that the quality of attachment security is not fixed but is, instead, adaptive and dynamic, raises questions about the cognitive structures underlying the relationship. In his original formulation, Bowlby (1969) postulated that the child maintains an "internal working model" of each attachment figure, a mental representation that assimilates or accommodates to new information and experience specific to a caregiving figure (e.g., Bretherington & Mulholland, 1999; Creasey, 2002; Main et al., 1985, Sroufe, Carlson, Levy, & Egeland, 1999).

As the child matures and develops higher order cognitive capacities, the information that informs the IWM begins to reach beyond the individual caregiver's direct sensitivity and reciprocity to incorporate increasingly language-based knowledge. "The working models

associated with secure or insecure attachments likely have their origins ... not only in the child's direct representations of the sensitivity of parental care, but in the secondary representations of their experience mediated through parental discourse" (Thompson, 2000, p. 150; see also Cook, 2000.)

Alienation and Alignment:

The Mechanisms of Accommodation of Attachment Security

If the security of a child's attachment to each caregiver is mediated by the child's internal working model of that caregiver, and if that internal working model is adaptive to the extent that it accommodates to new information, then it is not only possible to put the phenomenon of alienation in context, but it also becomes possible to examine its conceptual variants and alternatives.

Specifically, a child's perception of new information ("message") about a specific attachment figure will be perceived either as consistent or inconsistent with the existing IWM of that caregiver. A message that is consistent with a child's existing IWM of a specific caregiver presumably reinforces the child's experience of relative security in that relationship. To the extent that such a message is perceived as discrepant or inconsistent, it will either be assimilated into the existing IWM (that is, ignored) or the child may be prompted to accommodate her IWM in order to more accurately reflect the new information. The mechanisms of assimilation and accommodation are familiar to cognitive scientists (e.g., Block, 1982) and are commonly credited among the tools of personality development (e.g., Liben & Signorella, 1993; Ying, 2002).

Whether a given child assimilates or accommodates a message about a caregiver will be multiply determined by numerous systemic factors. These may include the child's cognitive,

social, and emotional maturity, the quality of her relationship with the caregiver, the context in which the message occurs, and the perceived content and emotional valence of the new information.

When new information is accommodated into the child's IWM such that the child becomes more secure in that relationship, the new information can be said to be aligning, that is, as enabling greater security. When the result moves the child toward lesser security, the new information can be said to be alienating. In this frame, alienation and alignment can be recognized among the common tools family systems use to help children feel safe and function maturely. They serve to define intra-familial cohesion and inter-familial differentiation; that is, they communicate to the child who belongs within the family group and who does not.⁷ Unfortunately, these ordinarily adaptive tools can sometimes be used as weapons.

Applying these broad theoretical strokes to the reality of children's ever-changing relationships prompts distinctions among actors and objects. The actor is the individual (or, more broadly, the source) from whom the message is perceived. The object is the individual (or, more broadly, the affiliation) about whom the message is perceived to be directed. Using these terms, it is possible to define eight unique cases by specifying the dynamic (alienation or alignment) and the object of that dynamic. These cases are identified in Table 1 and discussed below.

<<Insert Table 1 about here>>

1. When Actor and Object Are the Same (Caregiver) Individual

Much of our contemporary thinking about children's relationships is based upon clinical experience and/or empirical research within dyads. The attachment literature, for example, has almost exclusively examined the quality of the relationship between one parent (most usually the mother) and one child. Within the dyad, the caregiver is both actor and object affecting the

quality of the child's attachment security. The child distills the caregiver's words and actions in the form of an IWM that represents that caregiver's sensitivity and responsiveness and behaves in that caregiver's presence accordingly. This suggests that the concepts of alignment and alienation can each be used reflexively, as when a caregiver's words and actions serve to increase or decrease the child's security. Thompson (2000) and Broberg (2000) each suggest this dynamic in describing the impact of parents' caregiving changes on the child's attachment security within the dyad. Johnston (2003) speaks of this same reflexive quality, commenting that, "[r]ejected parents, whether father or mother, appear to be the more influential architect of their own alienation, in that deficits in their parenting capacity are ... consistently and most strongly linked to their rejection by the child" (p. 169).

In reality, however, "[t]here is a need both to consider dyadic relationships in terms that go beyond attachment concepts, and to consider social systems that extend beyond dyads" (Rutter, 1995, p. 556). Coincident events and relationships surround and collide with the attachment dyad, contributing to the child's experience in a way that is entirely familiar to each of us in our day-to-day lives, but which tend to overwhelm empirical description and statistical analysis. Much as an individual's own words and actions may be accommodated within a child's attachment IWM, so too must the child's ever expanding world play a growing role in how the child experiences security. Thus, our understanding of a child's relationships must begin to account for the contributions of the larger family system (e.g., Cowan, 1997), that is, how the social and emotional context bears on a child's relationship with each of her caregivers.

2. When the Actor Is a Caregiver and the Object Is Not a Caregiver

A second dynamic is in force when a caregiver provides new information that impacts a child's relative security in a relationship outside of the caregiving dyad. For example, parents

commonly act and speak in such a way as to intentionally build a child's feeling of security in select others (alignment), as when a child is anxious about a new teacher. By the same token, parents intentionally instruct their children to avoid select others (alienation), as when a neighbor acts suspiciously. Garber (in press) illustrates this latter dynamic in discussing *therapist alienation*, that instance in which a caregiver speaks or acts so as to corrupt a child's security with her psychotherapist.

3. *When the Actor Is Not A Caregiver and the Object Is A Caregiver*

In the third instance, a child accommodates her IWM of a caregiver to a third party's words or actions such that the child becomes more or less secure with that caregiver. When movement is toward lesser security, *parental alienation* is in force. This describes the dynamic typically at work in cases of stereotype induction, brainwashing, cult, and implanted memories (e.g., Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Gold-Biken, 1991; Warshak, 2001a). In *Dymek v. Nyquist* (1984), for example, a father claimed that his son's psychotherapist had brainwashed the child in an effort to ruin the father-son relationship. In contrast, when the effect of the third party's words or actions is to move the child toward greater security with the caregiver, *parental alignment* is at work. Such is the case in successful reunification therapies following extended parental absence (Freeman, Abel, Cowper-Smith, & Stein, 2004).

4. *When both Actor and Object Are Caregivers (Co-Parents)*

In contemporary usage, the alienated child, PAS, and PA are all intended to describe the instance in which one caregiver's words or actions (actor) cause a child to become less secure with a co-parent (object), resulting in the child's resistance to or refusal of contact with the latter.⁸ This is *co-parental alienation*, the more emotionally evocative and politically charged

dynamic due to the insidious, intrafamilial nature of the act. *Co-parental alienation* does not imply that the act is mutual or reciprocal among parents.

In contrast, *co-parental alignment* describes the presumably healthy, appropriate, and mutually supportive dynamic in effect when one caregiver's words or actions serve to increase the child's security with a second caregiver. Co-parental alignment is a useful tool, for example, when a child resists visits with a caregiver due to simple separation anxiety. In this instance, one caregiver's explicit endorsement of another can serve to reinforce the child's security in the latter and help to overcome anxiety that is not associated with that caregiver, per se.

The terms co-parental alienation and co-parental alignment are useful to extent that the intra-familial dynamics inherent in this description are distinguished from those instances in which an extra-familial actor's words and/or actions impact the child's IWM of a caregiver (parental alienation or co-parental alignment). These terms are more precise than Johnston and Kelly's (2001) reference to the "aligned parent" and the "target parent" to the extent that they allow clear discussion of those instances in which the parties involved in the dynamic are *not* co-parents. Given the distinctions of the present model, an "aligned parent" can impact a child's IWM in any relationship as in the case of therapist alienation (Garber, in press) just as a "target parent" can be the object of the words and/or actions of any party, including but not only a co-parent (actor).

Beyond the Dyad:

Accommodation and the Accuracy of the Message

Within the insulated confines of the dyad where actor and object are one-in-the-same and alienation and alignment are reflexive by definition, the messages the child receives about the caregiver's sensitivity are always accurate. In this constricted and artificial world, a child's

security of attachment to a particular caregiver is effectively that caregiver's résumé of sensitivity. The child has distilled an IWM exclusively from the caregiver him- or herself and behaves in that caregiver's presence accordingly.

As the child grows and her cognitive, emotional, and sensory capacities develop, the world begins to expand beyond the dyad. The information that informs her cognitive models is perceived from a wider range of sources and through a growing repertoire of means. Where the child's working model of security in a particular relationship was formerly informed only by that caregiver's behavior, now other sources of direct and indirect experiential and verbal information can begin to be accommodated. In general, this is adaptive. Like the clinician conducting an evaluation, the child is implicitly aware that an aggregate of information is more reliable than information from a single source. Like the clinician, as well, the child is now vulnerable to endorsing information that is inaccurate.

Table 2 presents the four outcomes possible when a child accommodates her IWM to third party messages about a caregiver.

<<Insert Table 2 about here>>

When a child accommodates extra-dyadic information about a caregiver that is accurate, two outcomes are possible. In the first, that new information moves the child toward lesser security in the relationship. This describes what Drozd and Olesen (2004) and Kelly and Johnston (2001) refer to as *estrangement* so as to avoid confusion with the term *alienation*. Estrangement is the dynamic in force, for example, when a victimized mother seeks to protect a child from an abusive father.

In the second case, the message is accurate and moves the child toward greater security (alignment). This is the case, for example, when a therapist or a co-parent works to facilitate a

child's security with a parent who has newly entered the child's life (Freeman et al., 2004) or who is believed to have become a more sensitive and responsive caregiver.

It is a very different situation for the child and for the larger family system when the child accommodates inaccurate information about a caregiver. In one case, the child becomes less secure despite the fact that the caregiver is appropriately sensitive and responsive. This is (co-)parental alienation. In another case, the child becomes more secure despite the fact that the caregiver is relatively insensitive and unresponsive. This is (co-)parental *misalignment*.

The distinction between estrangement and alienation, on the one hand, and between alignment and misalignment, on the other, rests on an objective assessment of the (object) caregiver's sensitivity, where sensitivity is defined as, "the contingency, appropriateness, and flexibility" (Biringen, 1990, p. 281) of the caregiver's response to the child's signals. Caregiver sensitivity has been operationalized and quantified by both clinical (e.g., Johnston, 2003) and attachment researchers (e.g., Ainsworth et al. 1978; Black & Teti, 1997; Braungart-Rieker, Courtney, & Garwood, 1999; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) using very economical and readily available measures.

Attachment, Co-Parental Conflict, and Divorce

When co-parents are mutually supportive, cooperative, and respectful (regardless of marital status), children are more likely to encounter consistent messages about each caregiver across time and settings. As co-parental conflict increases, so too does the likelihood that the child will be exposed to information about one or both caregivers that is discrepant from what she has previously experienced. Mom calls Dad names in the heat of anger. Dad curses Mom on his cell phone, thinking that their daughter is asleep. Either parent's narcissism, immaturity, or

rage (Siegel & Langforth, 1998) prompts maligning words or actions about the co-parent within earshot of or directly to the child.

Bowlby (1969) recognized that parental separation and divorce are among those events likely to prompt a child to accommodate her IWM of one or both caregivers and thereby to disrupt the continuity of the child's attachment security in either or both caregiving relationships. Contemporary researchers and clinicians alike have begun to examine children's attachment security in the context of marital conflict (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Frosch, Mangelsdorf, & McHale, 2000; Owen & Cox, 1997) and divorce (e.g., Beckwith, Cohen, & Hamilton, 1999; Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000; Olesen & Drozd, 2004), effectively confirming Bowlby's thesis. Solomon and George (1999b), for example, document the strong association between highly conflicted post-divorce parental communications and insecure infant attachments. Beckwith et al. (1999) further specify that, "insecurity based in the marital dyad tends to increase a sense of insecurity in the child, over and above the specific parent-child relationship" (p. 698).

In recognition of this effect, Kelly and Lamb (2000), Solomon and Biringen (2001), and Lamb and Kelly (2001) have sought to recommend the conditions of post-separation custody that might be least likely to disrupt the young child's attachment security "...when parent communication is high and parents are able to work flexibly together..." (Solomon & Biringen, 2001, p. 361). Even under these optimal conditions, the authors were unable to reach consensus. Unfortunately, it is in the absence of such constructive, child-centered, co-parental cooperation that children are at the highest risk (Amato, 2001).

In the extreme, one (actor) caregiver's denigrating and inaccurate messages can prompt a child to accommodate her IWM of another (object) caregiver such that her subjective experience

of security with that caregiver has little or no relationship to his or her actual sensitivity and responsiveness. In effect, the child's security with the (object) caregiver has been corrupted or distorted. In this relatively rare scenario (Johnston, 2003), the child speaks of her caregivers in the extreme and inflexible terms of good versus evil. She resists or refuses contact with the (object) caregiver and appears over-involved with the actor. This is severe co-parental alienation, magnification and misdirection of an otherwise adaptive family systems process.

Practical Implications of This Model

As a theoretical construct, alienation can now be understood as a family systems tool with which a child's security and family membership are normally crafted. Healthy family systems routinely and spontaneously communicate aligning messages in the process defining who is "in" and alienating messages in the process of defining who is "out." These dynamics enhance mutual safety and security and lay the foundation for a child's growing identity. Like any tool, however, both alienation and alignment can be turned into weapons.

Understanding alienation and alignment within the context of attachment security generates valuable direction for developmental research, clinical and forensic assessment and intervention, legal process, and public policy. Some of these directions require little more than improved exchange of existing concepts, data, and procedures between developmentalists, therapists, and forensic experts. Much of this direction, however, will require collaborative endeavors among these professionals in search of answers to a number of critical and compelling questions.

Developmental Research

Attachment theory has proven to be a robust framework for understanding many areas of development. Among the challenges facing this research in the near future will be further

definition of the continuity by degrees of attachment security (Cummings, 2003; Fraley & Spieker, 2003a, 2003b; Sroufe, 2003) and a broader understanding of how the attachment dyad exists within and is influenced by the scaffolding of the family system.

As in the study of any developmental process, the first step must be to establish baseline measures of these behaviors. How common are alienating and aligning messages as a function of family constellation (e.g., intact, two-parent; divorced single-parent), culture, socio-economic status, and/or language? Are children differentially vulnerable to accommodate these messages as a function of cognitive ability, social and emotional maturity, temperament, gender, or birth order?⁹ What quality of the message contributes to its impact? Are more frequent, more strident, and/or more direct words and actions more likely to be accommodated?

Most intriguing, perhaps, are the interactions among these many variables. How does the quality of a child's attachment to the actor and to the object mediate the impact of the message?^{10, 11} Is there a self-righting tendency for secure relationships to remain secure and insecure relationships to move toward greater security? Or does a child's early history create a longstanding predisposition as Sroufe et al. (1999) might suggest: "Individuals also interpret new and ambiguous situations in ways that are consistent with earlier experience" (p. 6).

Clinical and Forensic Assessment

Clinicians are often faced with the challenge of understanding the quality of a child's relationship with one or more caregivers but often lack reliable and valid instruments, proceeding instead on the basis of a dangerous combination of subjective impressions and invalid measures (Bow & Quinnell, 2001; Hagan & Castagna, 2001; Horvath, Logan, & Walker, 2002). Attachment research has generated and validated the measures. It is time to apply these measures for the benefit of the children we all serve.

The Strange Situation (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) is certainly the most familiar among the many attachment assessment instruments available. However, the time required for training raters and for subsequent scoring, and the requisite physical space and technical resources make this instrument awkward at least and, for many clinicians, simply prohibitive. Still, a handful of clinician/researchers are using attachment theory in general and this paradigm quite successfully in addressing custody and placement issues (Boris, Fueyo, & Zeanah, 1996; Dyer, 2004). Most noteworthy, perhaps, is the University of Virginia's Ainsworth Child-Parent Attachment Clinic.¹²

The promise for integration of attachment measures into clinical and forensic work more likely lies in the economical, valid, and readily available observer-, caregiver-, and self-report attachment and parental sensitivity measures, reviewed above. Most prominently, Waters' Q-sort (van Ijzendoorn et al., in press; Vaughn & Waters, 1990; Waters, 1987, 2002; Waters & Deane, 1985) offers one standardized method for assessing the quality of a child-caregiver relationship in the child's natural environment.

Integration of attachment-based tools will be of great value in any number of areas of psychological treatment (Broberg, 2000; Lieberman & Zeanah, 1999) and forensic assessment. Above and beyond the structure of the intervention (Garber, 2004a, 2004b), parent-child conflicts might best be assessed in therapies that are informed by the variety of well-documented interventions intended to improve the quality of children's attachments (that is, parental alignment; Bakermans-Kranenburg, Ijzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003; Travis, Binder, Bliwise, & Horne-Moyer, 2001).

One promising prototype of such an intervention is described by Marvin, Cooper, Hoffman, and Powell (2002). Their "Circle of Security" group intervention for parents provides,

“a theory- and evidence-based intervention protocol that can be used in a partnership between professionals trained in scientifically based attachment procedures and appropriately trained community based practitioners” (p. 108).

Legal Process: Custody and Visitation Decisions

Family law courts across the country are typically overburdened and poorly equipped to deal with the complex developmental and family systems issues inherent in contested custody litigation. When allegations of alienation arise, jurists are increasingly divided in matters of custody and visitation (Sullivan & Kelly, 2001; Williams, 2001). To the extent that viewing alienation through the lens of attachment theory helps to establish baselines, reliable and valid assessment measures, and successful intervention strategies, some of the courts’ burdens may be eased. For one, the admissibility of any discussion of alienation, heretofore questionable under *Daubert v. Merrill Dow Pharmaceuticals* (1993; Poliacoff, Greene, & Smith, 1999; Ziropiannis, 2001) may be resolved.

Further, when forensic experts working within an attachment model determine that (co-) parental alienation (or misalignment) has occurred, courts can order attachment-based and child-centered remedies. Unfortunately, those remedies currently available to the courts (e.g., Ward & Harvey, 1993), including Gardner’s hotly contested recommendation (1992a) that children exposed to severe alienation should be taken out of the home of the alienating parent (actor) and placed in the home of the alienated parent (object), are presently lacking both empirical and clinical support.¹³

Ultimately, the best clinical and legal remedies will be determined on the bases of rigorous research guided by an overarching effort to preserve the security of a child’s relationship with each of her caregivers (e.g., Lamb & Kelly, 2001; but see Johnston & Kelly,

this issue). In advance of these empirical data, the present model suggests that great caution be taken in concluding that a child's resistance to or avoidance of one caregiver is necessarily the result of another caregiver's (that is, co-parental) alienation. A thorough systems evaluation will be necessary (Cowan, 1997; Lee & Olesen, 2001), making every effort to rule out environmental and social factors (Garber, 1996), mindful of the potential role of parties other than the parents in shaping the child's relative security in a particular relationship and of evidence that much alienation is a reflection on the alienated caregiver him- or herself (Johnston, 2003).

Public Policy

Given that the quality of a child's attachments in childhood are strongly related to the quality of their relationships and achievement as adults (Barnett et al., 1999; Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Bretherington, 1985; Broberg, 2000; Cook, 2000; Deason & Randolph, 1998; Laible et al., 2000; Schneider et al., 2001; Thompson, 2000), that a healthier and more successful community is more productive and more likely to raise healthy children, we share a responsibility to establish those structures which preserve the quality of child-caregiver attachments.

In the first instance, this mandate calls for establishment and expansion of family-centered education and primary prevention programs (Gross, Fogg, Webster-Stratton, Garvey, Wrenetha, & Grady, 2003; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003; Marvin et al., 2002; Peterson, Tremblay, Ewigman, & Saldana, 2003) and the incentives (e.g., child tax credits) to use them. More specifically, the quality of our future may be improved by establishing co-parent (rather than parent) training appropriate to developmental landmarks (e.g., pregnancy, immunization, school enrollment, graduation) and emphasizing the family system (regardless of legal status) and the powerful tools with which family comes to be defined: alienation and estrangement, alignment and misalignment.

Secondarily, when education and prevention are insufficient, policies must be developed that support child-centered response and intervention. Child protection agency providers must be trained in recognition of alienation, estrangement, alignment, and misalignment. Law makers must consider the value of recognizing any dynamic that corrupts a child's secure relationships as a reportable act of abuse and establishing associated supportive and corrective interventions.

Limitations of the Present Model

It is unfortunate that some combination of political and practical matters have historically caused developmental theory and clinical practice to remain largely separate and distinct. In calling for application of the impressive accumulation of theory and measurement in attachment research, the present model is at once intuitively appealing and empirically weak.

The intuitive appeal lies in recognizing that, if alienation occurs at all, it is unlikely to spring forth, fully developed, exclusively in the context of contested custody litigation. Attachment theory provides a solid foundation upon which to postulate the cognitive-emotional mechanisms that mediate the relative impact of a given actor's security-enhancing or security-diminishing words and actions on a child's relationship with a given caregiving object.

Still, the leap from clinical and forensic to developmental and back again is yet to be bridged by data. The present model suggests that this empirical bridge will be built by improved communication between these fields. Clinical-forensic-research alliances will work to incorporate validated attachment measures into existing assessment protocols and feed back the data from these applications to research without compromising confidentiality and without risk of legal discovery for the benefit of the empiricists, the clinicians, the courts and, most importantly, the children.

Specifically, the present model will prove to be robust only to the extent that attachment assessment instruments and attachment-based interventions prove to be practical, reliable, and valid in clinical and forensic settings. This calls for clinical and forensic professionals to rethink their models and to begin to integrate developmental theory into practice (e.g., Dyer, 2004). Where many forensic examiners address custody issues entirely within the four walls of their own office, the introduction of attachment-based tools may call for observation in the child's natural setting. Where clinicians may previously have referred to relationships as "secure" and "insecure" without objective referents, these critically important terms may need to be relearned and applied accordingly. Where jurists have accepted discussion of alienation and experts' recommendations as to remedies, the movement must be toward empirically-tested, child-centered interventions.

Most specifically, the forensic custody evaluator is cautioned that attachment assessment instruments, however promising and theoretically valuable, are yet to be validated in their forensic application. The evaluator remains responsible to first and foremost observe and report specific behaviors and only secondarily to attempt to summarize such observations in an effort to inform the court. To the extent that attachment methodology is yet to be validated in its clinical and forensic applications, the evaluator would be premature to apply these methods and related terminology at present.

The power of the present model is similarly restricted to the extent that clinical and forensic data can usefully inform developmental theory and the direction of future developmental research. For example, in recognizing that third parties contribute to a child's relationship security, a door has been opened through which research can begin to examine attachment beyond the dyad. Do intact family units (regardless of legal status or composition) spontaneously

communicate membership with aligning messages? Do distinct family units spontaneously communicate their separateness through alienating messages? How do these messages shift as families transition as when parents separate and divorce, on the one hand, or when families merge (e.g., step-families), on the other?

Discussion

Lacking a foundation in developmental theory, the validation of a body of sound empirical research and fueled by the powerful emotions understandably associated with litigation and child custody decisions, the concept of alienation has run amok. Parent rights organizations, child advocacy groups, child-centered mental health professionals, and the court system each risk becoming polarized in the debate over the reality and response to alienation, a dilemma that leaves the child once again lost in the middle.

The present paper grounds the concepts of the alienated child, PA, and PAS in the solid research and conceptual framework of attachment theory, describing alienation as the complement of alignment and acknowledging that both dynamics are among the necessary and natural tools with which children shape their relationships, establish their security, and define their family. It is when these constructive tools are used as weapons to divide families that children are hurt.

In order to discuss these dynamics constructively, each must be defined in terms of actor and object. With this clarification, *parental alienation* and *alignment* can be differentiated from *co-parental alienation* and *alignment*. Baseline documentation and experimental manipulations borrowing the robust measures currently underlying attachment research will generate a broad understanding of the variables inherent in these dynamics, including an understanding of the conditions that may make the quality of one child's relationships more malleable than that of

another. This, then, will guide clinical process and dictate the legal remedies best suited to help a given child maintain a healthy and positive relationship with each of her caregivers.

Grounding the concept of alienation in attachment theory further suggests that the tools that have been developed with which to assess attachment have critical value in the clinical and forensic arenas. In a handful of settings, these tools have already proven useful in the course of custody evaluation, assessment of allegations of (co-)parental alienation, as process measures valuable to the course of any intervention intended to re-align caregiver and child and as landmark criteria on the basis of which courts might determine the conditions and duration of contact between a parent and child. The present paper calls for broad endorsement of attachment theory and methodology in clinical and forensic work with the children of highly conflicted caregivers, the development of programs intended to educate caregivers about the destructive potential of these acts, and the establishment of public policies intended to support healthy family systems and respond, as necessary, to the abuse inherent in extreme forms of alienation.

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Footnotes

¹ The history of the controversy has been thoroughly reviewed by a number of authors, most recently including Kelly and Johnston (2001), Faller (1998), Williams (2001), Dallam (1998a, 1998b), Poliacoff and Greene (1999), and Rybicki (2001) with rejoinders including Gardner (2001, 2003).

² Kelly and Johnston (2001) identify many factors including the child's age, temperament, and cognitive capacity, each parent's personality, the state of the litigation, and the relationship among the parents and between each parent and the child as contributing the child's observed visitation resistance or refusal.

³ In order to simplify expression, children are referred to in the feminine form throughout this paper. This is not to suggest, however, that any part of this discussion is gender specific.

⁴ Willemsen and Marcel (1995) provide an excellent introductory summary of attachment theory in the context of placement decisions.

⁵ These epochs are standardized as follows: (1) Caregiver and child are alone in an unfamiliar room. (2) An unfamiliar woman enters, speaks to the caregiver, and plays with the child. (3) The caregiver leaves the child and the stranger together. (4) The caregiver returns and the stranger leaves. (5) The caregiver says "bye-bye," and leaves the child alone in the room. (6) The stranger returns. (7) The caregiver returns and the stranger leaves.

⁶ Waters (personal communication, July 14, 2004) emphasizes the need to use the Q-sort in the child's natural setting (e.g., on the playground, at the shopping mall) as opposed to using this tool in the evaluator's office. He further notes that the research that might validate the use of attachment assessment instruments in forensic (that is, custody) settings is absent largely because of the confidentiality and discovery concerns associated with data collection.

⁷ The suggestion here is that children implicitly perform an analysis of variance among relationships. Alienating and aligning messages provide the data, which communicates the coherence of the family group and the lesser coherence between the family group and others. This is precisely the process cognitive scientists observe among infants acquiring real world categories.

⁸ Noting that a child might resist or refuse contact with a specific caregiver for many reasons entirely independent of the child's IWM of that caregiver (Garber, 1996; Johnston, 2003).

⁹ Stahl (1999), for example, observes that the children most vulnerable to alienation are passive and dependent.

¹⁰ Cook (personal electronic communication, December 10, 2002) suggests, "if the child is strongly attached to the denigrator *and* weakly attached to the object, would not the effect of the denigration be greatest? And yes, age, sex and developmental level of the child could also moderate the denigration"

¹¹ Mikulincer and Arad (1999) observe that securely attached adults maintain a more malleable or adaptive IWM of attachment figures: "[A]ttachment working models appear to bias the way people cognitively process new information about their relationship partner.... [A secure IWM] may allow people to tolerate ambiguities and contradictions, to successfully cope with conflictual and ambivalent situations" (p. 716-717).

¹² Personal communication July 15, 2004, with William Whelan, Ph.D. Further information is available at <http://www.attachmentclinic.com> (retrieved July 11, 2004).

¹³ Johnston and Kelly (2004) refer to Gardner's recommendations as, "a license for tyranny" (p. XX)

Table 1.

Illustration of the alienation and alignment of a child’s internal working model (IWM) of the quality of attachment with a given object by a parent’s (actor’s) words and actions.

Child perceives emotional valence of parent’s (actor’s) words and/or actions as:

		Self-directed (reflexive)		Directed at non-caregiver		Directed at co-parent	
		positive	negative	Positive	negative	positive	Negative
Quality of existing IWM	Secure	Validating	Self-alienation	Validating	Alienation	Validating	Co-parental alienation
	Insecure ^a	Self-alignment	Validating	Alignment	Validating	Co-parental alignment	Validating

^a Note that this illustration is simplified. The quality of attachment is most typically discussed as falling into four categories (secure, insecure-resistant, insecure-avoidant and disorganized) as presented earlier. Presumably an actor’s words and actions can be accommodated to shift the quality of a child’s attachment to the object from, as examples, insecure-resistant to insecure-avoidant or insecure-resistant to disorganized. Note Cummings (2003) discussion of the quality of attachment as a continuous, rather than a categorical measure.

Table 2.

Differentiating the impact of alienation and alignment on a child's attachment security as a function of accuracy and congruence.

Accuracy of the message about the object			
Objective quality of caregiver (object)	Sensitive and responsive	Message accommodated is accurate	Message accommodated is inaccurate
		Healthy alignment	Alienation
	Insensitive and unresponsive	Estrangement (Appropriate alienation)	Misalignment (Inappropriate alignment)