

Erasmus Medical Center
Rotterdam, Netherlands

Attachment-Based “Parental Alienation”

Trauma Informed Assessment of Complex Family Conflict

C.A. Childress, Psy.D.

An Attachment-Based Model of Complex Family Conflict Surrounding Divorce

Part 1:

- Orientation
- Foundations

Part 2

- Diagnosis
- Assessment
- Solutions

I call it the "pathogen" for a reason. This is a public health issue. The pathogenic agent is a specific set of damaged information structures in the attachment networks of the brain. This pathology has a neurological basis.

It is a specific set of damaged information structures in the attachment system - damaged by childhood trauma - that then create the current complex family conflict surrounding divorce, evidenced in severe attachment pathology displays by the child. This is a trauma pathogen. It is a public health issue.

This is a trauma pathology born in child abuse; a profound parental absence of empathy for the child. It is caused by a trauma pathogen that moves through generations, carried in the parenting practices it creates. This is a public health issue; a DSM-5 diagnostic issue.

It needs more complete discussion and professional attention from psychiatric and psychological (trauma) fields. I don't want to talk about "parental alienation," I'm going to talk about trauma; complex trauma moving through the generations - the trans-generational transmission of complex trauma.

We need professional attention to this pathology. It is a public health issue. That's why I refer to the pathogen; to highlight the medical-psychiatric public health issue.

APA Ethics Code

2.04 Bases for Scientific and Professional Judgments

Psychologists' work is based upon established scientific and professional knowledge of the discipline.

Forensic Psychology

Clinical Psychology

Forensic Psychology

Clinical Psychology

Dr. Childress

- Youtube: Vitae Series
 - clinical psychologist – senior staff
- Work product: Juvenile Firesetting Mental Health Assessment – FEMA and DOJ
- Attachment – Trauma – Early Childhood (neurodevelopment of the brain in childhood)

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Parental Alienation
Private Practice
Seminars & Trainings
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THE OFFICE OF
DR. CRAIG CHILDRESS
Licensed Clinical Psychologist, CA PSY 18857

Welcome, you've reached the professional website for Dr. Craig Childress, a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in treating children and families. My specialty areas of focus include the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD-spectrum issues, treating excessive child anger and

Juvenile Firesetting Screening Instrument

This is a screening instrument for juvenile firesetting behavior developed by Dr. Childress in collaboration with Dr. Fineman and Dr. Patterson.

 PDF

Firesetting Child Protocol

This is the structured clinical interview assessment protocol for juvenile firesetting behavior.

 PDF

Firesetting Reinforcement Summary

This is the Firesetting Summary Description Form.

 PDF

Dr Childress Reference List: AB-PA

This is my personal reference list for AB-PA.

 PDF

Dr Childress Reference List: Psychological Control

This is my personal reference list for the construct of Psychological Control, extracted from my personal reference list for AB-PA.


 PDF

Dr Childress Reference List: Dark Triad Personality


This is my personal reference list for the Dark Triad personality, extracted from my personal reference list for AB-PA


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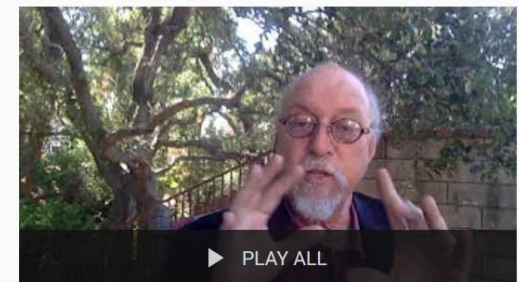


Standard of Practice: Vitae Series

1  Standards of Practice: Vitae Series 1: Dr. C. A. Childress 10:56

2  Standards of Practice - Vitae Series 2: Dr. C. A. Childress 10:04

3  Standards of Practice - Vitae Series 3: Psychology. Dr. C. A. Childress 12:15



Foundations: Family Systems

1  Foundations - Family Systems 1: Dr. C. A. Childress 4:59

2  Foundations - Family Systems 2: Dr. C. A. Childress 8:43

3  Foundations - Family Systems 3: Dr. C. A. Childress 5:49

Forensic Psychology

Clinical Psychology

Forensic Psychology

Clinical Psychology

- Court-Involved Clinical Psychology

○ Court-Involved Clinical Psychology

Scoreboard

AB-PA represents the return of **clinical psychology** to court-involved consultation, court-involved assessment of pathology, and court-involved treatment of pathology.

Court-involved clinical psychology does NOT address child custody. Court-involved clinical psychology has NO opinion on child custody schedules.

Two Basic Schedules:

- 50-50 Shared
- Every Other Weekend (primacy to one)

Live Apart

- Primacy for school – Primacy for Vacation

Clinical psychology can work with any custody schedule, it doesn't matter. The court can do whatever it thinks is best.

Clinical psychology has no opinion on child custody.

Clinical psychology is focused on treatment.

How do we fix the complex family conflict
surrounding divorce?

Referral Question:

Referral Question for forensic psychology:

What should the child's custody visitation schedule be?

That is an over-broad and unanswerable referral question.

Clinical psychology will not accept that as a referral question.

Referral Question:

Referral Question for court-involved clinical psychology is:

Which parent is the source of pathogenic parenting creating the child's attachment-related pathology, and what are the treatment implications?

That is a limited-scope treatment-focused referral question.

That referral question is answerable by clinical psychology and by a clinical psychology assessment of pathology.



Science

The foundations of clinical psychology

The Science of Professional Psychology

Psychoanalysis	1920	transference (psychotic)
Behavioral Psychology	1940	stimulus control; behavior chain
Cognitive Dissonance	1950	attribution theory
Attachment System	1960	internal working models
Personality Disorder	1970	narcissist - borderline
Family systems	1980	triangles; coalitions
Trauma Pathology	1990	generational transmission
Neuro-Development	2000	emotion regulation; intersubjectivity

AB-PA is not a theory.

It is diagnosis.

Diagnosis is the application of standard and established constructs and principles to a set of symptoms.

An attachment-based model of complex family conflict surrounding divorce represents the return of clinical psychology and standards of professional practice to court-involved complex family conflict surrounding divorce.

There is no such thing as “parental alienation” in
clinical psychology.

It is a made-up pathology.

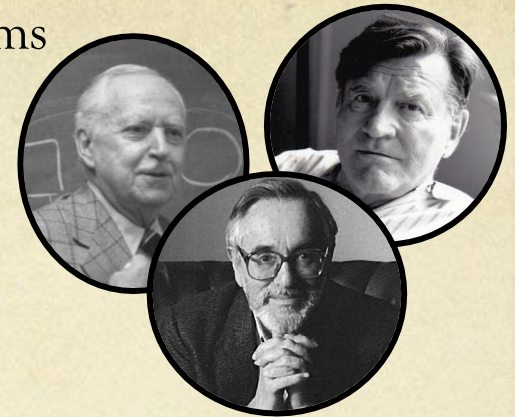
And...

There is no such thing as AB-PA



Attachment

Family Systems Therapy



There are the standard and established constructs,
principles, and pathologies of professional psychology



Personality
Disorders



Complex Trauma

AB-PA refers to the standard and established constructs and principles of professional psychology:

Attachment System

Bowlby

Personality Pathology

Minuchin

Family Systems Therapy

Beck

Complex Trauma

Millon

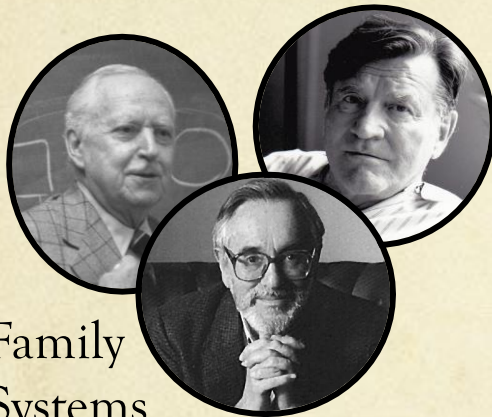
Bowen

An attachment-based model of “parental alienation”
(attachment bonding rejection surrounding divorce)
describes the pathology using standard and established
constructs and principles of professional psychology.

If the court wants an answer to the question, which custody schedule should the family have, turn to forensic psychology.

If the court wants an answer to the question, what needs to be done to fix the family conflict, turn to clinical psychology.

Established Knowledge



Family
Systems
Therapy



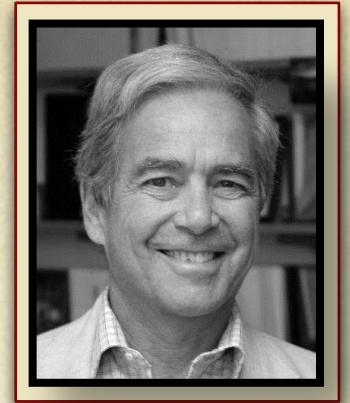
Attachment



Complex Trauma

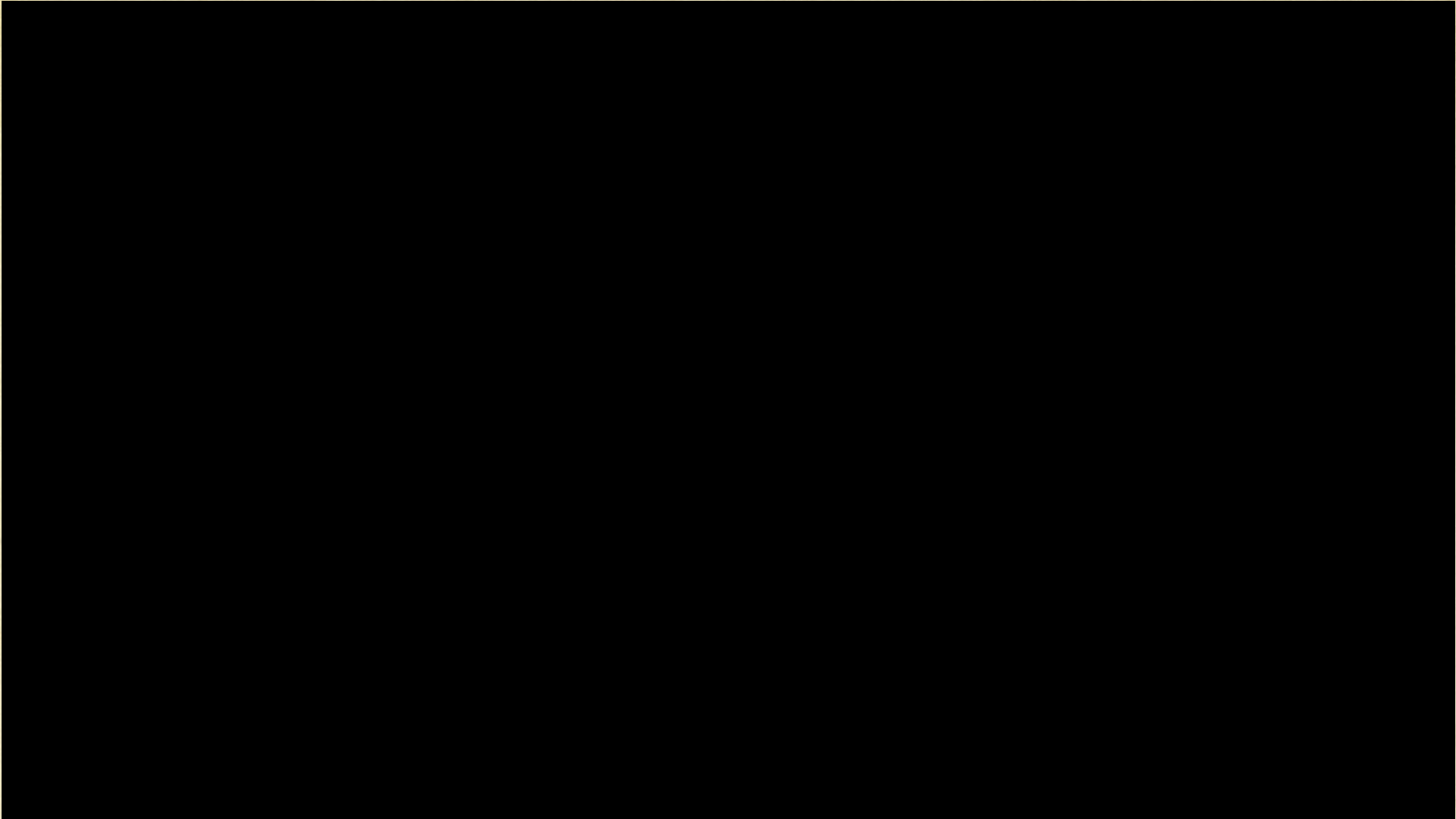


Personality
Disorders



Neuro-Development

Breach-and-Repair Sequence



Scaffolding the neuro-development of self-regulatory
networks for emotions and arousal regulation



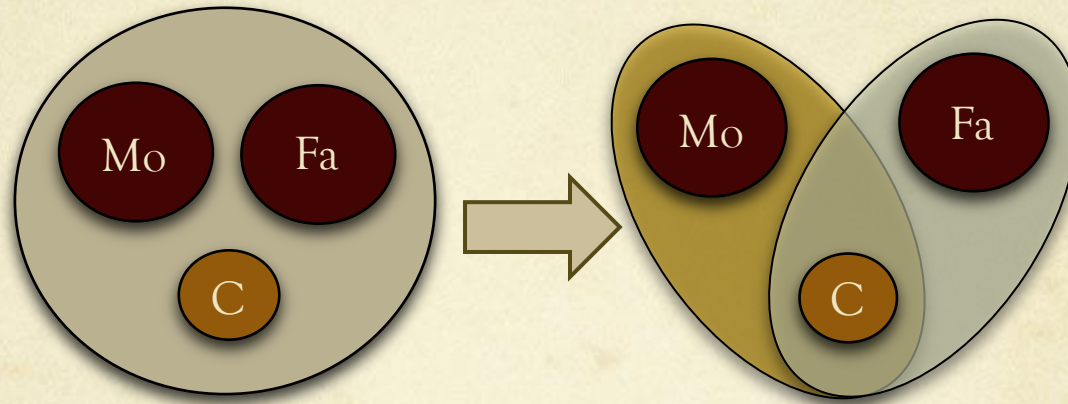
An Attachment Based Model of Complex Family Conflict

Foundations

Child's Best Interests:



Family Transitions

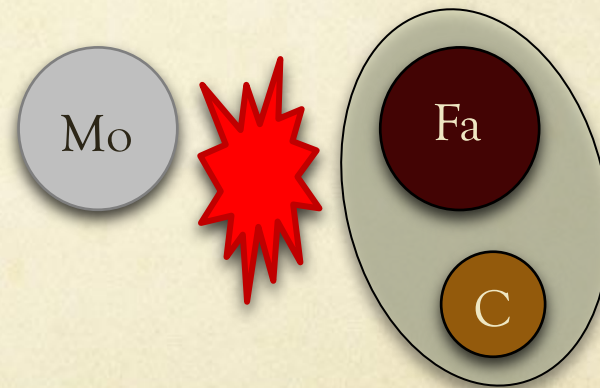
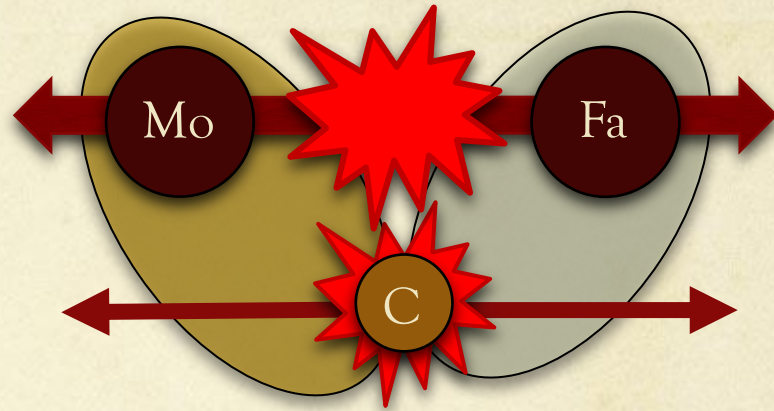


With divorce, the family is transitioning from an intact family structure that was united by the marriage...

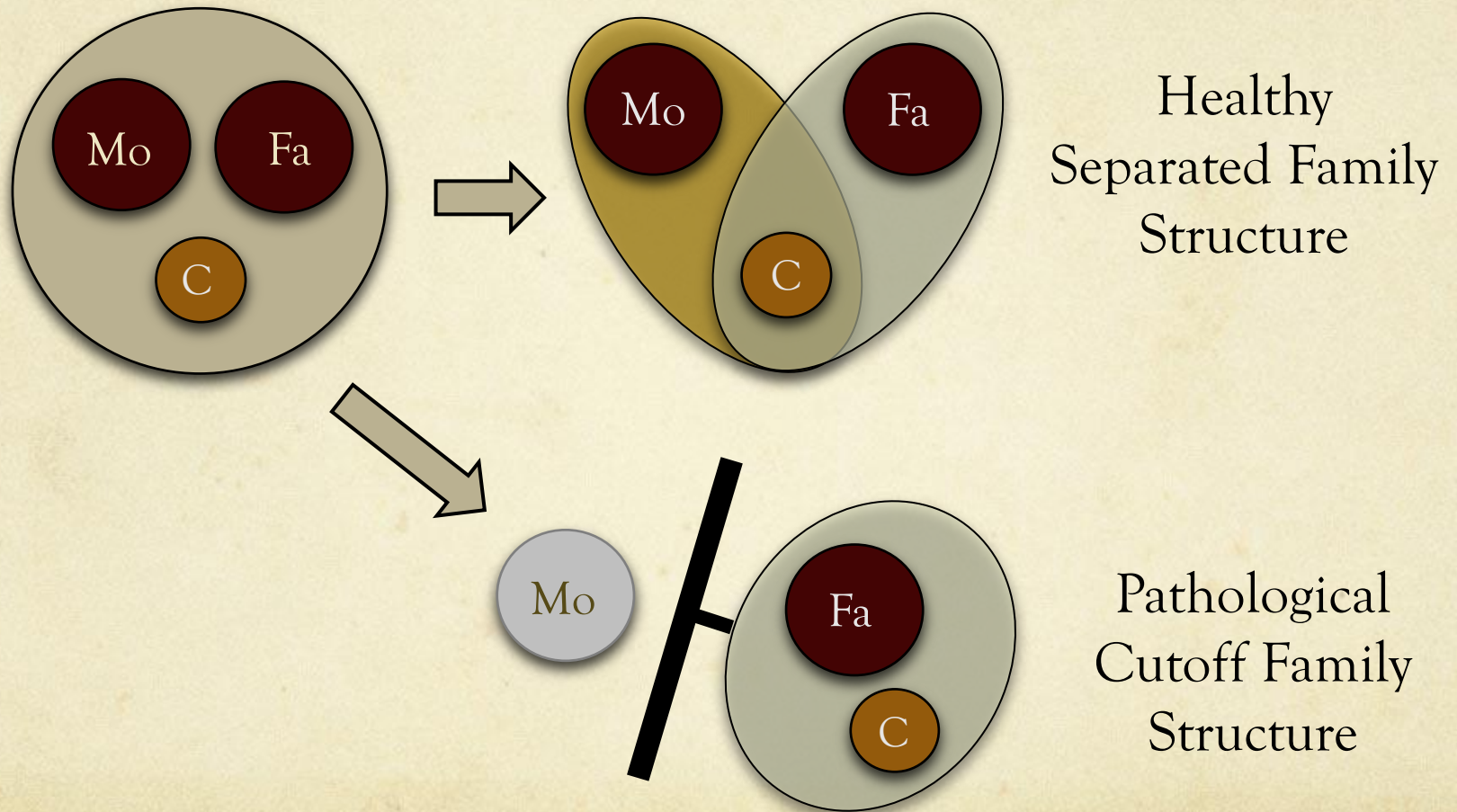
... to a new separated family structure that is now united by the child through the child's shared bonds of affection with both parents.

High inter-spousal conflict rips the child apart in the child's role of bonding with both parents, which continues to create the family;

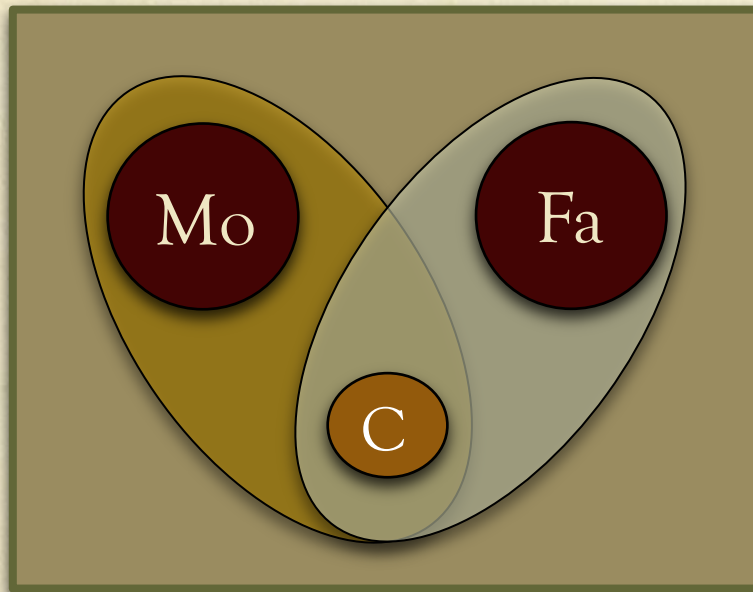
Sometimes creating a rupture in the family (emotional cutoff) as a consequence.



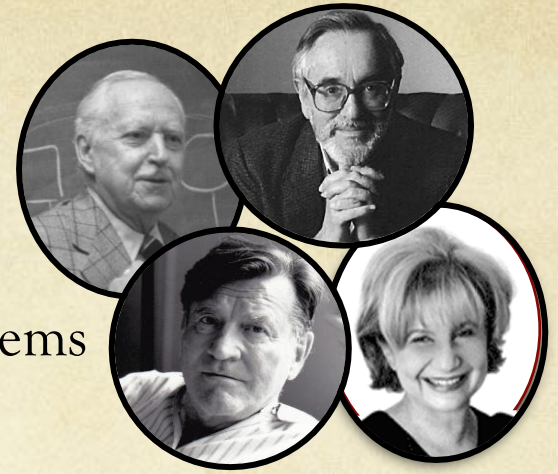
Two Possible Divorce Transitions:



Solution Focused: A healthy separated family structure is always in the best interests of the child



Family Systems



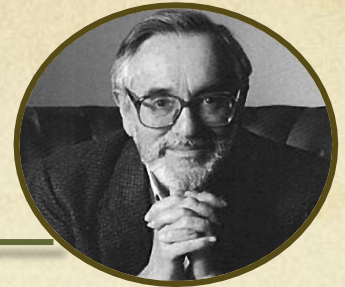
Foundations:

Family Systems Therapy

Family Systems Description:

The child is being **triangulated** into the spousal conflict through the formation of a **cross-generational coalition** with one parent (the allied parent) against the other parent, the targeted parent, resulting in an **emotional cutoff** in the child's relationship with the targeted parent.

Minuchin: Structural Family Diagrams



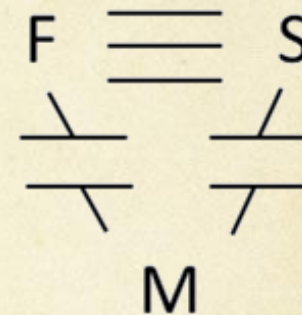
Triangulation

Cross-Generational Coalition

Emotional Cutoff

Inverted Hierarchy

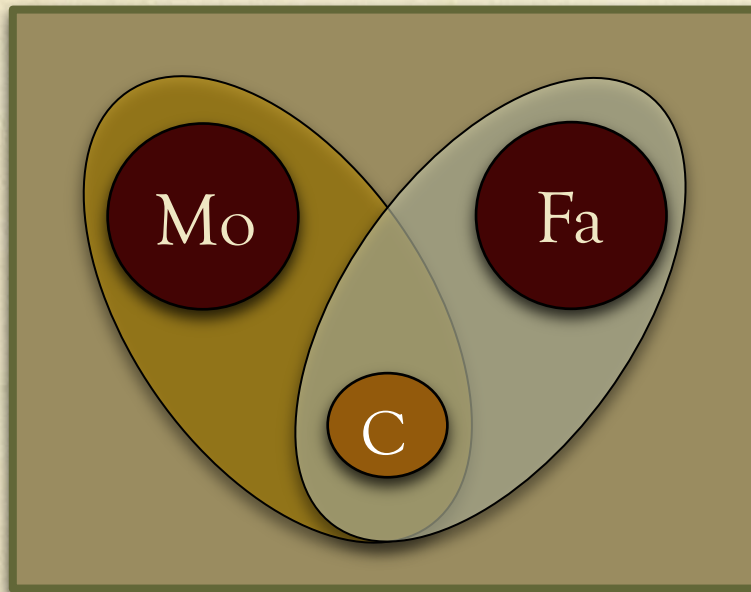
Enmeshment



Cross-generational
coalition & cutoff
(Minuchin & Nichols,
1993, p. 42)

Solution Focused:

A Healthy Separated Family Structure





Foundations

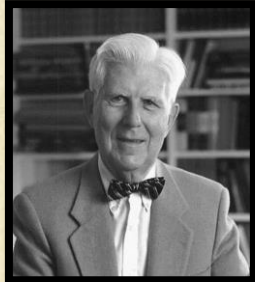
The Trauma Reenactment Narrative



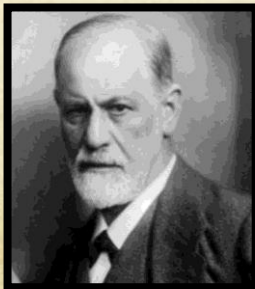
Van der Kolk: Trauma Reenactment



Bowlby: Internal working models

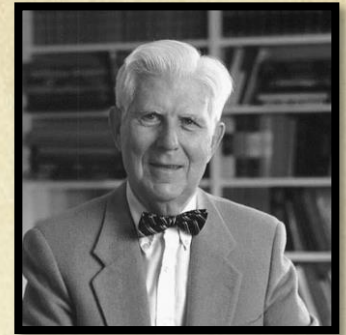


Beck: Schemas



Freud: Transference

Schema Patterns



"Evaluation of the particular demands of a situation precedes and triggers an adaptive (or maladaptive) strategy."

"How a situation is evaluated depends in part, at least, on the relevant underlying beliefs. These beliefs are embedded in more or less stable structures, labeled “schemas,” that select and synthesize incoming data.”

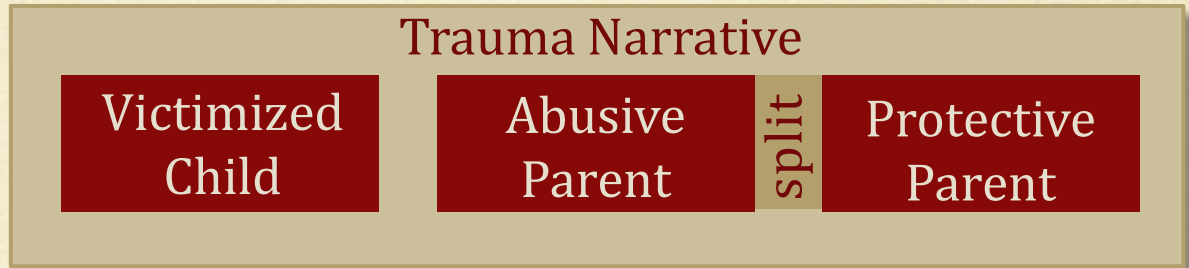
(Beck et al, 2004, p. 17)

"...when activated they channel cognitive processing
from the earliest to the final stages."

(Beck et al, 2004, p. 27)

Divorce activates **two sets** of representational networks in the attachment system of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent:

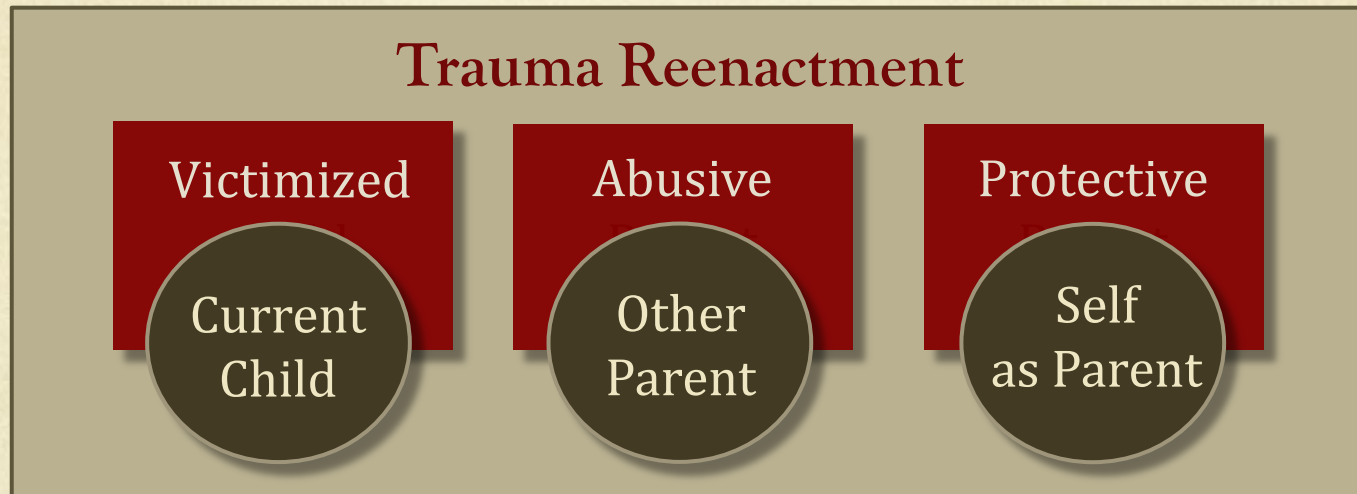
PAST childhood
trauma patterns
(schemas)



CURRENT
family
relationships



Psychological Equivalency



The simultaneous activation in the attachment system of two sets of representational networks, one from the past and one from the current relationships, creates a fusion, a psychological equivalence, of the neurological networks.

Psychological Equivalency

Targeted Parent = "Abusive Parent"

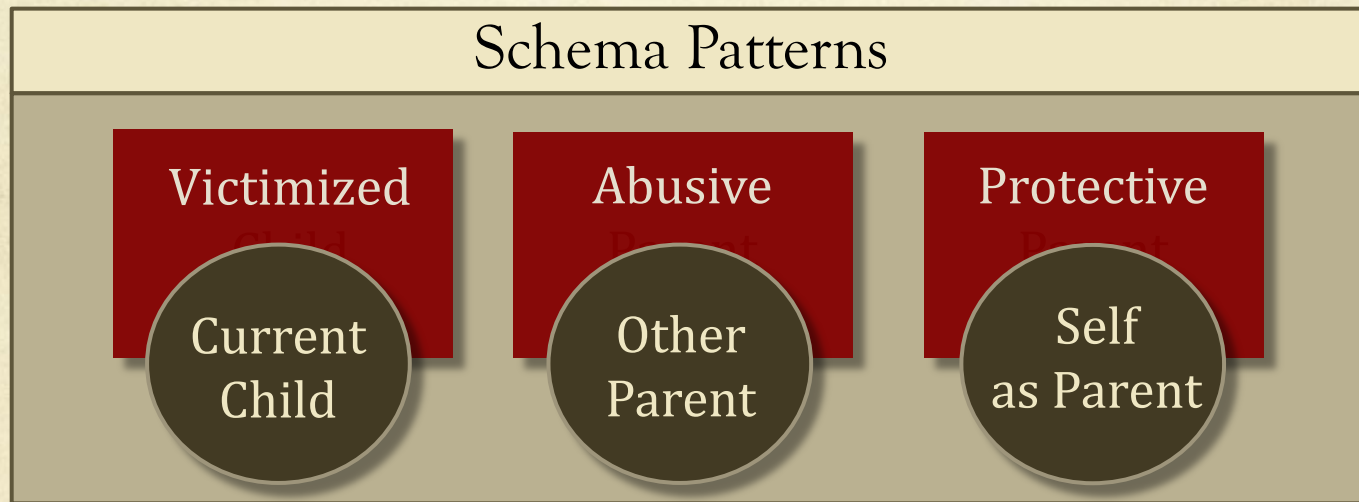
Current Child = "Victimized Child"

N/(B) Parent = "Protective Parent"



Schema Patterns

"When schemas are latent, they are not participating in information processing; when activated they channel cognitive processing from the earliest to the final stages."



Pearlman, C.A., Courtois, C.A. (2005). Clinical applications of the attachment framework: Relational treatment of complex trauma. **Journal of Traumatic Stress**, 18, 449-459.

"One primary transference – countertransference dynamic involves reenactment of familiar roles of **victim–perpetrator–rescuer**–bystander in the therapy relationship. Therapist and client play out these roles, often in complementary fashion with one another, as they relive various aspects of the client's early attachment relationships."

(Pearlman & Courtois, 2005, p. 455)

Trauma Reenactment



“When the trauma fails to be integrated into the totality of a person’s life experiences, the victim remains fixated on the trauma.”

"Despite avoidance of emotional involvement, traumatic memories cannot be avoided: even when pushed out of waking consciousness, they come back in the form of **reenactments**, nightmares, or **feelings related to the trauma**.”

(van der Kolk, 1987, p. 17)

From Wikipedia: "Bessel van der Kolk is a Boston-based psychiatrist noted for his research in the area of post-traumatic stress since the 1970s. His work focuses on the interaction of attachment, neurobiology, and developmental aspects of trauma's effects on people."

"A former Harvard Medical School professor of psychiatry, Bessel van der Kolk has served as president of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, medical director of the Trauma Center at JRI in Brookline, Massachusetts, director of the Complex Trauma Network within the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, and professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine."

Trauma Reenactment



"People who have been exposed to highly stressful stimuli develop long-term potentiation of memory tracts that are **reactivated** at times of subsequent arousal."


"This activation explains how **current stress** is experienced as a **return of the trauma**; it causes a **return to earlier behavior patterns**."

(van der Kolk, 1987, p. 17)

Abusive Parent - Victimized Child - Protective Parent

It is a **false drama**, created in the childhood attachment trauma experienced by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent many years ago;

That remains embedded in the *internal working models* (schemas) of this parent's attachment networks.



Delusional Pathology

The Collapse of Narcissistic Pathology



The Collapse into Delusions

“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.”

(Millon, 2011, pp. 407-408).



The Collapse into Delusions

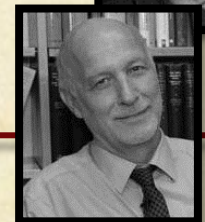
“Among narcissists, delusions often take form after a serious challenge or setback has upset their image of superiority and omnipotence. They tend to exhibit compensatory grandiosity and jealousy **delusions** in which they reconstruct reality to match the image they are unable or unwilling to give up. **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.”

(Millon, 2011, pp. 407-408).

Foundations:

Attachment Pathology

Attachment

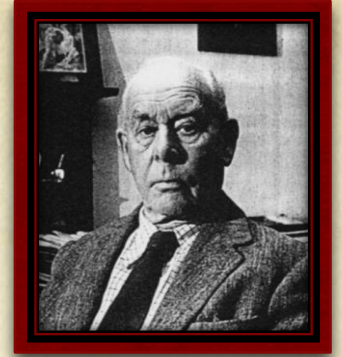


Attachment Pathology

The attachment system is the brain system governing all aspects of love and bonding throughout the lifespan, including grief and loss.

A child rejecting a parent is a problem in the love and bonding system of the brain; the attachment system.

A child rejecting a parent is an **attachment-related pathology**; a problem in the love and bonding system of the brain.



“The deactivation of attachment behavior is a key feature of certain common variants of pathological mourning.”

(Bowlby, 1980, p. 70)

Personality Pathology



“Disturbances of personality, which include a bias to respond to loss with disordered mourning, are seen as the outcome of one or more deviations in development that can originate or grow worse during any of the years of infancy, childhood and adolescence.”

(Bowlby, 1980, p. 217)

The Narcissistic Personality



"They [narcissists] are especially **deficient in genuine feelings of sadness and mournful longing**; their incapacity for experiencing depressive reactions is a basic feature of their personalities."

"When abandoned or disappointed by other people they may show what on the surface looks like depression, but which on further examination emerges as **anger and resentment, loaded with revengeful wishes**, rather than real sadness for the loss of a person whom they appreciated."

(Kernberg, 1975, p. 229)

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