

## Applying Professional Knowledge

Professional competence in complex family conflict and attachment pathology surrounding a divorce requires professional-level knowledge in five domains of professional psychology.

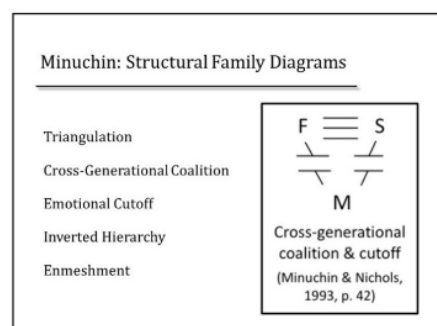
### 1. Attachment (Bowlby):

A child rejecting a parent is an 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 love-and-bonding, in attachment. A child rejecting a parent is an attachment pathology and requires for professional competence the application of professional knowledge from the field of attachment, as required by Standard B.1.2 of the APS ethics code and Standard 2.04 of the APA ethics code.

### 2. Family Systems Therapy (Minuchin):

It is self-evident that family conflict involves family relationships. Family systems therapy (Minuchin, Bowen, Haley, Madanes) is one of the four primary schools of psychotherapy, and the only school of psychotherapy that focuses on resolving family problems. Family systems therapy is THE school of psychotherapy to apply in resolving family conflict.

In his 1993 book co-authored with Michael Nichols, *Family Healing*, Minuchin provided a Structural family diagram for EXACTLY the pathology of concern surrounding this high-intensity family conflict pathology. This diagram from Minuchin and Nichols depicts the child's "triangulation" into the spousal conflict, the "cross-generational coalition" of the child with one parent against the other parent that empowers the child to judge and reject the other parent (called an "inverted hierarchy"), and the "emotional cutoff" in the child's bond to the targeted parent.



The professional knowledge base of family systems therapy represents a grounding foundation for resolving family conflict from the "established knowledge of the discipline and profession of psychology" that is required by Standard B.1.2 of the APS ethics code and Standard 2.04 of the APA ethics code.

### 3. Personality Disorder Pathology (Beck):

Narcissistic and borderline personality pathologies are recognized disorders in the DSM-5. Among the prominent experts in this field are Arron Beck, Otto Kernberg, Theodore Millon, and Marsha Linehan. The field of professional psychology recognizes that narcissistic personality pathology is vulnerable to collapse in response to rejection, and that borderline personality pathology collapses in response to abandonment. Both rejection and perceived abandonment are inherent to divorce, so divorce will trigger a full activation of narcissistic and/or borderline pathology in a spouse-and-parent. Narcissistic and borderline personalities are both high-conflict personalities, and both have their origins in unresolved childhood attachment trauma. The scientifically established knowledge from personality disorder pathology represents a foundational basis of professional competence surrounding high-intensity family conflict from the "established knowledge of the discipline and profession of psychology," knowledge required by Standard B.1.2 of the APS ethics code and Standard 2.04 of the APA ethics code.

### 4. Complex Trauma (van der Kolk):

Complex trauma is a relationship-based trauma that is created by prolonged exposure to high-levels of relationship stress in childhood (van der Kolk). The field of trauma psychology has long understood that unresolved childhood trauma is then transferred to other relationships in the future through a process called “the transference” by Freud (i.e., the transfer of trauma patterns from childhood to current relationships) and described within trauma research literature by van der Kolk as the “reenactment” of childhood trauma in future relationships.

**From van der Kolk:** “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... Recurrences may continue throughout life during periods of stress.” (Van der Kolk, 1987, p. 5)<sup>1</sup>

Scientifically established knowledge from the field of complex trauma has identified the trans-generational transmission of unresolved childhood trauma to future generations, and the field of complex trauma is directly linked to the formation of personality disorder pathology in adulthood. The domain of complex trauma represents the “established knowledge of the discipline and profession of psychology” required by Standard B.1.2 of the APS ethics code and Standard 2.04 of the APA ethics code for professional competence.

### **5. Neuro-Development in Childhood (Tronick):**

Research on brain neuro-development in childhood, specifically through the parent-child relationship (i.e., “scaffolding” the development of the brain’s social and regulatory systems), has expanded by exponential magnitude since 1980. A leading figure in this field is Dr. Tronick at Harvard University, with over 40 years of research using a type of parent-child research paradigm called the still-face paradigm. Dr. Tronick provides an example and describes the parent-child breach-and-repair sequence from his research in a YouTube presentation (Dr. Tronick: Still Face)<sup>2</sup>.

Dr. Tronick’s work is not about infants, although it is that as well. The still-face research paradigm from Dr. Tronick is about understanding the foundational brain systems for social, emotional, and behavioral regulation. The research is conducted with infants because the primary features of the brain’s regulatory networks are more clearly evident in early childhood, before the more complicated systems of later development build on top of and cover the fundamental neural-social structures of relationship and social communication systems.

Of prominent note in the YouTube description by Dr. Tronick of the research paradigm is his direct comparison of the various components of the breach-and-repair sequence to “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” The “good” is the normal-range negotiation of social relationships through the multiple give-and-take exchanges of normal-range relationship breaches, followed by their repair in the parent-child interaction. The “bad” represents a major breach to the relationship that is not repaired, and the child’s extreme discomfort to the loss of a parent-child bond is evident in the video. The “ugly” is to leave un-repaired the breach to the parent-child bond, which is the WORST possible thing to do. Yet that is exactly what forensic psychology<sup>3</sup> routinely does, it leaves an un-repaired breach in the parent-child bond, and frequently the input from forensic psychology to the court actually recommends leaving the breach in the parent-child relationship unrepaired, the “ugly” described by Tronick is

---

<sup>1</sup> Van der Kolk, B.A. (1987). The psychological consequences of overwhelming life experiences. In B.A. van der Kolk (Ed.) *Psychological Trauma* (1-30). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Tronick Still Face: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>

<sup>3</sup> Lees voor Nederland: Raad voor Kinderbescherming en Jeugdbescherming

actually often the recommendation from forensic psychology, who take a custody-oriented rather than a treatment-focused approach.

Professional knowledge regarding the neuro-development of the brain and the importance of the breach-and-repair sequence to both healthy child development and to creating pathological child development is a critical and central component of the “established knowledge of the discipline and profession of psychology” that is required to be applied by Standard B.1.2 of the APS ethics code and by Standard 2.04 of the APA ethics code.

Five domains of professional knowledge (symbolically represented by a leading figure each domain) are needed to competently assess, diagnose, and treat high-intensity court-involved family conflict surrounding divorce. Yet, while this professional knowledge is necessary for professional competence and its application is required by professional standards of practice (APS & APA ethics codes), court-involved forensic psychology routinely fails to both know and apply the scientifically established knowledge of professional psychology.