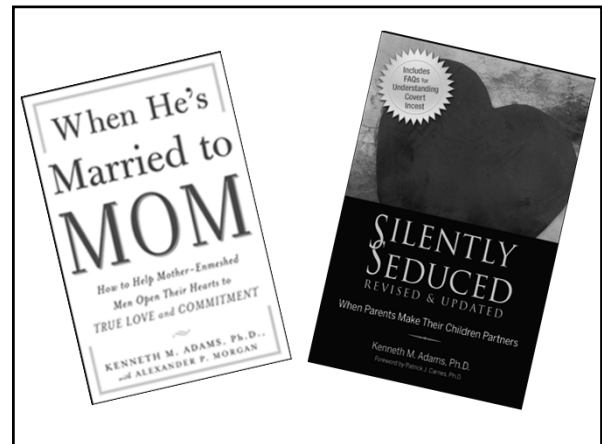


SEPARATION, DIFFERENTIATION, AND EMANCIPATION

Cornerstones of Recovery from Parental Enmeshment

Kenneth M. Adams, Ph.D., CSAT-S
www.overcomingenmeshment.com

1

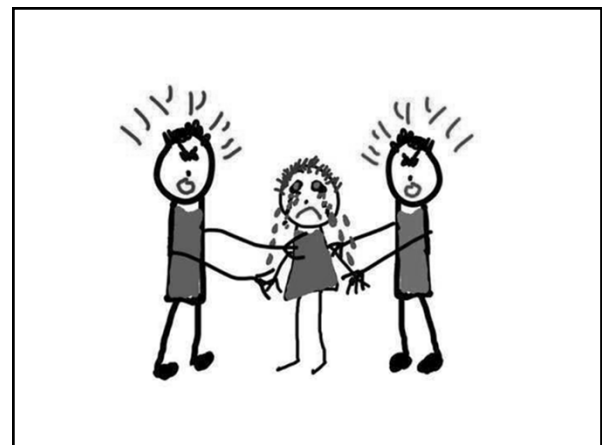


2

Structural Family Systems Therapy (Minuchin, 1974, Aponte, 1976)

- Boundary: Disengagement - Enmeshment
- Alignment: Coalition – Triangulation
- Power: Who has it?
- Sexually Addicted Systems?

3



4

Balance of Separateness and Togetherness

- "Family closeness seems connected with, or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, enabled by easy access to distance" (Bodin, 1981)
- Those allowed autonomy also have a sense of reciprocity regarding closeness
- Bodin goes on to say "Refraining from unnecessary coercion may be an expression of love"

5

"The ability of a family to function well depends on the degree to which the family structure is well defined, elaborated, flexible, cohesive"

(Bodine, 1981)

6

Healthy or Well-Functioning Family Systems

- Parents are well differentiated
- Clear separation of generational boundaries
- Loyalty to the family of procreation is greater than the family of origin
- Spouses put themselves before anyone else
- Encouragement of identity development and autonomy of each family member
- Non-possessive warmth and affection
- Open, honest, clear communication
- Open to outsiders

7



8

Symptom Development from Family Systems Perspective

- Two variables that influence symptom development:
 1. Level of anxiety in the family system at a given point
 2. The degree of undifferentiation in the child
- The greater the anxiety and the greater the undifferentiation, the greater the likelihood of a symptom (Kerr, 1981)

9



10

Therapy From Structural Family System Perspective

- Change the underlying system structure
- When the underlying system will not change, the adult child enmeshed with a parent must change the boundaries, alignment, and power by separating and emancipating without consensus from the family
- This emancipation will alter family functioning

11

Life-Cycle

- Dysfunctional families develop problems because they are not able to adjust to transitions within the family life cycle,
- e.g., children leaving home or getting married.
- e.g., an enmeshed mother-son dyad has fluid boundaries, excessive dependency, developed coalitions with siblings and others to reinforce the enmeshed dyad, and too much power in the hands of the enmeshed son.

12



13

Separation, Differentiation, Emancipation

- Related but separate concepts
- Separation: the setting of boundaries re time, closeness, topics, etc.
- Differentiation: the reduction in dependency on the parent (family) for intellectual and emotional stability and functioning
- Emancipation: Putting family of procreation, career interests, self interests, and other autonomous needs of greater priority than family of origin (or enmeshing parent). Emancipation does not require consensus or approval of family. Parents need to manage their loss.

14

Boundaries

- Differentiation
- Permeability
- Rigidity
- In Enmeshed systems boundaries undifferentiated, permeable, and fluid (including cross-generational boundary problems)

15



16

Separation- I begin here and you end there!



17

Differentiation of Self

- With differentiation defined on a continuum with one end reflecting a person's functioning depends on "borrowing" of strength or self from others, reflecting too much dependency on the system and the other end, people are more self contained and consistent in their functioning (Kerr, 1981)
- Enmeshed systems and dyads lack differentiation

18

Differentiation- I am not dependent on you!

19

20

Emancipation

- Emancipation is the young adult who has gone through the period of moratorium and adolescent crisis to a clear commitment to the fidelity of self, values, love, career, and so on...
- This is celebrated and honored by the parents and family-of-origin who understand they are no longer the priority in the young adult's life
- The young adult is able to shuttle back and forth to the family without guilty obligation to care-take them
- They have now renegotiated the contractual arrangements with the family-of-origin by the natural presence of their own adulthood

21

Emancipation – the honoring of leaving

22

Emancipation- I am doing fine on my own!

23

Where is the Line Between Caring or Cultural Norms and Enmeshment?

- Circular argument
- Unanswerable while point of reference is "obligatory guilt and loyalty"
- Emancipation and "identity achieved" must occur first to truly answer the question

24

Enmeshment Disrupts Intimacy

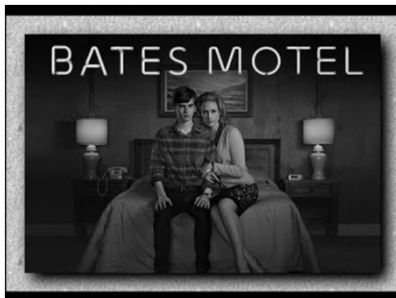
- Separate emotionally from the family of origin you grew up in, enough so that your identity is separate from your parents and siblings (*The Good Marriage*, Wallerstein and Blakeslee)
- Relationships have ever-deepening levels, and a relationship can only go to the depth of the more limited person (*The Seven 7 Best Things Happy Couples Do*, Friel and Friel)

25

Enmeshment: Different Labels, Similar Construct

- Parentification (Jurkovic)
- The Chosen Child (Minuchin)
- Emotional Incest (Love)
- Covert Incest (Adams)
- Enmeshment (Adams)

26



27

In his unconscious – and sometimes conscious – mind, a mother-enmeshed man (MEM) is representing his mother's interests, while his own have become secondary. If he does something he thinks she wouldn't like, he feels disloyal to her. If he "gets serious" about a woman, suddenly, without understanding why, he is overwhelmed with feelings of fear, anxiety, and guilt. Ambivalence and withdrawal inevitably follow.

From: When He's Married to Mom: Helping Mother Enmeshed Men Open Their Hearts to True Love and Commitment

28

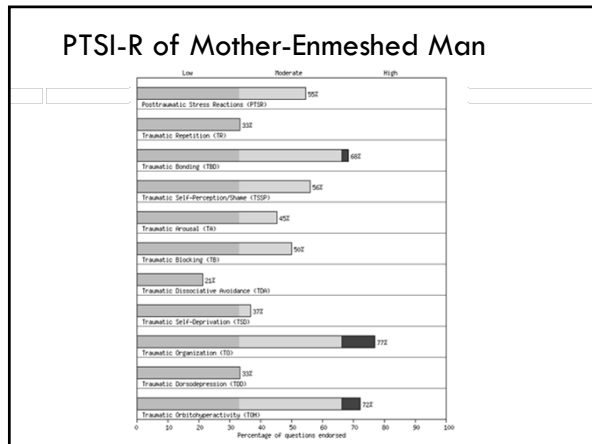
Can someone experience both covert and overt incest with the same parent?

29

Differences

- Overt more intrusive sensory memories
- Overt more lost and dissociated
- Covert more stuck in playing a role
- Both report feeling engulfed and smothered
- Recovery requires treatment of both
- Some therapists minimize impact of CI

30



37

Enmeshment: Aggravating Factors

- Entrapment, intrusion, and engulfment occurs before age five
- Punishment/physical violence in retaliation for separation attempts
- Participation by the other parent to encourage the entrapment or their physical or emotional absence
- Physical sexual abuse

38

Enmeshment: Factors in Parents

- Deprivation
- Disrupted attachment with caregivers
- Undifferentiated self
- Distorted cognitive schema that prevent seeing children as separate (Jurkovic)
- Personality disorders (traits, features), particularly dependency and narcissism

39

Enmeshment: Factors in Children

- Temperament
- Capacity for empathy and caring (Jurkovic)
- Birth order
- Gender

40

Setting Factors

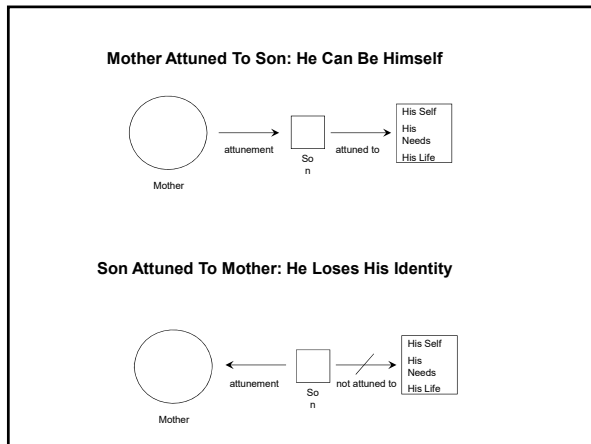
- High stress – substance abuse, mental illness
- Single parenting
- Marital discord
- Role induction (parents display of neediness, helplessness, and dependency)
- Poor boundaries- enmeshed with one parent, disengagement with the other (Jurkovic)
- Alcoholic and addicted family systems
- Cultural

41

Enmeshment Disrupts Identity Development

- Eric Erikson noted that identity was fully “achieved” after a 3-5 period of moratorium
- Without out it, a foreclosed (role defined) or diffused (lack of definition) identity would result
- Enmeshment prevents the moratorium period and interferes with the next stage of development: intimacy vs isolation
- Trapped in loyalty to the parent

42

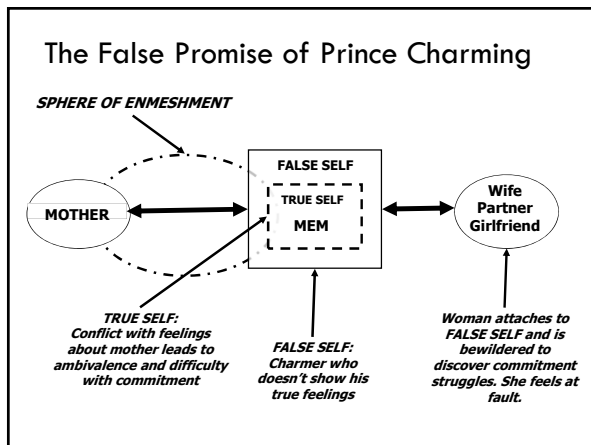


43

Identity Issues in Enmeshment

- ❑ A boy or girl who has played the role of a surrogate companion to a parent feels engulfed, enmeshed, smothered, and intruded upon. His or her wants and needs have merged with hers. The child's identity is lost
- ❑ Burdened with excessive feelings of guilt and disloyalty regarding their own wishes, these children/adults have lost their sense of self and submerged their most basic needs and wants
- ❑ His or her "true" self is unable to "unfold" and goes into hiding and a "false" self emerges:
- ❑ A sensitive and empathic caretaker becomes overdeveloped and central to the individual's identity
- ❑ May also develop a rebellious/narcissistic adolescent as identity

44



45

Sexuality Issues in Enmeshment

- ❑ Sexuality is filled with intense conflict- shrouded in danger, taboo, ambivalence, and shame
- ❑ Sexuality is split off, fragments or compartments are created
- ❑ Unencumbered erotic desire needed for bonding-adult love relationships become gateway to disappointment and loss
- ❑ Sex addiction as an escape, reenactment, or discharge of rage
- ❑ May be sexually shut down (avoidant) with primary partner as a way to protect or withdraw and hyper-aroused outside of commitment

46

Sex Addiction and Covert Incest

- ❑ Sexual addiction is a perceived gateway to emotional and sexual freedom - It temporarily reassures a damaged, entrapped, and ambivalent sexual self
- ❑ Sexual addiction is not disloyal, allows the CI survivor to avoid the trap of loyalty to the parent while asserting sexual freedom
- ❑ It permits discharge of the rage and anger and allows the covert incest survivor to reject and disappoint the partner, which is not allowed by the parent

47

Relationship and Attachment Issues in Enmeshment

- ❑ Ambivalent attachment style as well as avoidant and or anxious
- ❑ Struggle to commit, partners feel "second fiddle"
- ❑ Having learned to compromise, accommodate, or submit himself to his mother these men then later do so with others and then resent them and pull away or attack
- ❑ Lack of differentiation between self & others, creating difficulties with internal and external boundaries-"your problems become my problems"
- ❑ Choosing partners that don't represent a threat or challenge to the parent ("doomed from the beginning")
- ❑ In contrast, fail to pursue or commit to a workable relationship (or they wind up "divorcing" the wrong person)

48

Friendship Issues in Enmeshed Individuals

- ❑ Over-reliance on or over-involvement with parents into adulthood
- ❑ May become compulsively attuned to the feelings and needs of others or may dismiss and become insensitive to protect self
- ❑ Picks friends to take care of, rescue and emotionally and/or financially support - codependent
- ❑ Men be overly competitive with men and have many female friends
- ❑ Women may befriend women who they view as less threatening, may enmesh themselves
- ❑ May lose friends over time due to not being able to commit

49

Work and Career Issues in Enmeshed Individuals

- ❑ May have chosen careers to please parent
- ❑ Due to feeling disempowered may not pursue dreams
- ❑ Involved and dependent on family business at a cost to true self
- ❑ May not be self sufficient
- ❑ May overcompensate with work and pursuit of money to counter feelings of inadequacy and protection against felt threat of "neutering"
- ❑ Disavow their own talents, for fear of unconsciously rejecting the enmeshed parent

50

Parenting Issues in Enmeshed Individuals

- ❑ Enmesh children to get needs met
- ❑ Create triangulation by using child against other parent
- ❑ Over romanticize or sexualize child and seduce companionship
- ❑ Involve children with enmeshing parent to deflect away from own enmeshment
- ❑ Over involved in child's life
- ❑ Lack of differentiation with identity of child- project unmet needs and dreams onto child and pressure them to live them out
- ❑ Hold onto child at life-cycle transitions

51

Body Image and Distorted Eating Issues in Enmeshed Individuals

- ❑ Eating becomes a way to rebel against the felt intrusion and to gain control and access to their own body
- ❑ May use food as surrogate source of nurturance
- ❑ Food restriction may serve as way to control how much "mothering" gets in for mother-enmeshed women

52

Spirituality and Existential Issues in Enmeshed Individuals

- ❑ Parent first (and only) God, must pay homage
- ❑ Rebel against anything religious or spiritual
- ❑ Use scripture/religion to justify enmeshment with family and as tool to dismiss or gaslight a concerned partner

53

Are there different issues for a gay man who has had a covert incest relationship with his mother?

54

Differences

- Many similarities: engulfed, excessive guilt, overly responsible, fearing commitments, and sexual problems and compulsions
- Culturally reinforced (expected) to take care of mother
- Gay man may identify more with mother and not feel it as the same intrusion as a straight man
- Might not feel has compelled to separate in the same way
- May have developed alliance with mom against dad
- Must still emancipate, may be his mother's loving son, but must first be his own man
- Does not cause gay orientation

55

Enmeshed Women



56

Enmeshed Women

- Culturally reinforced to take care of parents
- May be actively involved with caretaking of parents and not see it as interfering
- Partners/spouses may not insist on change
- Enmeshment with both mothers and fathers
- "Best friends" with mother
- Fathers' sexualized girlfriend

57

Spouses and Partners of MEM Have Become the Other Woman



58

Spouses and Partners of Sexually Addicted Mother-Enmeshed Men

- Betrayed by both the addiction and the relationship with the mother
- Increased vigilance around the MEM's contact with mother much like the concerns associated with sexual addiction triggers
- She is in a bind because if she presses for changes with his relationship to mother, she is experienced as the controlling woman and he can then displace anger that belongs to mom
- Must use soft start up
- Needs bottom line

59

Enmeshment: Therapeutic Considerations

- Boundaries
- Differentiation
- Emancipation
- "Enmeshment relapse" prevention plan
- Develop and build on resiliency
- Create alliance with spouse/partner

60

Boundary Considerations

- Getting together
- Phone calls
- Physical touch
- Topics of conversation e.g.:
 1. I don't respond to my mother's criticisms of my dad
 2. I don't talk to her about my dad
 3. I say out loud to them both that I don't want to talk with either of them about their conflict
- Money

61

Basic Strategies for Holding on to Self

- Wait 24 hours - "I need to think about this and get back to you"
- Develop interest and hobbies
- Build friendships and decrease tendency to be dependent on only one person
- Set boundaries around the amount of time you will give to mom/dad
- Screen calls, wait to respond
- Pace romantic involvement, hold boundaries tight in early part of relationship

62

Steps in Setting Boundaries

- Make a list of ten most burdensome, inappropriate things you do for mom from most to least damaging
- Write down a few statements that are clear and specific ways to set limits e.g., "I can't talk now, I will call tomorrow"
- Identify feelings that arise during rehearsal
- List that behaviors your mother/father does that trigger the guilt and disloyalty response e.g., weepy, angry, threatening, martyrdom, silent, etc.
- Develop new beliefs that counter guilt and fear response

63

Negative Resiliency Balance Leading to Enmeshment Relapse

64

65

Transference and Countertransference Issues

- T: Dependency, will be in role "good pt" rather than true self, may feel that they are putting therapist out and not want to return, feel therapist is also controlling if too much advice, feel the therapy process is smothering
- CT: Pressure the pt to separate too quickly from parent, too much advice and intervention too quickly, getting angry at parent, failing to validate enmeshment (own enmeshment issues), trying to fix, over-involvement

66

Trusting Your Inner Voice

□ “ See...this [process exercise] makes me angry...because there are distinct times I should have listened to my inner voice-that’s been my behavior, my default for so long that it has become ingrained...this is the well worn path...the cost, the consequences...is that I’m not living the life I’ve chosen...*I’m living the life I allowed to be formed around me* (italics Adams)...And I sit in despair and agony at times when I consider the potential I had...when I dare to imagine what my life would look like if I had been true to myself and listened to that inner voice...

-MEM Intensive Participant October 2014

67

Experiential Exercise- Trusting Your Inner Voice

- Having lost their identity to their parent’s demands and neediness, enmeshed adults struggle to trust themselves and listen to their own “inner voice.”
- This has made it difficult for them to speak up on their behalf
- They may lack opinions or have made commitments to people and situations they have regretted
- Learning to listen to the inner voice is a critical component of reclaiming the self
- List the times you have not listened to your inner voice and the consequence(s) that followed:

68