

The Hostage Metaphor for “Parental Alienation”

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The dynamics of attachment-based “parental alienation” can be highlighted through the use of metaphors that capture and describe key aspects of the family processes and the child’s experience. The two primary metaphors are the 1) the Hostage Metaphor, and 2) the Computer Virus Metaphor.

1.) The Hostage Metaphor

The hostage metaphor captures the dynamics of psychological control that are fundamental to the child’s experience, and it helps us understand why the child adopts distorted beliefs and behaviors toward a parent. The child is essentially being held as a psychological hostage to the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.¹ As a hostage to the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child is subjected to powerful psychological control tactics of nullification, unpredictable psychological torment and retaliation for displeasing the hostage-taker (the narcissistic/(borderline) parent), and indulgent rewards for pleasing and cooperating with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, all of which combine to induce the child’s psychological surrender to the attitudes, beliefs, and will of the hostage-taker.

Protecting the Child

If the child shows any bonding motivation toward the targeted parent, or even fails to sufficiently reject the targeted parent, then the child is exposed to severe psychological retaliation from the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. We cannot ask the child-hostage to bond with the targeted parent until we are able to protect the child from retaliation by the hostage-taker should the child cooperate with us to show any degree of bonding with the targeted parent, or even for the child not to show complete rejection toward the targeted parent. Unless we are able to protect the hostage, we cannot ask the hostage to defy the will of hostage-taker. To do so would only expose the hostage to the retaliation of the hostage-taker.

¹ Narcissistic personality organization is essentially a subset of an underlying borderline personality organization. The basic “internal working models” for expectations regarding self and other in relationship that are embedded within the attachment system of the narcissistic-borderline personality are,

Self-expectation: I am fundamentally inadequate as a person

Other-expectation: I will be abandoned by the other (because of my fundamental inadequacy).

The difference between the narcissistic and borderline personality organization is merely that for the borderline personality these negative self- and other expectations are continually in the awareness of the borderline personality, which leads to chaotic emotional and social behaviors, whereas the narcissistic personality defends against the continual awareness of these core beliefs by adopting a defensive narcissistic veneer of grandiose self-importance.

“One subgroup of borderline patients, namely, the narcissistic personalities... seem to have a defensive organization similar to borderline conditions, and yet many of them function on a much better psychosocial level.” (Kernberg, 1975, p. xiii)

Kernberg, O.F. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. New York: Aronson.

The first, critical step in any hostage situation, whether a physical hostage or a psychological hostage, is to rescue the hostage and ensure the safety of the hostage from retaliation. As long as we abandon the child to the hostage situation, and do not rescue the child-hostage from the psychopathology of the hostage-taker, then the hostage must do whatever is necessary to survive in the hostage situation.

Power and Hopelessness

The superior power of the hostage-taker, of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, is continually demonstrated to the child-hostage. The hostage-taker is far more powerful than the other parent. The parental rights of the other parent can be entirely nullified and Court orders can be disregarded with impunity. The other parent cannot even defend his or her own relationship with the child against the power of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. The hostage-taker can intrude into the other parent's time with the child and can disrupt their relationship without consequence. And an allegation of child abuse against the other parent, made directly by the hostage-taker or one that is induced to be made by the child through the psychological influence and coercion of the hostage-taker, can entirely disempower the other parent, so that the child is left entirely vulnerable and in the control of the all-powerful narcissistic/(borderline) parent for months, and even for years, while the other parent's time with the child is severely restricted or placed on monitored supervision.

The narcissistic/(borderline) parent is clearly more powerful than the other parent, and the other parent clearly cannot protect the child from the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Even Court orders are rendered impotent by the power of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Why should the child defy the hostage-taker and bond with the other parent if we cannot protect the child from the power of hostage-taker's retaliation?

The other parent cannot protect the child, the Court will not protect the child, and therapists simply stand by impotently. The other parent could provide safety and protection for the child when the family was together, but this parent is no longer physically present when the child is with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, and so cannot offer protection for the child from the distorted parenting and arbitrary displays of parental anger and retaliation inflicted on the child by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. The child is alone, exposed and vulnerable, without protection and without hope of rescue from the hostage-taker. This is the context of power, control, and vulnerability in which the child's psychological surrender to the hostage-taker is created.

Inducing the Child's Psychological Surrender

The child's psychological surrender to the will of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent is achieved by creating an unpredictable world in which the definition of reality changes based on the needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. In this upside-down world of arbitrary truth the child cannot orient to any consistent anchors of meaning, since truth and reality are arbitrarily defined by the shifting moment-to-moment needs and

assertions of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. With a narcissistic/(borderline) parent, what was true 10 minutes ago may not be true 10 minutes from now. Truth and reality are malleable concepts capable of being changed, altered, and defined by the current needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Accuracy is not relevant. Reality is not relevant. Only the moment-to-moment needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent guide the definition of truth.

The child must continually adapt to this changing reality, and the child learns to carefully monitor the moods and attitudes of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent for the current definition of truth and reality. The child's psychological survival in this hostage situation requires that the child remains continually alert to the shifting moods and needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, which will then allow the child to respond in ways that meet the needs of the hostage-taker and so avoid the retaliation, anger, and rejection which results when the child fails to meet the parent's needs.

Within this narcissistic and borderline world of changing and unpredictable truth, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent inflicts intensely hostile and rejecting psychological torment on the child whenever the child's psychological state differs from that of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Yet in return for the child's psychological surrender to the hostage-taker, to the arbitrary reality defined by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, in return for the child's surrender to the role-reversal of being used to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child will be rewarded with grandiose narcissistic indulgences and hyper-affectionate displays of over-indulgent "love." Within this hostage context, the message is clear, "resist the reality of the hostage-taker and you will be tormented; but surrender to the will of the hostage-taker and the torment will stop, and you will be rewarded with indulgence."²

The child's surrender to the hostage-taker, to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, is achieved through an integrated combination of all four factors,

- 1) **Show of Power and No Hope of Rescue:** The clearly evidenced power of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to entirely disempower the other parent and to remove all hope of the child's rescue from the hostage situation means that the child must learn to psychologically survive in the distorted and dangerous narcissistic/(borderline) world of the hostage-taker.
- 2) **Unpredictable and Shifting Truth:** In the distorted narcissistic/(borderline) world of the hostage-taker, truth and reality are continually in flux, changing unpredictably based on the changing attitudes, needs, and assertions of the hostage-taker, of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, so that the child has no firm and consistent psychological ground on which to stand and from which to independently reference truth or reality, but must instead rely totally on the

² Shakespeare displays this process in his play, *The Taming of the Shrew*, with the psychological surrender to the hostage-taker accomplished in Act IV, scene vi

changing moods and assertions of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to create and define truth and reality.

- 3) **Erratic and Intense Psychological Torment:** The hostage-taker will inflict intense psychological torment on the child whenever the child's psychological state differs from the (changing) psychological needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, so that the child's psychological safety and survival requires that the child constantly monitor and adjust to the psychological state, mood, and needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.
- 4) **Indulgent Rewards for Surrender:** When the child surrenders, when the child adopts and displays the same psychological state as the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, when the child meets the emotional and psychological needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, then the child is rewarded by the hostage-taker with indulgence and the child enters a world of psychological safety (as long as the child continually meets the needs of the personality disordered parent).

If we cannot rescue the hostage, then the hostage must learn to psychologically survive in the world of the hostage-taker. This means the child's complete and unquestioning surrender to, and acceptance of, the ever-changing definitions of truth and reality provided by the hostage-taker. If the hostage-taker asserts that the sky is red, the child-hostage agrees. If 10 minutes later the hostage-taker asserts that the sky is yellow, the child-hostage agrees. By continually monitoring the moods, needs, and attitudes of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, by unquestioningly adopting and reflecting the psychological state of the dangerous and unpredictable hostage-taker, and by meeting the emotional and psychological needs of the dangerous and unpredictable hostage-taker, the child is able to achieve both psychological safety and indulgent rewards while living in the dangerous and ever-changing world of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Psychological survival in the upside-down world of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent requires that the child surrender, completely, to the attitudes, beliefs, and needs of the hostage-taker, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

Inducing a Role-Reversal Relationship

The psychological manipulation and control of the child-hostage also includes the formation of a role-reversal relationship in which the child becomes the emotional caregiver (called a "regulatory other") for the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Not only does the child surrender to the will and shifting assertions of truth from the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child is also induced into providing the narcissistic/(borderline) parent with narcissistic sustenance (called "narcissistic supply") for this parent's grandiose self-perception as being the all-wonderful parent/(person), and the child must supply emotional reassurance for this parent's borderline personality fears of abandonment.

Child: "You're wonderful, you're the best parent ever, I'll never leave you, I'll never abandon you. You're the most wonderful parent that ever existed."

Child: "It's the other parent who is bad, awful, terrible. The other parent abandoned **us**, the other parent didn't love **us** as we **deserve** to be loved (in our narcissistic wonderfulness). The other parent deserves to be rejected because they're bad."

This is the required "narcissistic supply" that the child must provide to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent who holds the child hostage, without hope of rescue. If the child provides this "narcissistic supply" to the parent then the child is released from fear of retaliation, and from the fear of unpredictable and arbitrary narcissistic and borderline rages, and the child is instead provided with narcissistic indulgences of grandiose entitlements, and borderline indulgences of hyper-affectionate "love."

The role-reversal relationship is achieved in slightly different ways by parents who display a more narcissistic-style organization from parents who display a more borderline-style presentation. Both personality disorder styles, the narcissistic and borderline, present to the child as the "injured victim," but in slightly different ways. The narcissistic-style parent presents to the child as being the "injured victim" of the other, inadequate and "abusive" parent and this same meaning is conveyed to the child regarding the child's relationship with the other parent, i.e., that the child is also the "injured victim" of the inadequate parenting practices of the other parent, so that the child and the narcissistic-style parent develop a mutual bond of "shared victimization" supposedly at the hands of the other parent. This bond of "shared victimization" establishes an emotional connection for the child with the otherwise emotionally distant and emotionally indifferent narcissistic-style parent. In the bond of "shared victimization" the child is able to achieve a degree of emotional closeness to the narcissistic-style parent.

The distorted parenting of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent forces the child to take sides in the marital dissolution. The sides created by the narcissistic-style parent are defined through the bond of "shared victimization" as us-against-them, with the "them" being the other supposedly inadequate and "abusive" parent. The narcissistic-style parent psychologically seduces the child through the lure of power and self-indulgence afforded by the grandiose sense of entitlement and the judgment of others. When the child surrenders to the narcissistic-style parent the child experiences the psychological rush of narcissistic empowerment and grandiosity.

The more borderline-style parent creates the role-reversal relationship as a means to mitigate this parent's abandonment fears. The borderline-style parent psychologically seduces the child into a role-reversal relationship by presenting to the child as being emotionally fragile and vulnerable, thereby eliciting from the child a desire to alleviate the parent's displayed suffering. The tearful parental presentation of emotional fragility pulls for the child's nurturing response. The borderline-style parent frames the origin of his or her tearful emotional fragility as either the "abusive" treatment of the other parent (e.g., Parent: "Your father didn't care about our family, he left **us** for his own selfish needs. He doesn't love **us**, he doesn't care about **us**."), or as the child's abandonment of the poor, sad, and all-alone borderline-style parent by the child being with the other parent (e.g., Parent: "I miss you so much when you're gone, I love you so much I can't bear to be without you,

even for a minute.”). The borderline-style parent establishes the sides within the loyalty conflict through affection channels involving displays of over-emotional vulnerability, which elicit the child’s nurturing motivations toward the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. When the child surrenders to the borderline-style parent, the child is then rewarded with hyper-affectionate parental displays of overly indulgent “love.”

These distorted parenting practices result in a psychological “role-reversal” in the parent-child relationship in which the child is drawn into nurturing and taking care of the supposedly “injured” narcissistic/(borderline) parent. The theme of being abandoned by the other parent is extended to the child in (somewhat) subtle ways, primarily through the use of the words “us” and “family,” such as “your mother destroyed our **family**, she didn’t care about our **family**,” which then includes the child in the injury supposedly inflicted by the other parent’s abandonment, or “your father left **us** because of his own selfish needs, because he doesn’t care about **us**,” so that the supposed injury and abandonment is extended to the child through the term “us.” In framing the source of the injury as the other parent “abandoning us,” the child is drawn into making a commitment to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent “never to abandon” this parent out of the child’s desire to ease and nurture this parent’s displayed “injury” and suffering. This psychological commitment by the child “never to abandon” the narcissistic/(borderline) parent is then met with great shows of affection from the borderline-style parent, and with over-indulgent parenting from the narcissistic-style parent, and this commitment by the child then serves as the foundation for the formation of loyalty sides within the parent-child relationships,

Child: “The other parent is bad. The other parent abandoned “**us**.” I’ll never abandon you like that bad parent did.”

Parent: “Oh, you’re the most wonderful child ever. I love you so much. You’re such a wonderful child.”

While the targeted parent accepts sharing the child’s affection with the other parent, the hostage-taker requires that the child choose sides, and the intensely manipulative psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent is brought to bear on the child to ensure that the child will form an alliance with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent against the other parent. The child is a hostage to the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. There is no hope of protection or rescue. The hostage-taker is all-powerful, the other parent is disempowered. The child must psychologically survive in the dangerous world of arbitrary truth created by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, and in this context the child’s psychological survival necessitates surrendering completely to meeting the emotional and psychological needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, to providing this parent with continual “narcissistic supply,” and by rejecting the other parent in order to reassure the narcissistic/(borderline) parent that the child will “never abandon” this parent. The child is used by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent as a “regulating other” in a role-reversal relationship in which the authenticity of the child is sacrificed to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the parent.

The Retaliation

Should the child ever show bonding motivations toward the other parent, or even insufficient rejection of the other parent, then the hostage-taker, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, will clearly indicate with intense rejection and hostility toward the child that the child has strayed beyond the acceptable bounds and is being disloyal to their alliance by “abandoning” the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. In the world of the hostage-taker, the world in which the child must survive, bonding with the other parent represents abandoning the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, bonding with the other parent means betrayal of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, and bonding with the other parent, or even insufficient rejection of the other parent, will result in retaliation inflicted on the child by the hostage-taker, by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

If the child shows bonding motivations toward the other parent, or even insufficient rejection of the other parent, then the narcissistic/(borderline) parent will psychologically punish the child. The psychological punishment of the child for displeasing the narcissistic/(borderline) parent can take several forms,

- 1) **Guilt Induction:** The narcissistic/(borderline) parent induces guilt by presenting to the child as being “vulnerable and injured” by the supposedly “abusive” actions of the other parent. The narcissistic/(borderline) parent communicates to the child, not verbally but primarily through emotional signaling and relational move sequences, that if the child bonds with the other parent (who abandoned “**us**”) the child is also abandoning the emotionally fragile and vulnerable narcissistic/(borderline) parent just like the bad and “abusive” other parent did. The narcissistic/(borderline) parent forces the child to choose sides. If the child bonds with the other parent, or even goes willingly on visitations with the other parent, then the child is also abandoning the “injured” and vulnerable narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

This guilt induction approach of “injured” vulnerability is typical of a more borderline-style personality presentation by the parent, while a more prominently narcissistic-style parent will usually tend toward a more active and direct communication of hostile-rejection of the child as retaliation for the child’s bonding with the other parent, or because the child was insufficiently rejecting of the other parent.

- 2) **Psychological Rejection of the Child:** In retaliation for the child’s bonding with the other parent, or an insufficient display of child rejection for the other parent, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent withdraws from and actively rejects the child. For example, if the child doesn’t express sufficient reluctance and active resistance to going on visitations with the other parent, or doesn’t actively criticize the other parent following these visitations, the child will be subject to rejection and retaliatory hostility from the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. It is as if the hostage must make a televised statement denouncing the supposed evils of the imperialist powers, while just off-camera the hostage-taker is monitoring the statement made

by the hostage. If, in the view of the hostage-taker, the on-camera statement made by the hostage is not sufficiently critical and rejecting, then the hostage faces an intense retaliation from the hostage-taker once the cameras are tuned off.

For the child, the metaphorical camera's are on whenever there is a visitation transfer, and whenever the child is on public display to therapists and attorneys, with the "grand performance" being the child performance for a judge. When going on visitations to the other parent, the child's performance before the camera requires that the child protest and resist going with the other parent, and the child must plead not to be "forced" to go on visitations with the other parent. The child cries, runs away, refuses to get out of the hostage-taker's car, all under the watchful eye of the hostage-taker; the performance of the hostage for the metaphorical camera. If the child's performance for the camera is not to the satisfaction of the hostage taker, then the child faces intense retaliation when the child is alone again with the hostage-taker. The other parent cannot protect the child from this retaliation. The hostage is alone. When the child returns from visitations with the other parent, the metaphorical cameras are again turned on and the child must actively criticize and degrade the other parent, must berate the parenting of the other parent, and must protest how hated the other parent is. And, again, if this performance is not to the standards desired by the hostage-taker, the child faces an intense retaliation. No one can protect the child. The hostage is alone.

- 3) **Intense Narcissistic and Borderline Anger:** The child's displays of any form of bonding motivation toward the other parent, including insufficient displays of rejecting the other parent, are met with active narcissistic or borderline anger from the personality disordered parent. Narcissistic and borderline forms of anger are extremely intense. They are both much more intense forms of anger than are typically experienced and displayed by most normal-range people, and narcissistic and borderline forms of anger differ from each other in the way in which they are more intense.

Narcissistic anger can be subdued on the surface, but contains an undercurrent of clearly intense hostility, and outright rage, that signals an inner motivation to completely destroy its target, which in this case is the child. Narcissistic anger is tinged with signals of disgust, which is an intense emotion of visceral repulsion. The intensity of narcissistic anger can be communicated in a look of only a moment, in which rage, disgust, and a desire to destroy the target are combined and focused on the child. For a child receiving the intensity of narcissistic anger the experience is extremely disturbing. The emotion of anger communicates rejection, and the addition of disgust signals a visceral repulsion of the parent toward the child.

Children want to be loved by their parents. For a child to receive a parental signal of rejection, that the parent wants to destroy the child, and that the parent perceives the child to be viscerally repulsive is extremely disturbing for the child. The deeply disturbing experience for the child of being on the receiving end of narcissistic parental anger that is mixed with a visceral parental disgust for the

child is so intense that once it is displayed, the child becomes strongly motivated to never stray outside of the parentally desired boundaries again for fear of receiving this parental display of narcissistic anger.

The full manipulative power of narcissistic anger is in its combination with the excessive narcissistic over-indulgence granted to the child whenever the child displays desired ways of being. When the child rejects visitations with the other parent or criticizes the other parent, the child is psychologically “rewarded” with parental displays of relaxed joyful exuberance and affection from the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. While these “rewarding” parental displays by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent are not verbally linked directly to the child’s rejection of the other parent (i.e., the narcissistic/(borderline) parent never verbally says, “I’m glad you don’t want to be with the other parent”), the linkage is clear, “Please me and I will love you, displease me and I will torment you; and your rejection of the other parent pleases me.”

Furthermore, over time the child’s psychological fusion with the narcissistic parent becomes complete, so that when the child is pleasing to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent the child will vicariously experience the power and narcissistic expansion of self-grandiosity, self-indulgent entitlement, and haughty arrogance obtained through the child’s fused (i.e., enmeshed) psychological state with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Displeasing the narcissistic parent can provoke an immensely painful retaliation, while pleasing the narcissistic/(borderline) parent by psychologically surrendering to and fusing with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent provides the child with wonderful feelings of powerful self-inflation, and most importantly, safety from the narcissistic anger.

Borderline anger, on the other hand, is chaotic, irrational, and intensely sharp and cutting. The borderline parent’s anger toward the child when the child fails to show a sufficient rejection of the other parent is likely to emerge as “hot” rages of caustic vitriol vented directly toward the child in a thousand different irrational criticisms of the child which can be spread across days. The child learns that it is best to keep the borderline parent pleased and emotionally regulated in order to avoid the chaotic anger and irrational allegations directed toward the child from the disorganized and chaotic borderline process.

The borderline-style parent also rewards the child for pleasing the parent. When the child pleases the borderline-style parent, then the borderline parent becomes hyper-affectionate, kissing, caressing, expressing undying love, and offering overly indulgent affection for the child. The child becomes the ultimate epitome of the beloved object. Displease the borderline parent, however, and the child feels the chaotic emotional tirades of hostile rejection and irrational anger. The child swings from the ultimate beloved to the ultimate rejected and despised. Under these conditions, the child quickly learns what to do to keep the borderline-style parent in a regulated state (i.e., the child enters a role-reversal relationship to become a “regulating other” for the borderline-style personality parent).

The child learns to become whatever the narcissistic/(borderline) parent wants and needs, the child learns to continually reassure the narcissistic/(borderline) parent of this parent's value (i.e., the child provides a continual "narcissistic supply" to the parent), and the child continually reassures the narcissistic/(borderline) parent through hyper-affectionate displays by the child that the child will never abandon this parent. Most importantly, however, the child becomes hyper-vigilant in monitoring the moods and psychological state of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, and the child learns to read the narcissistic/(borderline) parent for cues about what the child should think, how the child should respond, and what the narcissistic/(borderline) parent needs from the child in order to keep the narcissistic/(borderline) parent in a regulated state, so that the child can then provide what the narcissistic/(borderline) parent needs.

The focus for the child becomes maintaining the narcissistic/(borderline) parent's emotional regulation in order to avoid the chaotic decompensation of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent into hostile, frightening, and chaotic rages. The child is used by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent as a "regulating other" to meet the emotional and psychological needs of this parent.

Identifying with the Hostage-Taker

The absolute power of the hostage-taker to completely nullify the power of the other parent and negate Court orders clearly establishes for the child the child's vulnerability and the hopelessness of the child's rescue from the chaotic world of arbitrarily defined and ever-shifting truth, in which night can be day and black can be white based solely on the assertions of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, and in which intense psychological punishments can be delivered to the child at any time for failing to meet the shifting and arbitrary needs of the parent. Within this context of an insecure, unstable, and upside-down world, the child is then provided with powerful psychological rewards of narcissistic over-indulgence and borderline displays of hyper-affectionate "love" for psychologically surrendering to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, thereby creating the psychological context needed for inducing the child's complete psychological collapse and surrender to the needs and desires of the "hostage-taker." The child dare not deviate from the psychological state desired by narcissistic/(borderline) parent for fear of parental retaliation, and the child is seduced by the psychological rewards and the safety offered by surrender into adopting the psychological state desired by the hostage-taker, by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

In this way, the child becomes a psychologically fused reflection of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent ("I will be whatever you want me to be"), a ventriloquist's puppet mouthing the words and attitudes of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. Unless we show the child that we are more powerful than the hostage-taker, that we can protect the child from the hostage-taker, unless we can rescue the child from the intense psychological manipulation and control dynamic of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child must do whatever is necessary to psychologically survive in the arbitrary, dangerous, upside-down world of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. How can we ask the hostage to defy the will of the hostage-taker unless we are able to protect the hostage,

protect the child, from the retaliation that is sure to follow defiance of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. The first requirement of any hostage situation, physical or psychological, is that we must first rescue the hostage and ensure the protection of the hostage. Only then can we begin to ask for authenticity from the child.

The child's fused identification with the hostage-taker is analogous to the "Stockholm Syndrome,"³ in which the hostage comes to accept and adopts the views of the hostage-taker, even to the point of coming to view the police not as rescuers but as the enemy. The child is in a psychological hostage situation and has been psychologically coerced into a complete surrender to the hostage-taker, to the will and needs of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. The child dares not deviate from the distorted identification with the hostage-taker, from the "us" in the us-versus-them alliance of "shared victimization" that is created by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. As long as the child remains a hostage, and must survive in the world of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, then the child must do whatever is necessary for survival.

If the child deviates from the parentally desired psychological state, not just from parentally desired behavior, but from the very psychological state desired by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent,⁴ then the child will be exposed to intense retaliation. Complete psychological surrender to the hostage-taker, to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, is the only way the child can achieve psychological safety. When the child surrenders to a complete identification with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent and sees everything just like the narcissistic/(borderline) parent does, then the child will be safe from the narcissistic/(borderline) rage, the rejection, and the uncertainty. Then the child will be rewarded with grandiose self-indulgence and hyper-affectionate bonding with the (dangerous) narcissistic/(borderline) parent. As long as the child remains one with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, the child is safe. The child surrenders because the child must surrender. Complete surrender is the only way for the child to ensure his or her psychological safety and survival in the hostile and dangerous interpersonal world of living with a narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

And once the child surrenders psychologically to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, then the hostage-taker is internalized into the very fabric of the child's psyche and is perceived to be ever-present, lurking in the hidden recesses of the child's psyche, all-knowing and all-powerful. Even the very thought itself of bonding with the targeted parent becomes too dangerous. The hostage-taker will know, will see. The only safety is in complete surrender. The child surrenders absolutely and completely to the psychological

³ McKenzie, I.K. (2004). The Stockholm syndrome revisited: Hostages, relationships, prediction, control, and psychological science. *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations*, 4, 5-21.

⁴ "Rather than telling the child directly what to do or think, as does the behaviorally controlling parent, the psychologically controlling parent uses indirect hints and responds with guilt induction or withdrawal of love if the child refuses to comply. In short, an intrusive parent strives to manipulate the child's thoughts and feelings in such a way that the child's psyche will conform to the parent's wishes."

(Kerig, p. 12) Kerig, P.K. (2005). Revisiting the construct of boundary dissolution: A multidimensional perspective. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*, 5, 5-42.

control of fusion and identification with the hostage-taker, which represents the “Stockholm Syndrome” of the hostage’s complete identification with the hostage-taker.

Exploitation of the Child’s Induced Symptoms

Once the hostage-taker has achieved the child’s complete psychological surrender, then the narcissistic/(borderline) parent begins to exploit the child’s symptomatic rejection of the other parent, and the child is used as a “human shield” against outside forces that seek to end the child’s psychological captivity. The hostage-taker requires the child to take the lead position in initiating the rejection of the other parent, so that the child is placed in front (“I don’t want to go on visitations to the other parent. Do I have to go? I don’t want to go. I hate the other parent.”), and when the other parent objects to the disruptions to his or her relationship with the child, the hostage-taker turns on the metaphorical cameras for the statement by the hostage designed for public consumption by therapists and attorneys;

“I hate my mother, she’s a horrible parent. She’s abusive. I want to be with my father. My father’s wonderful.”

“I hate my father, he’s a horrible parent. He’s abusive. I want to be with my mother, she’s a wonderful parent. We love each other very much.”

The hostage is voicing the inserted beliefs and desired expressions of the hostage-taker, who is just off-camera monitoring the public statement by the hostage to the camera. If the hostage does well, then rewards of indulgence await. If, however, the hostage’s statements to the metaphorical camera of therapists, attorneys, and judges is not to the satisfaction of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, then the child faces retaliation. And the child is alone and unprotected.

Once the child surrenders, then the child’s induced rejection of the other parent can be exploited by the hostage-taker, by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, to achieve complete power, control, and domination over the other parent, to achieve victory.

“The need to *control* the idealized objects, to use them in attempts to manipulate and exploit the environment and to “destroy potential enemies,” is linked with inordinate pride in the “possession” of these perfect objects totally dedicated to the patient.” (Kernberg, 1975, p. 33)⁵

The child’s induced and elicited rejection of the other parent confers absolute power to the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to entirely nullify both the parental rights of the other parent and the authority of Court orders. The child’s symptomatic rejection of the other parent is exploited by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to obtain full custody of the

⁵ Kernberg, O.F. (1975). *Borderline conditions and pathological narcissism*. New York: Aronson.

child, i.e., full possession of the narcissistic object. The child represents a narcissistic possession, a symbol of victory by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent over the other parent.

And should we try to rescue the child through therapy we will encounter the on-camera statements made by the hostage for the public consumption of therapists and attorneys. If the therapist accepts these on-camera statements as being valid, then the therapist colludes with the psychopathology. If, on the other hand, the therapist does not accept these on-camera statements of rejection, and presses the child for change, for bonding with the targeted-rejected parent, then the therapy process will only further expose the child to the retaliation of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent for any display by the child of bonding toward the other parent.

If therapy does not accept and collude with the on-camera public consumption statements made by the hostage-child, then the hostage-taker will require that the child reject therapy and the therapist. The child will begin to complain about going to therapy, complain that the therapist isn't sufficiently "understanding," and the child will begin to actively resist therapy and the therapist. The same induced-rejection process used to nullify the rights of the targeted parent will be used to nullify treatment. After all, it works. And if the child is insufficiently critical and rejecting of therapy then the child is exposed to retaliation from the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. If treatment gains are made, if the child accepts visitations with the targeted parent, if the child stops resisting therapy, then the child is exposed to retaliation from the hostage-taker who is monitoring the hostage-child's statements made before the camera for public consumption.

By placing the child into the front, into the leadership position of rejecting the other parent, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent can deny responsibility and use the child as a "human shield" to thwart efforts to alter the hostage situation. If the hostage-taker is accused of manipulating the child, the hostage-taker responds, "prove it."⁶ The more pressure is applied for change, the more pressure the narcissistic/(borderline) parent applies to the child to remain the same, so that therapy threatens to tear the child apart psychologically. Therapy becomes a game of "chicken" with the child's psychological health, and the narcissistic/(borderline) parent will not blink, even if it means the psychological destruction of the child. Therapy must relent into being ineffective or else we will tear the child apart. The child is being used as a "human shield" by the hostage-taker. If we try to change the child's relationship with the targeted parent we will either expose the child to retaliation from the narcissistic/(borderline) parent if the child cooperates with us, or we will psychologically destroy the child from the conflicting

⁶ The psychological control of a child by a narcissistic/(borderline) parent will leave "psychological fingerprints" in the symptom display of the child. The set of three diagnostic indicators of attachment-based "parental alienation," 1) the suppression of the child's attachment system, 2) five specific narcissistic and borderline traits in the child's symptom display, and 3) the presence in the child's symptom display of a delusional belief system regarding the supposedly inadequate and "abusive" parenting of the targeted parent, represent the "psychological fingerprints" of the child's psychological control by a narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

pressures placed on the child to bond with the targeted parent and the child's fear of retaliation from the narcissistic/(borderline) parent if the child cooperates with therapy.

As long as the child is a hostage, the child must reject the other parent. Until and unless we are able to rescue the hostage, we cannot ask the hostage to defy the will of the hostage-taker. Unless we rescue the child, unless we can protect the child, bonding with the targeted parent is too dangerous for the child who must find a way to psychologically survive in the world of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. "Parental alienation" is not a matter of child custody and visitation, it is a matter of child protection.

The Responsibility of Mental Health Professionals

The presence in the child's symptom display of the three characteristic diagnostic indicators of an attachment-based model of "parental alienation"⁷ warrants the DSM-5 diagnosis of,

- 309.4 Adjustment Disorder with mixed disturbance of emotions and conduct
- V61.20 Parent-Child Relational Problem
- V61.29 Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress
- V995.51 Child Psychological Abuse, Confirmed

A professionally established DSM-5 diagnosis of V995.51 Child Psychological Abuse, Confirmed based on the presence in the child's symptom display of the three characteristic diagnostic indicators of an attachment-based model of "parental alienation" warrants an immediate child protection response, or we can simply abandon the child to the psychopathology of the hostage-taker, which becomes the decision before the Court.

Mental health professionals need to end their complicity of silence that results in the abandonment of the child to the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent by formally recognizing the child protection issues involved and by making an appropriate DSM-5 diagnosis for an attachment-based model of "parental alienation" as V995.51, Child Psychological Abuse, Confirmed, which will then allow the Court and child protective services to decide whether to fulfill their role of rescuing and protecting the child from the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, or of instead abandoning the child to the psychopathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

⁷ Childress, C.A. (2013). DSM-5 Diagnosis of "Parental Alienation" Processes. Retrieved 6/14/14 from <http://www.drcachildress.org/asp/Site/ParentalAlienation/index.asp>