The pathology typically described as “parental alienation” in the popular culture is an attachment-related pathology called pathological mourning (Bowlby, 1980), involving a cross-generational coalition of the child with one parent against the other parent (Haley, 1977; Minuchin, 1974), resulting in an emotional cutoff in the child’s relationship with a normal-range and affectionally available parent (Bowen, 1978; Titelman, 2003).

In 1993 (twenty five years ago), the preeminent family systems therapist, Salvador Minuchin and his co-author Michael Nichols provided a structural family diagram on page 42 of their book, Family Healing, for this type of family pathology.

There it is.  There is the structural family systems diagram for what everyone is calling “parental alienation” – but what is actually called a cross-generational coalition of an allied parent with the child against the targeted parent that results in an emotional cutoff in a parent-child relationship in actual family systems therapy (Bowen, 1978; Haley, 1977; Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Nichols, 1993)

Note the triangular pattern of family relationships.  This is called the child’s “triangulation” into the spousal conflict.  Triangulation is the professional construct for the child being “placed in the middle” of the spousal conflict.

Note also, the “inverted hierarchy” created by the child’s elevation in the family hierarchy to a position above that of the targeted parent (the mother in this example) from which the child is empowered by the coalition with the father to judge the targeted parent.  An inverted family hierarchy is a highly characteristic symptom feature of a cross-generational coalition within the family.

The three lines between the father and child indicate an “enmeshed,” over-involved psychological relationship of the father and child, which represents a psychological violation of boundaries across generations – leading the renowned family systems therapist, Jay Haley, to call this type of family pathology a “perverse triangle.”

The break in the connecting lines to the mother indicate the “emotional cutoff” of the mother from the father-son coalition.  This is the symptom feature everyone is calling “parental alienation” – the child’s rejection of the parent.  The child’s rejection of the parent is part of a much larger family systems pathology.

“Emotional stuck-together fusion and emotional cutoff are interrelated expressions of undifferentiation… The greater the degree of stuck-together fusion in a family, the greater the degree of cutoff that will follow.  This interlocking process continues to the multigenerational history of the family.” (Titelman, 2003, p. 21)

“When a pattern of fusion exists in one segment of a family, nuclear, family of origin, or extended, there is an equivalent degree of cutoff in the same or another segment of the family as a multigenerational system.” (Titelman, 2003, p. 21)

This is not some “new form of pathology” that requires unique new symptom identifiers.  We absolutely know what this pathology is.  Well, at least knowledgeable and competent mental health professionals know what it is.  The problem is that the field of professional psychology surrounding this attachment-related family pathology is rampant with profound professional ignorance and incompetence.

But the pathology typically called “parental alienation” in the popular culture is a well-understood and well-established form of attachment-related family pathology called “pathological mourning” which is being created by the personality disorder pathology of the allied narcissistic/(borderline) personality parent who has formed a cross-generational coalition with the child against the targeted parent.