

“The Dirty Rain, the Fire and the Ghosts of the Forest as the Surfacing, Alienated Self”: A Case-Study of an Alienated Child

Aristoniki Theodosiou-Tryfonidou*

Department of Psychology, Cyprus

Abstract

The case studied here, refers to a ten year old boy, Adam, a boy who has been alienated from his mother by his alienating father. He was sent to art therapy by his school as a result of his disorganized behavior. He underwent art therapy. The Parental alienation Syndrome is a debatable syndrome that tends to dichotomize the Mental Health professionals. It refers to DSM V using the term “estrangement” as a synonym of the term “alienation” as an extreme pathological dynamic which is developed between the members of a family. In the present case-study, there is going to be reference to the specific syndrome, since the definition of this syndrome and its description clearly depict everything that Adam goes through.

Keywords: Parental alienation; Trauma; Visual therapy; Alienating parent; Alienated parent

Case

A child who has been alienated, is subsequently self-alienated, that is, he deviates from his own nature, his ego, through his own actions which are nevertheless provoked by the alienating parent.

The Parental Alienation Syndrome [1] is a term that was suggested by Gardner. The Clinical Psychologist Darnall [2] classifies post-divorce parents, who conflict each other, into three different categories. The first category refers to naïve parents who criticize each other in order to empower their own relationship with their child. The second category refers to active parents who treat the other parent in a judgmental and undermining way, never seizing fire. However, they do realize that their behavior has a negative impact on their child. The third category refers to parents who have intense obsessions and who are determined to destroy their child's relation to the other parent. This thinking leads them to extreme forms of behavior. The parents who belong to the third category “contaminate” their children with the same kind of violent behavior. Dr. Bernet, a Vanderbilt University psychiatrist, describes these children's behavior as similar to a mental disorder, where the child sees things that do not exist.

The Parental Alienation Syndrome is thus attributed to the transition of violence, which is the result of a confrontational divorce, to the children and to a combination of both the “Stockholm Syndrome” and the phenomenon of “False Memories”. Referring to the “Stockholm Syndrome”, the child has the feeling of being a hostage of his/her mother/father and adopts the behaviors dictated by her/him, in order not to have to face her/his fury. The phenomenon of “False Memories” also affects the child, when the picture of the absent father/mother gradually fades away and is replaced by memories which are often not related to reality. A mother or father who hates her/his ex-husband or wife and uses their own child as a weapon against him or her, who tries to distract assets, who is possessive and fights for the exclusive love of her/his child, who wishes to delete their previous life in order to make a new undistracted start, who is still jealous of her/his ex, who find a new partner, possibly adopt behaviors which lead to this Syndrome. In each and every case though, this syndrome constitutes an emotional molestation of the child and along with the parents, who move its ropes, should all undergo family therapy.

The Parental Alienation Syndrome is defined by behaviors such as: sudden excuses on behalf of the children to cancel the upcoming

meeting with the parent, or a denial to receive presents or money from him/her. In addition, they may not want to see members of the father's or mother's family or consent to visitations of the mother or the father to places where children tend to hang out. Prohibition to the people in charge to allow entrance to the father or mother to them and dismissal of the mother or father from their occupational post or residence, etc., could also be related to the child's behaviour. Symptoms such as stress, nervousness, depression, lack of interest for the parent who does not have the custody, hostility, detestation, denial for phone or any other kind of communication, a fear to express his or her feelings in the presence of the parent, of whom he or she is depended upon according to judicial decision. Dr. Douglass distinguishes Parental Alienation which focuses on the parents' behavior from Parental Alienation Syndrome which focuses on the state of the child and his or her behavior, through the inexcusable defamation-aspiration of the other parent. In every case the loss of the parent who does not take the custody of the child, constitutes a mourning period and could emotionally mean the symbolic death of the child. When a parent turns his/her own child against his/her ex, it is like turning that child against his/ her own self. Children who are exposed to this kind of toxic parental behaviors, present more emotional problems in relation to those presented by the average population.

Clinical Research results have indicated that underage children, who go through experiences of parental alienation, suffer from low self-esteem and psychosomatic disorders. They seem to appear significant difficulty in expressing their emotions, and simultaneously, additional peculiarities in the way they perceive and analyze information. Moreover, they present issues in the attachment of healthy interpersonal relationships. They are characterized with aggressiveness, lack of empathy and tolerance of others- usually people they expect a lot from. They suffer from long-lasting depression, since they had never had the chance to mourn for the “loss” of the alienated parent. In addition,

*Corresponding author: Aristoniki Theodosiou-Tryfonidou, Psychotherapist at Psychologist in Private Practice, Apollonos 7, 4180, Cyprus, Tel: 0035797836335; E-mail: aristonikit@yahoo.gr

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they suffer from feelings of remorse and guilt for their behavior as well as problems in the development of the sense of identity. When they finally realize the truth and their unjust attitude, they often turn against the other parent, whom they blame as responsible for the loss. According to the research of Johnston et al. [3] some children who have experienced alienation from the parent try to make up for the lost time and re-establish the relationship between them as they become adults. In a research of Papanis, Roumeliotou, Natsou which covered the whole of Greece, it was ascertained that this Syndrome has notably appeared in Greece as well, taking into consideration that the law itself favors the mother when concerning the children's custody. Its frequency also increases, since the courts also take into consideration the children's opinion on the subject as far as the outcome of the custody is concerned. Nonetheless, there are cases where the father alienates the children from their mother, or even when the court favors the father for the ascension of the children's custody [4].

A lot of children who come from divorced parents think that the decision to emotionally dismiss their father or mother has come as a result of their own autonomous will, without being affected by their father/mother. It is worth noting here that some mothers/fathers strongly support that they have been always trying to encourage their children to keep in touch with their father/mother. However, their own actions reassure the opposite, giving thus divisive messages to the children under their custody. The child who insists on purposefully having denied his/her father/mother, usually ignores the unconscious will in him/her to discharge his/her mother/father from every responsibility, to protect her/him from negative social criticism and perhaps, through a peculiar hyper-substitution, to turn his/her fury for his or her father/mother for taking the decision to break up with his/her mother/father, into protection.

In 2002 the European Parliament recognized the Parental Alienation Syndrome (P.A.S) in an International Conference. Banotti [5], who is the mediator for international children's abductions, has written in her report that this phenomenon is progressively recognized. Correspondingly, it is more and more established as a problem of the children to whom access from the one or the other parent is denied. The parent with the custody makes sure that the parent who does not have the custody is alienated from his/her children and unfortunately this very common tactic has devastating effects on the child. It is significant for the judicial authorities and the social workers who take up these children in this situation, to be aware of the fact there are such behaviors and they should not be making discriminations when deciding on the visitation rights of both parents. In five American States, the 24th April of every year, has been declared as the day of Parental Alienation. Numerous articles in magazines and newspapers, in Greece between 2005 and 2007, referred to this Syndrome as well. It is estimated that the number of alienated children in Greece reaches hundreds of thousands and it is the highest both in percentages and absolute numbers all over the world. There are not any similar researches in Cyprus. In four American States and several other countries, the Parental Alienation Syndrome has been officially recognized and it is also referred to in judicial decisions in France, Canada, the Netherlands, etc. in order to explain the child's denial to interact with the parent who does not hold the custody. In addition, Despina Vassiliou's thesis [6]: Parental alienation syndrome: The lost parents' perspective has indicated that an important percentage of children who experience a divorce are likely to develop the Parental Alienation Syndrome and it is expressed in the following table as presented by her (Table 1).

Participants	Marital Status	Total Number of Marriages	Length of PAS marriage (in years)	Number of PAS children	Number of nonPAS children
1	Married	2	3	1	2
2	Married	2	13	3	0
3	Divorced	1	9	2	0
4	Married	2	8	1	2
5	Divorced	1	9	1	0
6	Cohabitant	2	5	5	1

Table 1: Summary of the participants' family constellations.

The present research will focus on the analysis of the case of a ten-year-old boy, Adam, who has been alienated from his mother.

Psycho-Social Background

Adam had presented all the indications of an alienated child which included: intense anger and frozen looks, stress, nervousness, depression, indifference towards the parent who does not have the custody, hostility, detestation, denial for telephone or any other kind of contact, fear to express his feelings in the presence of the alienated parent. It is worth noting here that Adam has been examined by a psychiatrist who diagnosed the child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. I met Adam at his school, during a free-activities day. He was sent for art therapy from his school in Paphos. Adam lives with his father- he is an only child. His parents are separated. His father is in intense judicial and personal conflict with Adam's mother. Adam has not seen his mother for six months. Adam's father belongs to the third category of alienating parents.

Parental Alienation has a multi-traumatic impact on the children. It is as if somebody is trying to uproot all the parental memories and origins from the child. In order for someone to interpret the child's drawings, they should be done through various perspectives. From the developmental point of view, their tendencies and their abilities, their personal experiences through artistic creation, the evolutionary phase and personal experiences as well. The traumatic memories from the recall of the alienated parent are not stored in the declarative memory, but in a non-declarative memory, sensory memory, which is not the same with the conscious, narrative memory and it is often expressed through post-traumatic symptoms, "for example such as nightmares, flashbacks, reflective reactions to trauma and traversal symptoms" [7]. The Artistic expression offers a significant distance and control, and thus, offers the children a sense of containment [3].

His First Drawing

1st session

Adam sat at the table, took a piece of paper and a brown crayon and started painting with clumsy movements. His drawing is of a single color. He says it is brown rain. Then he adds that rain is supposed to cleanse us but this rain only makes us dirty. Material used: Crayon (Figure 1).

The way a child deals with the unstructured creative piece, offers us the indications of how he possibly deals with an ambiguous situation [8]. Crayons are a solid material which does not allow you to spill the color effortlessly. It does not let you "spread" your feeling- on the contrary it contains you through a schematic way of writing. In his first picture, Adam chose a non-fluid color. He is introvert and cautious. His cautiousness may be of a dual nature: he is not familiar with the psychologist and he is not familiar with the process or the means either. Despite these, his first picture depicts pieces of the situation



Figure 1: The brown dirty rain.

he is going through. It is raining. Rain symbolizes life, cleansing – but this rain is brown. This rain does not wash and cleanse, it makes you dirty. His picture is not characterized by any kind of organization. The characteristics of the first drawing refer to the ostensible stage, where the child makes his first representative efforts. The classification of Adam's first drawing does not agree with Adam's cognitive and developmental abilities. Adam is sad and he makes aggressive movements.

Adam uses water-colors; he angrily dips the brush in the colors and paints clumsily, without having anything obvious in his mind to draw. The previous day he had met his mother at school. In order for someone to perceive how a child functions as far as Art is concerned, he should study the circular and variable nature of the natural development. The whole development process is not linear. The child's drawings appear to show progress along with the progress of the sessions. However, there are indications of cognitive and emotional retrogression. The causes of retrogression to the children's works are numerous. Sometimes, the retrogression is a result of external stimulation, such as the means used. Fluid materials are a means which provides support to retrogression. Kramer notes that when the child is freed from what restrains him, the art concurs to an emotional victory. If the retrogression is experienced as unblocking and freeing or as disruptive it is judged from the child's behavior during the drawing process. The most difficult phase of a therapeutic session is the point when the child openly deals with the subject that troubles him. During the sixth session, Adam was disorganized. He was just staring at blank and avoiding any kind of eye-contact. At the end of the session, when he was asked what his picture showed, he said that he had drawn the fire. "The fire has burnt everything in its path and has left nothing but dust and ashes behind", he said characteristically. Adam had intense anger and aggressiveness. Malchiodi [7] supports that the artistic self-expression can be used as a "vessel of containing emotions and perceptions which can evolve to deeper understanding of the self or they can transform, with the result of emotional restoration, the solution of conflicts and a feeling of wellbeing".

His Sixth Drawing

6th session

Perhaps, through artistic creation, the child obtains a sense of control, which enables him to distance from the traumatic memory and difficult emotions and that makes the objectification of his emotions and senses easier (Figure 2).

His Thirteenth Drawing

13th session

Adam chooses his materials and sits silently at a bench. He avoids

looking at me. He chooses fluid material- temperas to be more specific. His movements are clumsy. His drawing almost covers all the paper using each color on top of the other. Adam expresses himself with a non-verbal fluency. His frozen look says it all. The absence of any kind of eye contact means a lot. Having observed the formative details of his drawing, you can understand that it is not what is said, but how the unspoken is transmitted. In this drawing he uses more colors which are placed in a more figured shape. Adam draws a forest. The child sets the forest on fire. The smoke rises high and surrounds the trees, the flowers, even the birds (Figure 3).



Figure 2: His sixth drawing.



Figure 3: His thirteenth drawing.

The child turns black and then the ghosts appear. "The ghosts of the forest are the child's friends and burn the lying mother. His mother lies, she's been bad", Adam says. These ghosts are activated by the fire and come to support vague maternal memories. What makes this fire? The fire is dominant in more than three of Adam's drawings. This fire decomposes every living creature. And after it has left dust and ashes, there come the ghosts of the forest. These black immaterial creatures. According to Jung's approach the tree and the human figure can be related to the human sides. It is possible that the tree connotes semantic feelings of development, vitality and evolution. Whereas, the human figure symbolizes the immediate depiction of the self. During the representational phase, the child is experimented with both a similar and dissimilar way, in relation to his first explorations at the handling phase [8]. Having examined various ways, he creates objects, faces, natural elements and talks about them. The human figures are a good indicator for someone to see how flexible a child's ability is at experimenting. The imperilment of revealing innermost thoughts is a very slow process. While the figurative work of the children, Rubin says, extends and becomes more naturalistic, the non-figurative works of the children become more and more controlled, processed and interesting from the aesthetic perspective. For the first time, Adam talks about his mother, whom he calls "bad" and simultaneously says that the ghosts of the forest are coming to burn her. What could these ghosts possibly be? Could they be the memories or the distorted narrations of the alienating father to the child's indolent memories?

For the first time, Adam depicts a human figure in movement. He uses temperas but manages to organize his drawing and gives it a clear title. "This is me". Having a look at it, you get the sense that the figure performs a balancing act on a rope. Can a child be balanced without being in touch with his emotions? His drawing presents his face. It looks as if it has jumped out from the dirty rain, the flinty flames of the fire, and the ghosts with the black magnetic smoke. A figure in movement, which is running away, a figure which cannot stand. His figure is placed on the left side of the paper and it indicates the child's need to be related with his origins.

His Twentieth Drawing

20th session

When the green colour dominates a drawing, it could mean inhibition. Inhibition, shyness and guilt, characterize a child who experiences alienation. The red face indicates shyness. The facial characteristics of a drawing, concentrate all the communication and interaction tools with the outside world. A face without human features indicates a child who has trouble in expressing his feelings and uses the denial mechanism opposite a reality he considers to be unbearable. Parental alienation is a form of emotional violence. Who perceives the responsibility when a child is unable to bear with the reality created by parental alienation? Tense arms indicate expressiveness. Children who come from alienated parents express their discomfort but the alienating parent perceives it as anger towards the alienated parent (Figure 4).

The issues which are transmitted through the final product are revealing for the location of the problems that trouble the child.

Conclusion

Experience has offered therapy through art significant amount of proof that the specific depiction of form in various feelings is of great use. Because when somebody is in pain and shows to his pain its image in the mirror, then the pain itself makes sense, taking space, time and image. The therapist, through art, uses visuals as a means to objectify traumas,



Figure 4: His twentieth drawing.

emotions and thoughts. Adam is ten years old. A ten-year-old boy has selective memory that is he can remember details which are consistent in relation to every gender. More specifically, he rejects any given information which is not in conformance with the gender stereotypes already developed in him/her. His memory is much better when it comes to information related with the same gender as his, in comparison with the opposite gender. Adam has memories from the time he lived with his parents. However, living with his father and the alienation from his mother may have contributed to selectively remembering facts which connect him with his mother. They could also be distorted in order to be agreeable with the descriptions of the alienating father. As far as Adam's development is concerned, he can understand cause and effect, but the violent emotional cut-off from his mother could have negatively affected his psycho-emotional development. We tend to remember the negative facts according to bibliography [9]. However, since the sense of space and time is not acquired at the pre-school age, it is possible that the parents' later narrations could establish, in this case, alienating behaviors. The ghosts of the burnt forest could be representing the narrations of the alienating father which burn the memories from the forest, the roots from the alienated mother. And that dirty rain, what is it trying to cleanse? The dirty rain could possibly mean Adam's guilt for denying seeing his mother. The fire, which symbolizes his fury, is trying to burn down the guilt. And all these take shape in symbols of the forest which burns the child. Fury, guilt, sorrow, loss, denial are the emotions which dance in the rhythm of alienation and turn to smoke. And while the choking scent of the burnt forest appears, there emerges the child's figure in a continuous movement of balancing but with no communicative purpose.

Adam has fought with complex images and shapes and revealed himself. A self who emerged through fluid shades of colors. An alienated self who tries to balance.

Children who experience alienation, from one of the parents, as a result of a traumatic divorce, experience a kind of secession of themselves from their roots. The objectification of Adam's emotions has been of great help into making him able to understand his emotions.

Art Therapy made it possible for Adam to see his emotions, thoughts memories and perceptions which were realized in front of him. The specific projection of his inner world on paper gave him the chance to understand the symbols and motifs used. They were then discussed and as a result his anger for his parents' divorce was decoded.

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