

## **Why Doesn't Parental Alienation Occur More Frequently? The Significance of Role Discrimination**

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*Approximately two thirds of divorced families develop co-parenting relationships that are more or less effective. Of the approximately one third of divorces that do not evolve into effective co-parenting, a subset deteriorates into parental alienation. Classical Balance theory predicts parental alienation as a normative outcome in divorcing and divorced families. Discriminating between their roles as spouses and parents allows separated and divorced couples to avoid alienation outcomes. Elevated anxiety, however, may interfere with these discriminative responses, and lead parents into stereotyping each other. This article proposes a two-dimensional model of parental estrangement-alienation addressing variations in anxiety and stereotyping. Interventions for reducing the effects of estrangement and alienation are also identified and discussed.*

The welfare of children of divorce necessitates effective co-parenting from their divorced parents (Repucci, 1984). Subsequent to divorce, effective co-parenting is characterized by parental consistency regarding expectations and limits for their children's behavior. As the stress and turmoil of pre-decree divorce negotiations diminish on a post-decree basis, approximately two thirds of divorced families develop co-parenting relationships that are more or less effective (Isaacs, Montalvo, & Abelson, 1986).

The more effective arrangements involve divorced parents actively communicating and cooperating on behalf of their children (Wolchik & Karoly, 1985). Less effective relationships, but more typically more benign than not, involve parallel parenting arrangements. In parallel parenting circumstances, active communication and cooperation are rare (Maccoby,

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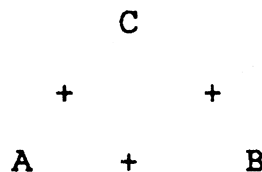
Buchanan, Mnookin, & Dornbusch, 1993). These parents often prefer avoiding face-to-face communication, relying instead on written notes, voicemail, and/or fax machines. Nonetheless, both parents recognize and accept the significance of each other in their children's lives (e.g., "I don't tell the kids what a [blank] s/he is, s/he is their father [or mother] and it is better if they have a decent relationship.").

Of the approximately one third of divorces, that do not evolve into effective co-parenting, a subset deteriorates into parental alienation. In these instances, one of the parents persistently alienates his or her children from the other parent. Alienated children react to their parents in absolute terms of "black and white." They regard the alienating parent as all things good and virtuous. The parent from whom they are alienated, however, is considered dispicable beyond any hope of changing his or her ways. Alienated children are well aware of the animosity with which the alienating parent reacts to the alienated parent. In turn, the children blindly align themselves with the alienating parent. While doing so, they also uncritically adopt the agenda of the alienating parent.

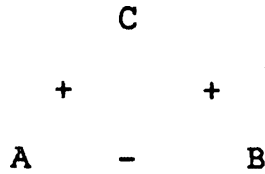
### BALANCE THEORY

Though developed more than 40 years ago, Heider's (1958) Balance theory continues to influence the fields of person perception and attitude formation. Balance theory indicates that people seek a sense of balance in their attitudes and perceptions of other people. For example, assume a three-person relationship as illustrated in Figure 1. Persons A, B, and C all regard each other positively; therefore, their relationship is balanced (the algebraic sum of the valences—a positive times a positive, times a positive—equals a positive). In contrast, assume a three-person relationship as illustrated in Figure 2. The relationships between persons A and C, and B and C, are positive. The relationship between persons A and B, however, is negative. These circumstances are unbalanced (a positive times a positive is a positive, times a negative equals a negative). The conflicts ensuing from these circumstances motivate people to pursue balance by altering the valences of their relationships.

Applying Balance theory to divorce-related circumstances predicts the outcomes illustrated in Figure 3. The prevailing relationships between husband and wife are more negative than not. These spouses, however, seek



**FIGURE 1** A balanced system.



**FIGURE 2** An unbalanced system.

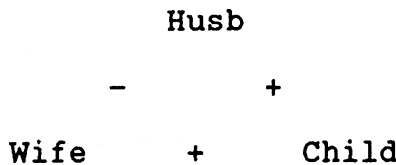
positive relationships with their child or children. The ensuing circumstances are unbalanced therefore motivating the spouses to restore balance.

Figure 4 demonstrates how attempted balance restoration can develop into alienation. In Figure 4, a positive relationship prevails between custodial parent and child. Negative relationships, however, exist between custodial and noncustodial parents, and between child and noncustodial parent. The relationship system portrayed in Figure 4 is balanced. It assumes characteristics that can be described as “the enemy of my enemy is my friend;” and consequently, it is consistent with parental alienation.

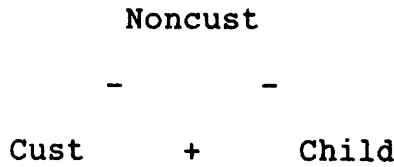
Because the unbalanced characteristics of Figure 3 are normative in divorcing or divorced family systems, those systems are motivated to restore a sense of balance. Restored balance is available via the circumstances illustrated in Figure 4. Though the circumstances of Figure 4 are consistent with parental alienation (negative relationships prevail between the parents, and between the noncustodial parent and the child or children), these are atypical circumstances. In other words, the vast majority of divorcing and divorced family systems do not deteriorate into parental alienation. Balance theory, however, predicts that parental alienation would be the norm. Therefore, it is necessary to ask: How do most divorcing or divorced families avoid alienation outcomes despite “balance” influences to the contrary?

### DISCRIMINATIVE PROCESSES

Fortunately, the majority of divorcing and divorced couples manage to discriminate in how they view each other as spouses (or ex-spouses), and how they view each other as parents. While the dynamics illustrated in Figure 3 correspond to how these divorced people view each other as spouses, they can discriminate in their perceptions of each other as parents. When



**FIGURE 3** An unbalanced system.



**FIGURE 4** A balanced system.

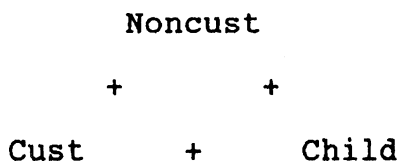
parental alienation is absent, divorced or divorcing spouses view each other in a manner corresponding to Figure 5. Focusing on each other's status not as spouses or ex-spouses, but as parents, allows them to accept and endorse their counterparts's significance in the lives of their children.

### Elevated Anxiety Levels

To belabor the obvious, divorce is an arduous and agonizing experience for practically all who endure it. Divorce also involves considerable ambiguity for most litigants. They frequently do not understand the legal procedures of divorce, and they can feel equally bewildered by their own emotional reactions to those circumstances. Struggling with arduous and agonizing circumstances, involving considerable ambiguity and uncertainty, arouses anxiety levels.

When sufficiently elevated, anxiety levels interfere with discriminative judgments (Dollard & Miller, 1950). Rather than efficiently discriminate when assessing one's ex-spouse and how that spouse functions as a parent, elevated anxiety provokes overgeneralizations. Overgeneralizing can prompt custodial parents to assume, "S/he was a selfish, thoughtless spouse, therefore s/he is a selfish, thoughtless parent." Consequently, it is imperative to recognize the extent to which elevated anxiety drives parental alienation dynamics.

When dealing with ill-defined ambiguous situations, elevated anxiety leads people into anticipating worst case scenarios. Asked to interpret an ambiguous statement such as "The doctor examined little Emma's growth," non-anxious people typically assumed the doctor examined the child's height or stature. Anxious people, however, more often assumed the doctor examined the child's tumor (Eysenck, Mogg, May, Richards, & Matthews, 1991).



**FIGURE 5** A balanced system.

Because divorcing and divorced spouses frequently avoid face-to-face interactions, their parental relationships create considerable ambiguity for them. In response to this ambiguity, elevated anxiety levels can drive parents into assuming worst case scenarios.

As a result of assuming worst case scenarios, divorcing or divorced parents resort to negative terms when judging each other. Thinking of one's spouse as "selfish" and "careless," for example, rapidly engages similar terms such as "ungiving" and "irresponsible" via spreading activation. Data related to spreading activation theory demonstrate that the cognitive representation of concepts are spatially organized (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Ratcliff & McCoon, 1988). Associated concepts (e.g., bread and butter) are closer together, and more available to cognitive searches, than unrelated concepts (bread and football). Worst case scenarios therefore rapidly engage numerous negative judgments about the other parent via spreading activation.

### Anxiety Driven Stereotypes

The anxiety-driven, negative judgments of ex-spouses about each other can assume the status of stereotypes. Consistent with spreading activation theory, stereotypes motivate rapid impressions of other people (Stangor & Lange, 1993). Rather than carefully consider their impressions of an ex-spouse, anxious parents may judge their parental counterpart in stereotypical terms: "selfish, careless, ungiving, and irresponsible." In response to stereotypes, people selectively attend to examples they can interpret as confirming the stereotype. Simultaneously, they disregard other examples inconsistent with the stereotype (Bodenhausen, 1988).

Not suprisingly, then, people overestimate the frequency of some circumstance if that circumstance is consistent with the stereotype (Blair, 2001). Simultaneously, they reject as an atypical event any situation appearing to disconfirm the stereotypes they endorse (Crocker, Hannah, & Weber, 1983). As would be expected, therefore, negative stereotypes vigorously resist change. This is especially the case when elevated anxiety drives stereotype use. Elevated anxiety, and the corresponding tendency to anticipate worst case scenarios, substantially increase the cognitive availability of stereotypical terms such as "selfish, careless, ungiving, and irresponsible." In turn, the greater availability of these stereotypical terms increases the likelihood of ex-spouses relying on them when judging each other (Newman, 2001).

### "Hot" and "Cold" Stereotypes

Recent work in social cognition also demonstrates that stereotypes can respond to "hot" or "cold" influences (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). "Hot" influences motivate stereotype use pursuing emotional gratification such as enhanced

self-acceptance and self-esteem (e.g., “Compared to Black people, I am superior”). Applied to divorcing or divorced family dynamics, stereotyping sometimes serves a “hot” agenda. Feeling betrayed and abandoned by a failed marriage, spouses can stereotype each other attempting to maintain a fragile sense of self-esteem (e.g., “Try as I did to save this marriage, how could I succeed when s/he was so selfish, careless, ungiving, and irresponsible?”).

“Cold” influences motivate stereotype use as a result of less than efficient attempts at information processing. When attempting to explain positive behaviors exhibited by outgroup members, ingroup members attribute those behaviors to social demands and situational constraints (e.g., “He only did it because other people were watching.”) (Hewstone, 1990; Ybarra, 2002). Negative behaviors, however, are attributed to the presumably enduring dispositional characteristics of the person (Skowranski & Carlston, 1987). Though these attributional biases undermine the accuracy with which people judge others, they persistently influence processes of person perception (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

In divorcing or divorced families, stereotyping can also result in parents resorting to biased judgments of their counterparts. As a result of “cold” stereotyping, it becomes exceedingly difficult for the parents to alter their less than stellar reputations. Typically forced to rely on second-hand information, separated and divorced spouses resort to inefficient information processing when judging each other. These inefficient information processing strategies are inefficient because of stereotyping influences.

As custodians monitor their childrens’ relationships with the noncustodians, they often expect to find evidence of the latter’s “selfishness, carelessness, withholding, and irresponsibility.” Not surprisingly, what they think they have found rarely disappoints their expectations. Relying on the ambiguous accounts of visitation described by their children, anxious custodians can rapidly conclude that the non-custodian is neglecting their children’s welfare. Consequently, the custodian becomes increasingly determined to protect the children from someone who is so “selfish, careless, ungiving, and irresponsible.”

“Cold” stereotyping, also termed implicit stereotyping, involves an important paradox. Though not as highly motivated as the “hot” stereotyping that serves self- or ego-protective purposes, “cold” stereotyping also resists change. In particular, it resists change because people do not recognize their “cold” stereotypes as stereotyping. “Cold” stereotyping occurs so automatically that people remain unaware of the process. Because “cold” stereotypes influence information processing in a stealth-like manner, they have been called “cognitive monsters.” (Bargh, 1999). Unlike circumstances of “cold” stereotyping, people are usually quite aware of their “hot” (or explicit) stereotypes (e.g., “I don’t like Black people, and I’m right.”) To the extent that alienation is driven by the “cold” stereotyping of a custodial parent, it would

be mistaken to characterize that parent as engaged in premeditated efforts at realizing such an outcome.

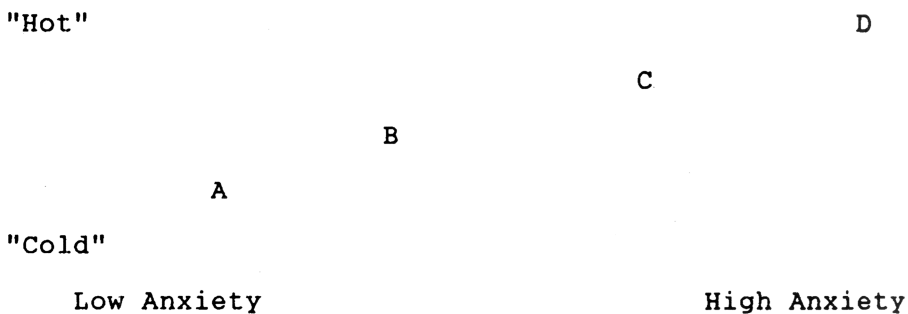
### TWO-DIMENSIONAL MODEL OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

Quite clearly, parental alienation is most appropriately viewed as falling along a continuum (Gardner, 2001; Stolz & Ney, 2002; Warshak, 2002). Gardner (2001) describes this continuum as ranging from mild, through moderate, to severe. This continuum could also be described as extending from mild estrangement to severe alienation. Parental alienation also varies in response to the type of stereotyping processes involved. "Hot" and "cold" stereotypes can lead to significantly different consequences in cases of alienation. Compared to "hot" stereotypes, "cold" stereotyping is more readily altered via various interventions. "Hot" stereotypes frequently motivate those who respond to them to cling tenaciously to their stereotypical judgments, and emphatically resist any changes.

Figure 6 illustrates how alienation dynamics respond to different kinds of stereotyping, and varying degrees of parental anxiety. At point A, the child, or children, is mildly estranged from the noncustodial parent, influenced by the "cold" stereotypes, and relatively low anxiety, of the custodian. At point B, the child, or children, is more estranged, influenced by the increasing anxiety level, and "hot" and "cold" stereotypes of the custodial parent. At point C, the child, or children, is more seriously alienated in response to the custodian's even greater anxiety level and frequently "hot" stereotypes. At point D, the child, or children, is severely alienated in response to the custodian's consistently elevated anxiety level and persistently "hot" stereotypes.

Gardner defines the parental alienation syndrome in the following manner:

The parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a disorder that arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is



**FIGURE 6** Two-dimensional model of parental alienation.

the child's campaign of denegation against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the villification of the target parent. When true parental abuse and/or neglect is present, the child's animosity may be justified, and the parental-alienation-syndrome explanation for the child's hostility is not applicable. (2001, p. xix–xx, italics in the original).

Gardner's emphasis on the alienating parent's "programming" and "indoctrination" in the service of "brainwashing" corresponds to example D in Figure 6. In cases of mild to moderate estrangement between the child and the custodial parent, parental alienation as Gardner defines it does not apply. Mild to moderate estrangement between child and noncustodian obviously falls short of a "campaign of denegation." Moreover, estrangement driven by the custodial parents' "cold" stereotypes, and low to moderate anxiety level, is less than "programming" and "indoctrination" in the service of "brainwashing." Well-defined criteria for ruling out parental alienation are necessary for avoiding false-positive conclusions. Neglecting to consider rule-out criteria can result in mistakenly labeling minor cases of estrangement as parental alienation (Warshak, 2002).

## INTERVENTIONS ADDRESSING ESTRANGEMENT AND ALIENATION

Restoring normalized relationships between estranged or alienated parents and their children demands unequivocal permission from custodial parents. The custodial parent must tell the children directly and emphatically, "visitation is OK now." Without this outcome, the dynamics of estrangement or alienation can vary to one degree or another, but fundamental changes do not ensue. Obtaining permission from custodial parents to restore normalized relationships between noncustodians and their children therefore necessitates therapists seeing both parents together.

If the parents are not seen together, custodians continue to view noncustodians as ambiguous figures; and as a result, the custodians persist in stereotyping the noncustodians. Persisting ambiguity moreover maintains elevated anxiety levels. In other words, effectively addressing estrangement-alienation dynamics requires altering the relationship dynamics between the custodian and noncustodian. Attempting to alter a two-person relationship when seeing only one of them is a futile endeavor (Garber, 1994).

Any mental health professional who undertakes the task of working with disputing parents in these circumstances faces a formidable task (Campbell, 1993). In and of themselves, attempts at promoting insight in these situations usually fail. While therapists may see benefits in each parent understanding how he or she contributes to their progressively escalating problems, the parents do not. Both parents usually insist that their own counterpart must



change while denying any need to undertake changes of their own. Suggesting to either parent that they might adjust their own thinking encourages them to understand that the therapist is a fool, and therapy is a waste of time. Thus, alienating and alienated parents typically embrace insight with the same enthusiasm that they embrace each other.

### Facilitating Figure-Ground Reversals

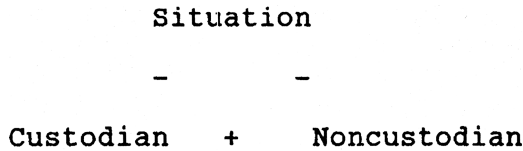
Reducing and then resolving conflicts between custodial and noncustodial parents requires altering their assessments of the circumstances creating those conflicts. In response to their conflicts, custodians and noncustodians typically exhibit “observer bias” (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Unable to view their own behavior objectively (which none of us can do), custodians and noncustodians attribute the origins of their conflicts to each other. Neither parent comprehends the extent to which they alternate back and forth both influencing—and being influenced by—each other. Conflict reduction between custodians and noncustodians therefore necessitates assisting them to attribute their conflicts to situational circumstances rather than to their parental counterpart.

In leading custodians and noncustodians to recognize the influence of the situational circumstances inundating them, a therapist can explain: “Divorce is a tragic and enormously difficult situation for all who encounter it. Therefore, the issue we must address is whether these difficult circumstances will control you, or will you control these difficult circumstances?” When it is effective, this intervention reverses the figure-ground perceptions of custodians and noncustodians. Instead of viewing each other as dominant figures against the background of an ill-defined situation, the situational background emerges as the salient issue requiring their vigilance and attention. In effect, then, the parents are told: “You are not each other’s enemy. The painfully difficult circumstances of divorce are your enemy.”

At this point, most divorced parents begin to shift their thinking. Rather than attribute responsibility for their conflicts entirely to their ex-spouse, they at least entertain the possibility that they are victims of situational forces spiraling out of control. As a result, they can start sharing a common goal—“We must work together to control these situational circumstances or else they will control us.” Pursuing shared goals also effectively reduces the intensity and frequency of conflict between any two parties.

When viewing themselves as victims of difficult situational circumstances, balance theory also predicts improved relationships between the parental figures.

In Figure 7, both custodial and noncustodial parent react negatively to a shared situation threatening to overwhelm them. In response to these circumstances, Balance theory predicts a positive relationship between custodial and noncustodial parents.



**FIGURE 7** Cooperation between custodians and noncustodians.

At this point, divorcing or divorced parents become more inclined to consider the benefits of mutual cooperation. Appeals regarding the welfare of their children can further emphasize, "To the extent you can agree as parents, you will make the decisions regarding your children's welfare. To the extent you cannot agree, however, you will invite judges, attorneys, and others into your lives as dictators telling you what to do. Well-meaning and well-intended as those people may be, we can assume you are more committed to the welfare of your children than they are."

### Contending with the Influences of Third Parties

Circumstances of parental estrangement-alienation often motivate the parents to seek out, and enlist allies in their cause (Campbell, 1992a). These allies can include family members, close friends, and even mental health professionals. While interacting with these allies, custodians and noncustodians often describe each other relying on the stereotypes they have adopted. The allies typically react sympathetically, commiserating with the parents about the enormous burdens they bear. Their ensuing dialogues then further serve to reinforce the stereotypical portrayal of the other parent. Over time, these circumstances correspond to the circumstances illustrated in Figure 4, except for substituting "ally" for "child."

When the interventions described above begin to obtain desired changes, the therapist must consider the potentially disruptive influences of these "allies." Convinced that the other parent is "selfish, careless, ungiving, and irresponsible," allies are motivated to protect the presumably victimized parent from his or her own misjudgments. Allies have often assumed the role of "savior" in the life of the "victim-parent" aligned against the allegedly "villain-parent." As a result, the ensuing dynamics between these "victims, villains, and saviors" can acquire the characteristics of a dramatically engaging soap opera.

The altruistic reputation of a savior appeals to those who assume this role; and as a result, saviors are disinclined to sacrifice their savior identities. While attempting to restore their reputations as needed saviors, allies can persuade parents that the recent shifts in their thinking are premature and therefore ill advised. Consequently, parental allies can rapidly undo the work of therapists seeking to reduce the frequency and intensity of parental conflicts.

In contending with the potential influences of these allies, therapists must first identify them. The therapist can ask each parent (perhaps with the other parent temporarily absent), "Is there anyone in your life who is going to worry about the relationship with your ex-spouse improving?" Once these allies are identified, the therapist proceeds with two related directives. First, the parent must thank the ally for the understanding and assistance s/he has previously provided. Secondly, the parent must also apologize to the ally for making him or her a victim of the same situational forces related to divorce that victimized the parent. In particular, the parent can explain to the ally, "Not only did this divorce situation overwhelm me, it progressed to the point where I allowed it to start overwhelming you. And I am so sorry for that."

Responding to parental allies in this manner also reverses their figure-ground perceptions of the conflicts between the parents. When they can view their parental-friend and themselves as victims of an inherently difficult and tragic situation, allies are significantly less inclined to view the other parent as a villain.

### Intervention as Assessment

The interventions detailed above also involve a paradox. In addition to their potential for aiding the normalization of relationships between divorced or divorcing parents, these interventions also test custodial parents for extreme parental alienation. If a custodial parent responds well to these interventions, the degree of estrangement-alienation that necessitated intervening was likely mild to moderate (Points A-C in Figure 6). If, however, a custodial parent vigorously and persistently resists these interventions, there is a substantially greater likelihood of extreme alienation (Point D in Figure 6).

Presuming extreme alienation and recommending the removal of children from their custodial parent without testing the custodian's capacity for change is usually—but not always—ill advised. To the extent that the custodian's stereotyping of the noncustodian responds to "cold" stereotypes, and moderately elevated anxiety, constructive changes remain possible. In other circumstances, however, the likelihood of constructive changes may be remote. To the extent the custodian has deliberately sought to evade a court's jurisdiction, while engaging in premeditatedly defiant actions (e.g., unauthorized moves from the state, changing the child's name, transparently false allegations of physical or sexual abuse directed at the noncustodian) extreme alienation is rather clear and evident.

Effectively intervening in cases of parental estrangement-alienation necessitates well-defined and carefully crafted treatment plans. Fonagy (1999), for example, emphasizes:

...treatments that are unstructured, unfocused, and delivered without predetermined goals and objectives tend to be ineffective when

contrasted with carefully crafted, well-thought-out, clearly specified and, above all, structured interventions. (p. 443).

In other words, merely bringing disagreeable parents together and hoping for the best will not suffice. Circumstances of parental estrangement-alienation demand diligent preparation and unrelenting efforts from those who seek to intervene.

## CONCLUSIONS

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the literature too often characterized false allegations of sexual abuse, and fabricated allegations of sexual abuse, as if they were synonymous. Now it is generally recognized that rumor formation and rumor dissemination can endorse false allegations of sexual abuse via distorted reconstructions of past events (Campbell, 1992b; Poole and Lamb, 1998). As a result, parents and children alike can report false allegations of sexual abuse without deliberately fabricating them.

Similarly, then, this article outlines how parental estrangement-alienation can occur without custodial parents pursuing a premeditated agenda. In cases of suspected alienation, well-defined interventions can rule out extreme alienation by seeing the parents together. As a result, recommending removal of children from custodians in response to presumed alienation can be ill advised. More often than not, such a recommendation necessitates previously and systematically testing the custodian's capacity for constructive change.

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