Personality Disorders in Divorce Cases

Case Summary 1 – Narcissistic Personality Disorder

Background

"Mr. A" is a 47-year-old father of two (ages 9 and 12) in a high-conflict divorce and custody dispute.
He owns a successful business and initially presents as confident, composed, and deeply invested in his children's well-being.
In early meetings, he arrives with meticulously organized documentation and photographs, positioning himself as a model parent.
His narrative frames him as the stabilizing force in the family, while his spouse is described vaguely but consistently as disorganized, impulsive, or emotionally unstable.

When describing his own parenting, Mr. A emphasizes structure, high expectations, and involvement. He speaks about enrolling the children in advanced academic programs, encouraging competitive sports, and ensuring "they're always striving for excellence." He highlights his financial contributions and ability to "provide opportunities that most kids could only dream of."

When describing his estranged spouse's parenting, Mr. A tends to focus on perceived lapses: forgotten homework, inconsistent bedtimes, or occasional missed practices. These are presented as evidence of chronic irresponsibility, even if they are isolated incidents. He acknowledges that the other parent "loves the kids," but qualifies it with "she just doesn't know how to prepare them for real life."

Mr. A's attorney contacts and interviews third parties. The children's teachers report that Mr. A is engaged but sometimes overly directive, insisting on certain academic placements even against school recommendations. Coaches note that Mr. A is supportive but prone to sideline criticism of his children if they aren't performing to his standards. Neighbors describe him as cordial but somewhat distant, often emphasizing his professional success in conversation.

Behaviors and Relationship Dynamics

Mr. A views the divorce as a zero-sum contest, emphasizing that shared custody is "non-negotiable" because "the kids need my stability."
His co-parenting emails are polite in tone but subtly undermine his estranged wife's competence. For example, Mr. A has written:

1. "I heard you forgot to help Alex with his science project. I know you're busy, but maybe I can step in and make sure it gets done right. We can't afford for the kids to fall behind."
2. "I'll be there at 5 p.m. sharp. Please try to be on time — the kids need consistency, and it's

important for them to see that at least one of us is reliable."
3. "I've already scheduled a meeting with the teacher to discuss the kids' progress. I assume you won't mind if I handle it, since I've always had a better rapport with their educators."
4. "Just a reminder — practices are at 4:30, not 5:00 like you told Emma last week. I know it's hard to keep all the details straight, so I'll take care of transportation from now on."
5. "Let's make this simple: the kids will spend the holiday with me. I can provide them with the kind of experience they deserve, without the chaos they've been exposed to in the past."

These communications rarely show overt hostility but consistently reinforce his superior role, creating subtle pressure for the children to view him as the more competent parent.

Communication Patterns with the Attorney/Custody Evaluator

Mr. A begins with flattery and statements of confidence in the attorney's/evaluator's skill.
Over time, his approval becomes conditional on full agreement with his strategic goals.
Meetings are often dominated by Mr. A's need to present himself as the "ideal parent," sometimes at the expense of discussing actual legal risks or the specific needs of his children.
He resists advice that challenges his control over the narrative, reframing or ignoring recommendations that require compromise.
Emails are long, evidence-heavy, and focused on defending his image.
If court outcomes do not match his expectations, he may imply—politely but clearly—that the attorney's lack of aggression or the custody evaluator's inadequate report was the problem.

Feelings the Attorney/Custody Evaluator May Experience During and After Interactions

- Feeling subtly "graded" or evaluated by the client
- Experiencing pressure to endorse strategies that lack legal or scientific merit
- Increasing frustration at repeated rehashing of the same points
- Worry about being the recipient of a Board Complaint and/or being undermined or replaced if not fully aligned with client's goals

Why These Feelings Matter

Clients like Mr. A can create a professional environment where the attorney/custody evaluator feels they must constantly prove competence.
The sense of being evaluated by the client and the pressure to align with the client's self-image is constant and consistent with the client's typical pattern in interpersonal relationships.

Hot Tips for Attorneys

- Frame advice as a strategic advantage rather than compromise.
- Document all recommendations and decisions in writing.
- Set clear communication boundaries.

- Avoid reinforcing self-image battles—stay fact-based.
- Summarize meetings in writing to prevent later reinterpretation.

DSM-5 Criteria and Symptom Mapping

DSM-5 Criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (must meet 5 or more):

1. Grandiose sense of self-importance – Present (self-presentation as "ideal parent").
2. Preoccupation with fantasies of success, power – Subtle (framing case as "victory").
3. Belief they are "special" – Present (implies unique parenting competence).
4. Requires excessive admiration – Present (seeks attorney validation).
5. Sense of entitlement – Present (custody as "non-negotiable").
6. Interpersonally exploitative – Subtle (uses attorney as image advocate).
7. Lacks empathy – Present (dismisses spouse's perspective).
8. Envious of others – Not directly evident.
9. Arrogant behaviors/attitudes – Present (patronizing spouse).

Discussion Notes: _____