

Too Much Pathology, Not Enough Repair

A review of



Poisonous Parenting: Toxic Relationships Between Parents and Their Adult Children

by Shea M. Dunham, Shannon B. Dermer, and Jon Carlson (Eds.)

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Clinicians continually encounter adults who are suffering in longstanding, toxic relationships with their parents. These adults often blame themselves for the relational impasses, unable to see the true relational nature of the problems. These relationships are often toxic due to the emotional and relational limitations of the parents of these adults. Dating back to the work of Murray Bowen (Bowen, 1978), clinicians and professionals have attempted to provide understanding and insight into the workings of these relationships, as well as offer suggestions regarding how to improve them. Alice Miller's now-classic volume, *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (Miller, 1979/1997), is a prime example.

Poisonous Parenting: Toxic Relationships Between Parents and Their Adult Children, edited by Shea Dunham, Shannon Dermer, and Jon Carlson, is a much needed effort to

extend the scholarship in this very important area of human development and therapeutic work. The fields of family therapy, family psychology, and human development have needed a book like this for some time. We approached this book with excitement, especially after noting that several chapters were written by scholars in the area of attachment theory and gender, notably Daniel Siegel and Judith Jordan. However, after a thorough review, our excitement dissipated. Although there are several strong chapters, overall the book is lacking in integration and depth.

Linear Pathology

In the first chapter, Dunham and Dermer develop an argument that parents can be objectively classified as poisonous, and they identify three main categories of poisonous parents—the *pageant* parent, the *dismissive* parent, and the *contemptuous* parent—each with several subcategories (pp. 6–12). The authors take a pathologizing focus and examine the parent–child relationship in a one-dimensional, linear fashion rather than as a circular and relational phenomenon.

Much later, in Chapter 8, buried in one small paragraph (p. 149), Judith Jordan confronts the use of the term *poisonous parenting*, pointing out its shaming and pathologizing qualities. She focuses on the larger cultural context, which is fitting since she is a historical leader in feminist theory. Unfortunately, she quickly concedes that some family relationships are not “growth-fostering” (p. 149) and, in this way, may be poisonous, as defined by the editors. It begs the question whether the editors cut out an exploratory discussion on the possible detrimental effects of these typologies. It is this central theme of pathologizing parents, including identifying a topology of pathologies, that is the central flaw in this book.

In this volume, poisonous parents are characterized as fixated in a pathology that does not allow them to attune to their adult children. The parent is the cause of the toxic relationship. The first chapter introduces the reader to a pessimistic view that gives little credence to the possibility that change can occur in these parents, thus suggesting that emotionally cutting off is the only viable solution.

This view is in sharp contrast to contributors Hanna Farber and Daniel Siegel, who identify in Chapter 3 how parents can alter their personal attachment style and internal working model to become more attuned (Siegel, 1999, 2010; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). For these reasons, though this book contends to be a primer for therapists and a resource for clients, we do not believe that it is.

Missed Opportunity

Little attention is paid to diversity and generational issues in the book, despite the ever-growing awareness of mental health professionals of the unique impacts of gender, culture, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, and religion on multigenerational family dynamics (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2007; Bokhorst et al., 2003; Gervai, 2009; Holtzen, Kenny, & Mahalik, 1995; McBride, Schoppe, & Rane, 2002; Stams, Juffer, & van IJzendoorn, 2002). Many grandparents serve as both caregivers and protective, secure attachment figures for children, yet no authors explore the intergenerational impact.

Also ignored is the question of how parenting styles may change over the life span when parents become grandparents. Parents often soften when they become grandparents, which could increase the possibility of a real relational repair being made. Further, no authors address the relationship of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer children (adult or adolescent) with their parents. The parents may be homophobic or simply struggling with accepting their child's sexual orientation, thus causing toxic conflict and, potentially, severing an otherwise secure attachment.

One chapter discusses African American families, and a second explores religious families, but both remain focused on the "poisonous" aspects of each of these factors and neglect the strengths inherent in each of these cultures. This is especially unfortunate, given the breadth of research on the importance of embracing cultural identity, the impact of parental attachment on perceptions of God (Dickie et al., 1997), and the opportunity to gain earned secure attachment through spirituality and religion (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Kirkpatrick, 1998).

Jordan's chapter on mother–daughter relationships is one of the few that covers a topic in some depth, though still more discussion would have been desirable. She explores the obstacles that women and daughters confront in the larger patriarchal system; however, the benefits of developing a secure mother–daughter relationship are ignored. Likewise, father–daughter and mother–son relationships are also overlooked.

Jordan does reframe poisonous parenting as a "chronic disconnection," and she, thankfully, explores the stressful contextual factors many parents experience that may cause the ineffectual interactions (p. 149); however, she neglects to include theoretical or practical guidance for overcoming or healing or renegotiating a "chronic disconnection." Further, she does not discuss personal accountability, thereby abdicating the parent of responsibility.

Moments of Hope




A few important chapters address systemic concerns. The chapter “Father–Son Relationships,” written by Melanie Mellers, Matt Englar-Carlson, and Jon Carlson, presents an insightful and thorough look at the historical and societal implications of father–son attachments. The authors achieve an even balance of describing the obstacles to that attachment process, techniques of how to overcome those obstacles, and the potential strengths for both father and son in achieving that attachment.














Also, the book’s final emphasis on forgiveness, written by Terry Hargave, and strategies for helping clients become compassionate parents, partners, and friends, written by Dermer and Dunham, allow the book to finish from a strengths-based approach. Overall, one of the book’s strengths is its focus on compassionate parenting from structural, Bowenian, and reality and choice theory perspectives.

Adult children come to therapists’ offices frequently with frustrations about their parents. It is important to help them acknowledge that the state of their relationship is not entirely their fault. However, simply shifting the blame to the “poisonous” parent serves to oversimplify and blame rather than assisting to explore ways to evolve the attachment style over the life span and within an evolving and layered context.

Despite this limitation, *Poisonous Parenting* does make a valiant effort at addressing an important topic in our field. Several chapters offer bright moments. We believe this book is a great first step, and we hope it will inspire future research and writing on the topic.

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