Forced Relational Conditioning: A Three-Tier Framework

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Abstract

Within coercive families, attachment may gradually become organized around roles that preserve belonging and stabilize the family's governing order. Through repeated approval, withdrawal, and relational consequences, family members learn which perceptions, needs, relationships, and bodily limits they can express while maintaining connection. Forced Relational Conditioning (FRC) names the process through which these adaptations begin organizing selfhood and become increasingly coercive when a person moves beyond the assigned role. Drawing on attachment, family systems, coercive control, trauma, script, and role theories, FRC traces this process across three tiers. Tier One, Scripting, develops as attachment pressure and selective approval maintain role-bound participation. Tier Two, Enforcement, begins when family members impose coercive consequences intended to restore someone who has moved outside the assigned role. Tier Three, Catastrophic Script Collapse, emerges when those consequences can no longer restore the governing order and attempts to preserve it become acutely dangerous. The framework locates this family organization in four structural positions that family members might occupy: the Systems Architect, the Formless Center, the Tethered Child, and the Banished Child. These positions describe different functions within the system and the developmental adaptations formed around them. Clinical implications include tier-sensitive assessment, safety planning, and interventions that strengthen independent perception, bodily autonomy, and relational differentiation. FRC remains a provisional theoretical framework requiring empirical investigation.

Keywords: forced relational conditioning, coercive control, family systems, script theory, intimate partner violence

Public Significance Statement. Forced Relational Conditioning explains how some coercive families make belonging depend on performing assigned roles, punish family members who move beyond those roles, and may become dangerous when the established order can no longer be restored. The framework may help clinicians recognize escalating risk, strengthen

safety planning, and support people as they rebuild trust in their own perceptions, needs, and bodily limits.

Some coercive families remain stable because members learn to perform their assigned roles in accordance with the needs and expectations of the person with the greatest relational authority. Over time, each person comes to understand themselves through what the family will accept. When someone moves beyond the expected role, the family experiences that change as a threat to the order holding it together.

Forced Relational Conditioning examines how these adaptations become family structure. At first, performing the role preserves attachment. As the family grows dependent on that role, movement beyond it draws consequences. Danger increases when those consequences can no longer return the person to their expected place. The framework follows how relational authority shapes adult and child positions across this progression.

FRC distinguishes three tiers of relational organization. Tier One, Scripting, teaches the expectations that organize belonging and uses attachment pressure to maintain each member's assigned role. Tier Two, Enforcement, begins when the family uses coercive consequences to restore that role. Tier Three, Catastrophic Script Collapse, begins when those consequences fail and the family's internal order becomes the only authority that matters. Ordinary social rules lose their restraining force, and attempts to restore the assigned role become acutely dangerous.

The "governing script" is the family's internal set of rules. Within it, each person must perform an assigned role to remain accepted. The responses of the person with the most relational authority establish which rules prevail and what happens when someone breaks them.

The family occupies the center of FRC because it is where people first learn how relationships work. The Systems Architect sets the family's governing order and retains the most authority over its relationships. The Formless Center keeps the family functioning around that order and may use her own authority over the children to maintain it. The Tethered Child gains a dependable place by anticipating and meeting the Formless Center's needs. The Banished Child moves between acceptance and rejection and may become the person the family blames for its conflicts. Until they experience relationships that work differently, the way their household operates can feel like reality itself. The Systems Architect, Formless Center, Tethered Child, and Banished Child are named positions within this structure. The adaptations a person develops in one position may reappear in later family relationships. A person's position may also change as the distribution of authority changes.

The Systems Architect is referred to as he and the Formless Center as she because this is the gendered pattern most often documented in research on coercive control in intimate relationships (Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2007). People of any sex or gender may occupy either position.

FRC addresses families in which acceptance depends on remaining in an assigned role. When a family member moves beyond that role, the family pressures them to return to it. Danger may emerge when those consequences can no longer restore the governing order. Adjacent tiers may overlap during transition, and family members may occupy positions to different degrees. The framework remains provisional. Research must determine whether the proposed structures recur and can be identified reliably. It must also test whether FRC improves assessment beyond established models.

The Three-Tier Model

The three tiers are distinguished by how the family responds when a member moves beyond an assigned role.

Tier One: Scripting

Tier One is the earliest form of FRC-governed family functioning. In a new couple, it may appear as intense closeness. They spend nearly all their time together and remain on the phone when apart. Through repetition, constant contact becomes expected, and time apart begins to suggest that something is wrong. The pattern becomes part of the relationship's script before either person recognizes it as a rule or before they share a home or have children. In some couples, this early attachment becomes unusually concentrated. The relationship begins taking time and attention that previously belonged to work, family, friendships, routines, and independent interests. Talking throughout the day may feel desirable to both people, and missed obligations can be experienced as evidence of closeness rather than loss. As the couple becomes each other's primary source of attention and emotional regulation, constant availability begins to define what the relationship is supposed to feel like. Later efforts to return to ordinary separateness may therefore register as a change in the bond itself rather than as normal differentiation. Within FRC, this may help explain how mutual early intensity becomes the foundation for later expectations about availability, attention, and relational priority.

Children enter a family whose expectations are already in place. They learn their assigned roles by watching how the adults respond to what they do. Because their safety depends on these relationships, they begin adjusting before anyone corrects them directly. Over time, anticipated reactions guide what they acknowledge and express. Managing another person's state comes to feel like loyalty, and their sense of self begins to form around how well they can do it. Tier One can remain outwardly calm because each person is performing their assigned role exactly as expected. The family may feel loving and functional while the adaptations supporting its order remain unseen.

Tier Two: Enforcement

Tier Two begins when a person moves outside the assigned role or loses the capacity to continue performing it. The family then uses explicit consequences to pressure the person back into the role.

Gaslighting pressures the person to abandon their understanding of what they felt and what happened. They are expected to accept the family's account of what occurred and what it meant. If they continue to stand by their own perception, those family members may describe them as unstable or disloyal. Enforcement may also take the form of humiliation, surveillance, economic control, sexual coercion, or physical violence. These responses form an enforcement system while they continue to return the person to the assigned role (Dichter et al., 2018; Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2007). Because the person still depends on the relationship, they may experience the coercion as justified punishment for operating outside of their assigned role.

Tier Three: Catastrophic Script Collapse

Escalating threats or violence show that earlier consequences are losing their effect. Tier Three begins when repeated enforcement can no longer return a family member to the assigned role. The person enforcing the script experiences this failure as the collapse of the only order that feels real. They can neither restore the family member to the expected place nor accept that person living beyond it. Research on personality organization and shared distortions of reality addresses related processes (Lenzenweger et al., 2001; Srivastava & Borkar, 2010). Those studies do not directly test FRC's proposed progression from failed enforcement to Catastrophic Script Collapse.

Restoring the script then takes precedence over laws outside the home and the lives of family members. The perpetrator may risk legal consequences for themselves and lethal harm to others. At Catastrophic Script Collapse, they may act on a final rule: A family member who will not remain within the script cannot be permitted to live outside it. Immediate safety assessment is required because external consequences may no longer restrain the perpetrator's conduct.

Relationship to Existing Frameworks

Attachment theory provides the developmental starting point because early relationships teach children what to expect from the people they depend on for safety (Bowlby, 1969). Family systems theory shows how boundaries and relational triangles stabilize roles across family relationships. FRC brings these processes together when connection depends on performing a role the family accepts.

Coercive control theory explains how domination restricts autonomy through surveillance, intimidation, and control over daily life. Trauma theory explains why sustained threat can make appeasement feel like the safest available response (Bailey et al., 2023). FRC examines what happens when the family comes to depend on the child appeasing a caregiver. Over time, appeasement begins to shape the child's behavior and sense of self.

Script theory explains how earlier emotional experiences form patterns that shape later expectations and interpretations (Schank & Abelson, 1977; Tomkins, 1979). Role theory explains how expectations attached to a social position become part of identity (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). FRC extends these traditions by tracing how an adaptation first used to

preserve attachment becomes an assigned role within a governing script. FRC then examines how the family enforces that role and what happens when enforcement fails.

Developmental Formation and Structural Positions

A child can begin adapting to the family's relational rules before anyone states them directly. When a caregiver shifts unpredictably between threat and care, the child must remain close to the same person they fear. They begin watching for changes in tone or movement so they can respond before the caregiver's tension becomes explicit. If becoming quiet or helpful reduces danger or brings the caregiver back, the child learns to make that adjustment earlier. Through repetition, the response becomes anticipatory self-protection (Bailey et al., 2023).

In regulated families, connection remains secure as children express their needs and become more independent (Branje et al., 2021). Earlier adaptations can change as the child develops. When care is inconsistent, the child may learn that closeness depends on monitoring the caregiver and adjusting to shifts in mood or expectation (Ugarte & Hastings, 2024). Over time, the child's attention remains fixed on the caregiver, leaving fewer opportunities to recognize and organize their own experience. This can limit the development of a stable sense of self (Baroncelli et al., 2025).

Children build identity by recognizing their experiences as their own and connecting them over time (J. D. Campbell et al., 1996; Klimstra et al., 2010). This process continues through adolescence as identity becomes more coherent and stable. When a child must anticipate a caregiver's response, the expected reaction begins to determine which experiences the child can acknowledge. Anything likely to upset the caregiver may be suppressed before it is expressed or acted upon.

FRC calls this process Attachment Role Imprinting. The child notices which person receives the caregiver's attention and begins imitating how that person relates to the caregiver. If the imitation draws the caregiver closer, the child learns that this role preserves their connection. Leaving the role may then feel like losing the relationship. FRC extends Bowlby's account of proximity-seeking by proposing that children may pursue proximity through both physical closeness and the adoption of a relational role (Bowlby, 1969).

Children commonly experiment with relational roles as they develop (Mead, 1934). When adults retain responsibility for adult relationships, a child can imitate a valued role and later leave it while remaining connected to the caregiver (Minuchin, 1974). As children form other relationships, they find additional sources of attachment and recognition.

In an enmeshed family, ordinary companionship may deepen into an adult-like confidential role. The caregiver may share private adult concerns or rely on the child for comfort (Byng-Hall, 2002; Jurkovic, 1997). Meeting this need brings the child closer to the caregiver and relieves the caregiver's distress, giving both a reason to repeat the arrangement. As the caregiver becomes dependent on this support, the role becomes harder for the child to leave (Schorr & Goldner, 2023). FRC provisionally describes the family's continued dependence on the child's

role as arrested role differentiation.

The Banished Child develops when the child's place in the family repeatedly shifts between acceptance and rejection. The caregiver may draw the child close when the child regulates the caregiver's emotional state. Closeness may also return when association with the child elevates the caregiver's position within the family or society. When the child no longer serves the caregiver's immediate need, the caregiver withdraws. Because acceptance is unpredictable, the child may work harder to regain it (Ferster & Skinner, 1957). The child may pursue acceptance through achievement or compliance. They may also conceal needs that could invite further withdrawal. When the family places unresolved conflict onto this child, the child becomes the apparent source of problems arising within the wider system (Yahav & Sharlin, 2002). Protest can then be treated as further evidence that the child is the problem.

The Tethered Child receives a more dependable place in the family by remaining useful to the Formless Center. The child learns to anticipate her needs and calm her distress. When the child expresses a need of their own, the Formless Center may withdraw or show disapproval (Byng-Hall, 2002; Schorr & Goldner, 2023). The child learns to remain available before being asked. Because this role brings trust and a sense of importance, the relationship may feel loving to the child and appear loving to others. Caring for others becomes how the child stays connected and knows they are good.

In both positions, the child adapts to the person who decides when closeness is available (Callaghan et al., 2018; Katz, 2019). Attachment Role Imprinting may help explain how these childhood adaptations later shape adult family positions. In one proposed pathway, the Banished Child may later occupy the Systems Architect position. Controlling the family's order then protects him from being displaced again. In another, the Tethered Child may later occupy the Formless Center position. Remaining responsive to another person continues to secure her place in the relationship.

The pathways described here are possible adult outcomes, and each child's development can take many forms. Later relationships may give the child room to discover who they are beyond the assigned role. When later relationships recreate the original family conditions, the old adaptation may return in an adult role that shares some of the main features of the childhood role. Because the role once preserved closeness, performing it again can feel like love.

One proposed pathway from the Banished Child position into the Systems Architect position begins in a triangle among the Formless Center, her adult partner, and the child. When the adult relationship becomes unstable, the Formless Center draws the child into functions that belong to her partner. The child may take on responsibilities left within the adult relationship. His achievements may also become a source of status for her. In return, he receives closeness and the sense that he has become the person she values most. For a child accustomed to unstable acceptance, this position can feel intoxicating.

When the Formless Center turns back toward her adult partner, the child is pushed into a subordinate place. The Formless Center may blame the change on a minor offense. The child

then searches his own behavior for the mistake that cost him his closeness with her. The needs of the adult relationship govern the transition. He is drawn close when a vacancy opens and displaced when it closes.

The Formless Center creates an Oedipal rivalry by placing the child in competition with her adult partner for relational status and closeness, a pattern consistent with cross-generational coalition and boundary dissolution described in family systems literature (Kerig, 2005; Minuchin, 1974). She draws him into an adult-partner function when the adult bond weakens, then pushes him out when her partner returns. The child experiences the partner's return as proof that he has lost. He learns that the adult partner can leave and return with his place intact, while the child's place lasts only as long as he is needed. The child is wounded by being invited into a position the family will always take back.

Across repeated cycles, the child learns that being needed brings him close, but the adult partner's rank determines whose place remains secure. When he forms his own family, he may protect himself from that uncertainty by occupying the Adult-Partner Position and organizing the family around its permanence. His partner becomes the Formless Center, and other family members learn that closeness depends on preserving his place. The child who once waited outside the restored adult bond may later become the man whose return pushes someone else outside it. In this proposed pathway, the child who occupied the Banished Child position becomes the Systems Architect in his adult family.

The script he constructs in adulthood gives him the protected position he once watched the adult partner hold. He can withdraw while expecting the family to preserve his place. During his absence, others carry the responsibilities he leaves behind. When he returns, the family reorganizes around his needs.

When another family member develops a life beyond the role he assigned, he experiences the change as a threat to his hierarchical position. It returns him to the childhood experience of being displaced when the adult partner returned. He responds by increasing control over the family to restore the order that keeps him central.

One proposed pathway from the Tethered Child position toward the Formless Center may begin when a caregiver tries to reclaim her own childhood through her child. She treats the child as a peer, as though they are growing up together. She turns to the child for the protection she never received. She confides in the child about adult romantic problems and expects her to help solve them. When those problems remain unresolved, the child must comfort the caregiver for feeling unsupported. The child becomes the adult in the relationship before she has learned who she is. The child learns to hide any need that requires the caregiver to act as her parent, because the caregiver wants to remain her peer. In adulthood, she may try to reclaim through her own family the childhood she spent trying to restore for her caregiver.

Within this pathway, parentification and emotional spousification occur in the same relationship. Parentification requires the child to care for the caregiver. Emotional spousification makes her a confidante in the caregiver's adult romantic life (Byng-Hall, 2002;

Jurkovic, 1997). These demands may occur together or alternate from one moment to the next, teaching the child both roles. Her identity has little room to develop apart from the functions she performs (Stolorow & Lachmann, 1980). Research on parentification links these childhood demands with psychological distress in adulthood (Hooper et al., 2011).

The caregiver may have learned the same movement between roles in her own childhood. When she later becomes a partner and mother, both positions are available within her family. She may treat her child as a partner when she seeks intimacy, then reclaim parental authority when she needs to direct the relationship. Because both roles have preserved connection for her, moving between them feels familiar. The generational boundary follows her emotional state, requiring the child to move with it (Kerig, 2005). FRC proposes that this learned fluidity lays the foundation for the Formless Center.

That fluidity may also teach the child functions associated with both adult positions. Her place still depends on remaining responsive to the caregiver, but the caregiver's dependence may also require her to monitor the relationship, anticipate what will restore stability, and organize her behavior around making that happen. She learns both to adapt herself to another person's needs and to manage the conditions that keep the relationship intact. FRC proposes that this may help explain why the adult positions are structural rather than sex-based and why a person who develops toward the Formless Center position may later occupy the Systems Architect position when the distribution of authority changes.

The Systems Architect pathway contains a different limit. The boy may be recruited into the emotional and practical functions of an adult partner, while the romantic bond remains between adults. His access to that position lasts only until the adult bond resumes. When it does, he is banished from the position he had been invited to occupy. The Tethered Child learns to preserve her place by moving between roles. The Banished Child learns to seek the one role the family will always restore.

FRC proposes these as two possible developmental pathways. Children in either position may reach other adult outcomes. Adult assessment begins with the family's current organization and asks whose account and decisions ultimately govern the relationship. This distinction allows harmful conduct by either adult to be assessed alongside the authority that determines how far its consequences reach.

The discussion now turns from possible developmental pathways to how the adult positions operate within a family. It examines how the Systems Architect and Formless Center distribute responsibility, respond to each other, and draw children into the family's governing order. Within an adult partnership, the Systems Architect may withdraw from family responsibilities while retaining authority over the family. The Formless Center takes over what he leaves undone so the household and relationships continue to function. As this happens repeatedly, the family becomes increasingly dependent on her labor, while her competence conceals how much responsibility has shifted. When the burden exceeds what she can carry, she may pass part of it to the children and draw them into maintaining the family.

The Systems Architect's treatment of the children may change with the state of his relationship with the Formless Center. He may withdraw from the children as part of withdrawing from her. He may also draw a child close to hurt her, placing the Formless Center and the child in competition for his attention. Within that alliance, the child learns that closeness with him depends on moving away from her. If the child stops carrying his side of the conflict, he may withdraw the attention that established their special relationship.

The Formless Center may enter the relationship expecting both adults to contribute and honor their agreements. When negotiation fails, she may try to force accountability by monitoring him or drawing the children into the conflict. These actions can frighten and injure the people subjected to them. Their place within the family structure depends on how much authority she holds. Her conduct may be coercive even when the Systems Architect retains control over the resources and decisions that determine the family's future. Both the harm she causes and the limits of her authority require assessment.

Repeated instability can draw the Formless Center more deeply into the bond. When the Systems Architect withdraws, she looks for the change in herself that might bring him back. She may take on more responsibility or surrender a boundary. When he returns with warmth, the relief makes those sacrifices appear effective. She becomes increasingly invested in giving more of what has already depleted her (Stark, 2007). Alternating mistreatment and reconciliation can strengthen this attachment by pairing distress with the relief of his return (Dutton & Painter, 1981).

The pattern may deepen when the Systems Architect continues to rely on the Formless Center to maintain their shared life while directing sexual attention elsewhere (Bareket et al., 2018). She remains essential to the family but feels replaceable as his desired partner. The continuation of the marriage confirms that he can leave without losing his Adult-Partner Position. His return confirms that she has not been fully displaced, even though the betrayal remains unresolved.

Repeated return preserves both positions. The Systems Architect leaves from a place that remains available to him. In his absence, the Formless Center keeps the family functioning. When he returns, he resumes the central position while she manages the consequences of his absence. Over time, her personhood may narrow into the function of home, kept stable and ready for his return.

Progression Across Tiers

The following fictional family scenario illustrates one possible movement across the three tiers of Forced Relational Conditioning. The people and events are invented, and the sequence is not presented as universal or inevitable. Daniel occupies the Systems Architect position, Mara the Formless Center position, their sixteen-year-old daughter Sophie the Tethered Child position, and their fourteen-year-old daughter Jules the Banished Child position. These positions describe how the family organizes particular relationships; they are not diagnoses or fixed descriptions of character.

Tier One: Life Revolves Around One Person

Family members do not describe Daniel only as controlling. He is often warm, humorous, and attentive, and both children seek his approval. In this scenario, this affection is treated as genuine, but it is expressed through a model of love in which closeness also confirms his importance. The children's natural admiration provides a form of attachment he values, while disagreement is more difficult for him to sustain without experiencing it as rejection.

For several years, Daniel drove Jules to school. Jules described these rides as the time when her father understood her best. He shared her dry humor and recognized the seriousness that other family members called morose. During the same rides, he increasingly discussed his disappointment with Mara, portraying himself as overburdened and insufficiently appreciated. Jules received the disclosures as evidence of trust. Clinically, the bond contains real affection while also placing adult marital weight onto the child and making her closeness to Daniel partly dependent on carrying his account of Mara.

Jules occasionally observed Daniel meeting a woman he described as a friend. She later explains that she did not tell Mara because protecting the information also protected the relationship in which she felt especially understood. When Jules told Daniel privately that his involvement with the woman was wrong, he stopped driving her to school. He attributed it to work demands rather than to their disagreement. The lost rides functioned as a relational consequence without being named as one: Jules retained access to Daniel's attention while she accepted his side of the story but lost it after she challenged him.

Mara's relationship with Jules also carries the history of the marriage. Outside the home, colleagues experience Mara as capable and decisive, yet the range of action available to her within the family has narrowed over time. Mara recalled loving Jules's solemn temperament when she was young because it reminded her of qualities she loved in Daniel. As Daniel became more dismissive and avoidant, the same resemblance became harder for Mara to tolerate. Jules's quiet expression could now be read as withdrawal, and her skepticism as the contempt Mara experienced from Daniel. The child remained a mirror, but the meaning of the reflection changed.

This history is visible on an otherwise ordinary school morning. Daniel says that work prevents him from driving Jules, leaving Mara to change the schedule she had arranged around her own job. Sophie notices the disruption and begins preparing lunches and gathering what Jules needs for school. Jules objects that Daniel had made a commitment and that Mara should not have to absorb another change. Because Jules knows that the withdrawn ride followed her private challenge, her complaint names more than a scheduling problem. The rest of the family hears her tone before it considers what she knows.

By the time the children leave for school, the family has stopped discussing Daniel's withdrawal. Mara has absorbed the practical cost, Sophie has supplied the labor that allows the morning to continue, and Jules has become the person whose attitude requires attention. Tier One remains stable because each person's anticipation and accommodation still prevent the

conflict from becoming explicit.

The children’s lives outside the home show how this organization reaches beyond emotion. Sophie earns high grades, participates in cheer, and is trusted by adults. When teammates invite her to an unsupervised party, she declines even though she wants to attend. The decision protects more than parental approval; it preserves the bodily conduct, social associations, and public identity attached to being the child about whom no one must worry.

Jules spends time with peers whom adults often regard as conspicuous or difficult. Within that group, however, she experiences a form of belonging that exists on its own terms, apart from her family. Her friends notice when she has had a difficult morning and take her perceptions seriously. At home, the same relationships are treated as evidence that her judgment and character are deteriorating.

When Sophie later mentions declining the party, Mara expresses relief and Daniel praises her judgment. Their approval strengthens Sophie's place and confirms that the part she left out, that she wanted to go, is the part that has to stay hidden. Jules’s request to attend a performance involving her own friends is met with concern about the company she keeps. Daniel and Mara assign the children different moral meanings. They treat Sophie as evidence of the family’s virtue and Jules as the location of its disorder and shame. Preserving that contrast allows the adults to locate conflict in one child without disturbing the idealized family identity represented by the other.

The family’s organization at Tier One extends beyond whether daily interactions feel tense or affectionate. Daniel’s state influences schedules, labor, speech, appearance, friendships, bodily conduct, and the information each person can safely disclose. The whole person is organized in relation to the script, even though daily life may still appear orderly and affectionate.

Tier Two: The Pattern Is Defended

Several weeks later, Sophie accepts another invitation to an unsupervised party and tells her parents that the cheer team is meeting at a classmate’s house. She later describes enjoying the evening and feeling guilty for enjoying a version of herself that her family does not know. Her parents do not discover the lie. Sophie remains the dependable child because the conduct that complicates that position stays outside the family’s awareness.

Jules continues seeing the friends Daniel distrusts. When he again argues that a person’s company reveals their character, Jules answers, “What about the company you keep every morning with your girlfriend?” Daniel does not initially address the allegation. He turns to Mara and asks, “Are you going to let your daughter talk to me like that? Since you’ve gone back to work, your children run the roost. At least Sophie knows how to treat me.” Mara immediately slaps Jules.

By referring to Jules as “your daughter,” Daniel makes Mara responsible for restoring respect. He also treats her return to work as the source of household disorder and invokes Sophie as the standard for proper orientation toward him. Mara uses her own parental authority to restore

the hierarchy by slapping Jules. Within an FRC formulation, Mara may also direct at Jules some of the anger she cannot safely express toward Daniel because the child's face and tone increasingly remind her of his dismissiveness. These pressures help explain the violence without removing Mara's responsibility for committing it.

Jules then reports that she had seen Daniel with the woman during their school drives and that he stopped driving her after she challenged him. Mara's demand to see Daniel's phone moves the conflict into the adult relationship, where he first denies the affair and then resists her effort to verify his account. The eventual confirmation exposes a contradiction Mara had been living inside without naming it: she was carrying Daniel's parenting responsibilities while he violated an agreement he still expected her to honor.

Mara's response also causes harm. She reads portions of the messages in front of the children and throws Daniel's phone across the room. Her anger follows an actual betrayal, but public humiliation and the recruitment of the children move the conflict beyond accountability. Daniel and Mara are both attempting to make the other answer to shared rules, although their authority, resources, and capacity to impose consequences remain unequal.

When Mara says that she intends to leave, Daniel alternates apology with blame. He argues that her attention to work and the children led her to neglect the marriage. When neither explanation restores her participation, he blocks the doorway and takes her car keys, describing the restriction as necessary because she is too upset to drive. The language of concern conceals the practical consequence that Mara cannot leave without his permission.

Sophie returns from the party while the conflict is unfolding, and her parents do not discover where she has been. She begins calming Jules and urges Mara not to make a permanent decision that night. Her response reflects genuine fear for the family and returns her to the role through which she has secured closeness with her parents. Her undisclosed conduct may also increase her investment in restoring the family's prior arrangement because open conflict could expose the part of her life that contradicts the family's account.

During the following days, Daniel combines remorse with increasingly explicit control. He promises to end the affair, becomes unusually attentive, monitors the family accounts, and questions the children about Mara's plans. He warns that separation will destroy their financial security and asks Sophie to help Mara reconsider. Mara demands continuing evidence that the affair has ended and sometimes uses the children's anger to force Daniel to acknowledge the injury. Both adults act upon the other, but Daniel possesses greater control over movement, money, and the conditions under which separation can occur (Dichter et al., 2018; Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2007).

Tier Two is defined here by the point at which family members can no longer preserve the established positions through anticipation and accommodation alone, so they begin imposing direct consequences on one another. Jules will not withdraw what she knows, Mara will no longer absorb Daniel's violation without protest, and Daniel cannot recover the prior arrangement through expectation alone. The family still behaves as though sufficient

consequence, remorse, or renewed service might restore the former order.

Tier Three: The Pattern Can No Longer Be Maintained

The prior arrangement is not restored. Mara learns that Daniel has continued contact with the other woman and begins preparing to leave without further negotiation. She copies financial records, contacts a relative, and arranges a place where she and the children can stay. These steps give the separation witnesses and practical support outside the family.

Jules also carries her account beyond the home. After a friend describes Daniel's conduct as controlling, Jules reports to a school counselor that Mara slapped her and that Daniel prevented Mara from leaving. The outside description matters because it names the behavior without requiring the family's agreement. Sophie initially asks Jules to stop discussing the family, but later tells Mara that she can no longer be responsible for keeping the parents together. The children remain recognizable as themselves; what changes is their availability to the positions through which the family has regulated them.

Daniel first relies on methods that previously persuaded Mara to resume her participation. He apologizes, promises counseling, warns her that the children will blame her for destroying the family, and predicts that she will lose financial security and custody. As Mara continues preparing to leave, his statements shift from persuasion toward increasingly explicit threat. The escalation is clinically important because it shows that his earlier consequences are losing their effectiveness, rather than indicating a sudden change in Daniel's character.

Daniel discovers the packed belongings before the family departs. He positions himself between the family and the door, forces Mara back by the arm, and threatens to kill Mara and both children rather than allow them to leave. At this point the family's safety cannot depend on whether Sophie can calm him, whether Mara can reassure him, or whether Jules can make her account persuasive. The threat requires an external protective response.

Separation, threats to kill, physical violence, stalking, and increasing disregard for external consequence require urgent danger assessment (J. C. Campbell et al., 2003; Spencer & Stith, 2020). FRC may help a clinician understand the relational pathway into the escalation, but formulation cannot substitute for immediate safety planning or diminish individual responsibility for violence.

The children did not cause the collapse. Sophie's undisclosed party attendance and Jules's outside relationships show that their internal lives had already begun extending beyond the script. Jules exposed the adult violation, but the violation preceded her disclosure. The organization failed when Daniel's breach became visible, Mara stopped absorbing its consequences, and enforcement could no longer compel the family to resume its former positions.

Clinical Implications

People living inside FRC may enter treatment with anxiety, exhaustion, or physical signs of prolonged stress before they connect their distress to the family. When they describe harm, they may begin by explaining why the Systems Architect was upset. They may apologize, change details, or question their memory as they speak. These corrections show the clinician what the family has taught them they are allowed to know and say. The script becomes visible by asking what happens when they keep their own version of an event.

At Tier One, treatment helps the person see how the role was taught. The clinician traces the times when usefulness or emotional service brought the person closer to the family and what followed when the person needed something different. Once the pattern becomes clear, the person can begin making small choices before adjusting to the family's expected reaction. In family work, the adults practice remaining connected as the child becomes more independent. The Formless Center begins taking her emotional needs to other adults, freeing the Tethered Child from responsibility for managing them. The Banished Child receives continued connection while expressing need or disagreement. Progress appears as the children change and the family learns to change with them.

At Tier Two, the clinician follows what happens after a family member steps outside the assigned role. A series of incidents often reveals a pattern that each incident conceals when considered alone. A written record allows the person to see how different conflicts return to the same demand. Safety planning begins with the family's likely response to the next act of independence and identifies who has the power to carry it out (Stark, 2007). Conjoint treatment requires confidence that speaking openly in the session will remain safe after the family returns home.

When one consequence fails, pressure may come through another relationship. A parent may recruit a sibling to bring a child back into line, or a partner may use the children to punish the other adult. A dependable adult outside the family can help a child retain their account of what happened and observe how the family responds. Assessment follows the conduct of both adult positions. The Formless Center may hold less authority within the partnership while still using parental authority against a child. The Systems Architect's control over the family's money, movement, or future may give his enforcement a wider reach. Clinicians assess the harm each person causes alongside the power available to continue it.

Child sexual abuse requires its own assessment. If the Systems Architect sexually abuses a child, the Formless Center's response must be considered separately. Most nonoffending mothers believe their children's disclosures in whole or in part and provide some support or protection, although a substantial minority do not and protective responses may be inconsistent (Elliott & Carnes, 2001). In some families, the Formless Center protects the adult relationship she depends on. At Tier Two, she may deny the child's account or help the Systems Architect retain access to the child. These actions return the child to silence and allow the abuse to continue. The Systems Architect remains responsible for the sexual abuse. The Formless Center remains responsible for what she knew and what she did with that knowledge.

Tier Three begins when consequences can no longer restore the assigned role and the escalating family member experiences the collapse of the script as a catastrophe. The immediate task is safety. The clinician needs to know what the person has already done, how much access they retain, and whether outside law still functions as a limit. Separation deserves particular attention because the loss of access may intensify the effort to regain control. Threats, stalking, confinement, weapon access, and physical or sexual violence call for an urgent protective response (J. C. Campbell et al., 2003; Spencer & Stith, 2020). Insight-oriented or conjoint treatment may heighten danger by exposing resistance before protection is in place. Domestic violence advocacy, legal services, child protection, and emergency housing may need to be coordinated around the timing of disclosure or departure.

After immediate safety is secured, treatment helps the person understand why the assigned role once felt necessary. Family-systems work shows how the family distributed authority and placed responsibility for its stability onto particular members. Trauma-focused treatment addresses the vigilance and appeasement that once reduced danger (Bailey et al., 2023). Parts-based work can help the person approach these responses as protections developed within a needed relationship (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2019). Separation creates distance from enforcement. Safe relationships then show the person that their perceptions, needs, and limits can remain present within connection. Practical protection gives this learning enough stability to take hold.

Limits, Future Research, and Conclusion

FRC remains a provisional framework. Researchers will need clear measures for its tiers, structural positions, and proposed developmental processes. Studies should determine whether different clinicians identify these patterns consistently and whether the new terms add useful precision to existing concepts. The framework fits most clearly when one person’s account governs the family. Families in which authority shifts among several people may follow a different organization. The adult positions can organize a couple before children enter the family and can continue in couples who never have children. When children are present, the child positions describe how they may be drawn into that organization. Each term must earn its place by improving understanding or assessment.

Tier Differentiation

Research on tier differentiation should test whether trained raters assign the same tier to the same clinical or legal case. In Tier One, anticipation and accommodation still hold the assigned role in place. Movement into Tier Two occurs when the family begins using direct consequences to restore the role. Movement into Tier Three occurs when those consequences stop working and someone becomes willing to risk legal or lethal consequences to restore the script. The purpose and effectiveness of the consequence determine the tier. Behavioral severity requires its own measure. Longitudinal studies can then examine whether separation or outside support weakens enforcement and predicts movement into Tier Three.

Developmental Pathways

Developmental research can begin by asking whether children move toward the family positions that receive a caregiver's most reliable attention. When adults keep adult responsibilities within the adult relationship, the child may leave the borrowed position as they mature. Continued recruitment may make the role harder to release and contribute to arrested role differentiation. Studies can then test whether the form of recruitment predicts which adult position later feels familiar. Repeated elevation into an adult-partner function, followed by displacement when the adult bond resumes, may contribute to the Systems Architect pathway. Parentification and emotional spousification may contribute to the Formless Center pathway by teaching the child to secure connection through service.

Mechanism, Escalation, and Prevalence

Mechanism research should follow what happens to a person who performs an assigned role over time. Studies can examine whether the person continues to recognize their own preferences and act on them. They can also ask whether the person feels able to rest or decline a demand when tired, ill, or in pain, even when the family expects continued availability. Following these capacities as the person leaves the role may show how a stable sense of self develops beyond the family's script.

Estimating prevalence requires evidence of the family's organization. Structured interviews and longitudinal records can identify the assigned role, how the family tries to restore it, and the point at which those efforts stop working. Counts of abusive acts establish severity. Placing those acts within the family's sequence shows whether they follow the mechanism proposed by FRC. Comparison with established partner-violence typologies can then determine whether script collapse adds precision to coercive controlling violence (Johnson, 2006, 2008).

Research on escalation should ask whether dangerous behavior becomes more likely after enforcement has failed. Stalking, confinement, weapon access, and disregard for legal consequences may carry greater significance after separation or disclosure has made the family's prior consequences ineffective. Structured case comparisons can test whether failed enforcement improves prediction beyond existing danger-assessment frameworks.

Research should also examine whether the developmental period in which the response formed affects later escalation. A child who learns to respond to displacement before developing the capacity to regulate strong emotion, tolerate frustration, or understand another person's separate perspective may carry that same intensity into adulthood. When a similar displacement occurs later, the intensity of the earlier response may return even though the person now has an adult's ability and physical capacity to act upon it. Psychological Stretch Marks describes how responses formed when a demand exceeds available capacity may remain available for later activation (Sarkozy, 2026). Studies can test whether identifying when these responses formed, which capacities were available at the time, and how they appear during script collapse improves prediction of dangerous escalation and identifies more precise targets for treatment.

Intervention Research

Intervention research should evaluate whether care guided by FRC improves outcomes compared with established approaches. In families where joint treatment is safe and appropriate, does helping adults take back emotional responsibilities placed on children reduce role pressure and child distress more than an established family intervention? For people facing active enforcement, does assessing when consequences have stopped restoring an assigned role improve safety planning compared with usual assessment? For adults leaving an assigned role, does therapy focused on identifying the family's script and practicing independent decisions improve trust in their own perceptions and bodily autonomy more than an established individual treatment? These studies would test specific clinical actions and measure the changes that follow them.

Limitations

FRC has yet to be studied empirically as an integrated framework. Its proposed tiers, positions, and developmental pathways require direct testing. The theory's scope also needs clarification across family circumstances that may change how the proposed process unfolds. FRC may develop differently when a child has a dependable relationship outside the immediate family. That relationship offers another experience of closeness and may help the child see the family's way of relating as one possible arrangement. A community that repeats the family's hierarchy can deepen the script by making separation feel like moral and social exile. Temperament and neurodevelopment may shape which relational signals a person notices and how they respond to them. Future research should also test whether recognizing the script later in life changes how the person relates to the next generation. These conditions mark the limits of FRC and show where the framework may require refinement or another explanation.

Conclusion

Forced Relational Conditioning proposes that some families preserve their order by assigning each person a role and making connection depend on its performance. As the family becomes more dependent on those roles, movement outside them brings consequences meant to return the person to their place. Catastrophic Script Collapse begins when those consequences fail and a family member becomes willing to risk legal or lethal outcomes to restore the script. Research must now determine whether this sequence can be identified reliably and whether recognizing it helps clinicians intervene before the effort to restore the family becomes catastrophic.

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