

FIRST EDITION

Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis



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Parental Alienation Study Group, Inc.

**PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY:
OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS**

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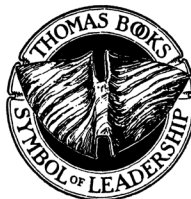
**PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY:
OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS**

By

PARENTAL ALIENATION STUDY GROUP, INC.

pasg

(With 16 Contributors)



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PRAISE FOR *PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY*: *OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS*

A clarifying and helpful book on all aspects of parental alienation. As a lawyer, therapist, high-conflict case consultant, and speaker to family law judges, I heartily recommend this book. While I see much or most alienating behavior as unconscious rather than an intentional “campaign” of denigration, I agree with the dynamics of alienation and the effect on the child that this book describes. This is an important field of knowledge for everyone involved in family law cases and should not be ignored or disparaged. This book acknowledges the need for family violence professionals and alienation professionals to understand and collaborate with each other on solving these resistance and refusal cases. Here is the essential information on alienation that should become part of the knowledge base of all family law professionals.

Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.
Author of *Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient
Children While Avoiding High-Conflict Divorce*

What a helpful tool for attorneys working in the family law field to understand the psychology, theory, and criticism of parental alienation. One of the big challenges in these cases is helping clients see the problem for what it is and educating the jurists to the damage that results and possible solutions. This synopsis puts so many resources at your fingertips. I wish I had this available when I had my first PA case almost 20 years ago. Very grateful for this and I cannot wait to pass it along to other practitioners.

Helen Sfikas Rogers, Senior Partner
Rogers, Shea & Spanos, PLLC
Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Congratulations to the Parental Alienation Study Group for producing a thorough, complete, and non-argumentative treatment of parental alienation theory. It was refreshing to read such a balanced and impeccably informed treatment of parental alienation in its social, psychological, legal, and medical contexts.

Ronald P. Rohner, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus and Director
Ronald and Nancy Rohner Center for the Study of
Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection
University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA

This is an important book. The Parental Alienation Study Group has collaborated to produce an authoritative and concise volume highlighting current understanding of what parental alienation is and is not. This book will help the various professionals who work in the area of difficult divorce to be able to identify this extremely damaging phenomenon, appreciate its complexity, and limit its impact on children and alienated parents.

John Sargent, M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics
Tufts University School of Medicine
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

This summary of current thinking on parental alienation is a uniquely valuable resource. It brings together a wide array of experts with different perspectives yet manages to present a coherent view of the relevant research on one of the more fraught areas of forensic science. It should be at the elbow of every family practitioner.

Christopher Slobogin, J.D., LL.M.
Milton Underwood Professor of Law
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

This book is a succinct, yet comprehensive, overview of parental alienation theory broadly conceived. Intended to be regularly updated in future editions, this volume offers a valuable foundation for understanding key concepts of parental alienation. As an easily accessible resource, it will benefit the general public, practitioners, and researchers by accelerating research and commentary in the field, promoting consensus, and contributing to the maturity of parental alienation scholarship.

Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D.

Author of *Divorce Poison: How to Protect Your Family from Bad-mouthing and Brainwashing*

WELCOME

From Nashville, Tennessee, USA

The author of this book is the Parental Alienation Study Group, Inc., a non-profit corporation that promotes research on all aspects of parental alienation and educates mental health and legal professionals and the public regarding this topic. Our members hope that *Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis* will accomplish two goals.

First, that practitioners, researchers, educators, and policymakers will find this summary of the principles of parental alienation theory to be helpful. This is a complex topic, and there is a need for a concise presentation of its most important components.

Second, that this book will become a platform for building a consensus among scholars who have an interest in this topic. We hope to reduce the polarization that damages this field of study by inviting readers to provide their suggestions and corrections, which will be incorporated into future editions. Interested individuals can submit their comments by following the link to “Contact Us” at our website, www.pasg.info.

William Bernet, M.D.

Former President, Parental Alienation Study Group

BIENVENIDO / WELCOME

From Buenos Aires, Argentina

Damos la bienvenida a esta nueva obra sobre el fenómeno de la alienación parental, la cual será de gran utilidad a nivel mundial. Los principales destinatarios de este importante libro son los niños, la humanidad en ascenso.

La alienación parental es una grave disfunción familiar que debe ser plenamente reconocida en todos los países del mundo. Ello permitirá su abordaje terapéutico oportuno, mediante un diagnóstico precoz realizado por profesionales competentes. Si esta problemática no se detecta a tiempo y alcanza un grado avanzado de gravedad, el niño corre el riesgo de perder su condición de sujeto de derecho, viendo anulada su voluntad al ser objeto de una instrumentalización perversa. Por ello, la labor de terapeutas y jueces debe estar orientada a garantizar, mediante una intervención rápida y eficaz, el cese del maltrato que padecen los niños cuando son víctimas de esta anomalía familiar. De lo contrario, enfrentarán una nueva forma de sufrimiento: el maltrato institucional derivado de los órganos judiciales.

* * * * *

We welcome this new work on the phenomenon of parental alienation, which will be of great value worldwide. The primary beneficiaries of this important book are children—the rising humanity.

Parental alienation is a severe family dysfunction that must be fully recognized in all countries across the globe. Such recognition will facilitate timely therapeutic interventions through early diagnosis conducted by competent professionals. If this issue is not detected in time and reaches an advanced stage of severity, the child risks losing their status as a subject of rights, with their will effectively annulled as they become an object of perverse instrumentalization. Therefore, the efforts of therapists and judges must be directed toward ensuring, through swift and effective intervention, the cessation of the abuse suffered by children who fall victim to this family anomaly. Otherwise, they will face a new form of suffering—institutional abuse resulting from judicial bodies.

Mauricio Luis Mizrahi, Doctor of Law and Social Science
Former National Judge of the Republic of Argentina

VELKOMMEN / WELCOME

From Copenhagen, Denmark

Folketinget i Danmark har vedtaget, at forældrefremmedgørelse skal have betydning i familieretlige sager fra den 1. januar 2025. Folketinget har hermed understreget, at forældrefremmedgørelse ikke er tilladt, og erklæret forældrefremmedgørelse er en realitet i samfundet. Kontaktbevarende samvær skal sikres for barnet inden for 4 uger i forhold til det bedste for barnet og samfundet.

Når 10-30 procent af alle børn, afhængig af hvilket land og hvilken kultur vi ser på, mister kontakt til en forælder, har vi en stor udfordring i samfundet. Den mistede kontakt kan skyldes flere årsager; manglende forældreansvar og kompetencer, helbred, misbrug, vold eller død, men en af de væsentlige årsager i dag er forældrefremmedgørelse ved skilsmisser. Dette er en realitet i samfundet.

Vi takker for denne vigtige bog og PASG-forskningen om forældrefremmedgørelse, som laves af forskere i mange lande, målrettet nationale og internationale lovreformer.

* * * * *

The Danish Parliament has decided that parental alienation shall have effect in all family court decisions starting January 2025. The Parliament has hereby clearly emphasized that parental alienation is not allowed, and stated parental alienation is a reality. Immediate contact shall be ensured for the child within four weeks in the best interests of the child, parents, and society.

When 10–30 percent of all children, depending on which country and culture we look at, are losing contact with a parent, we have a major challenge in society. The lost contact can be due to several reasons: lack of parental responsibility and skills, health, abuse, violence, or death, but one of the major reasons today is parental alienation during divorces. This is a reality in society.

We welcome this important book and PASG research on parental alienation by many people in many countries, targeting national and international law reforms.

Jesper Lohse, MBA

Strategic advisor for international organizations

G'DAY

From Adelaide, Australia

Firstly, let me say I was honoured to be invited to contribute to this important, potentially life-saving publication. Since being elected, I have worked diligently and earnestly to draw attention to parental alienation, but also to set about making change.

In an early speech to the South Australian Parliament in 2022, I outlined the three documented levels of alienation, their typical behaviours, and subsequent impacts. I have since called for an inquiry into this unwelcome—but extraordinarily under-publicised and too-often-ignored—phenomenon, and will continue my advocacy for as long as I remain in public office.

This book—*Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis*—provides a pathway to resolve this most trenchant issue for parents and children. It is essential to address this presentation by improving the education of this nation's family law and family violence professionals and the judiciary.

Parental alienation is a worldwide problem and no country, including Australia, is exempt. Unfortunately, One Nation still appears to be this nation's only prominent political party willing to shine some light on this issue.

Hon. Sarah Game, MLC
South Australia Legislative Council
Former veterinarian and teacher, mother of three children

FOREWORD

The scenario of a stridently angry child or an anxious, avoidant child—reciting unjustified or exaggerated convictions about, and refusing contact with, a parent—is one that resonates with the experience of family justice professionals across national borders. A 2023 survey of 1,200 legal and mental health professionals from the two leading family law organizations in North America found overwhelming agreement with the statement, “[Parental alienation] is a valid, multifactor construct with [parental alienating behaviors] a common occurrence that manifests across family structures. Furthermore, [parental alienating behaviors] and [parental alienation] were distinguished from other pernicious kinds of family dynamics and viewed as highly destructive within the family” (Pruett, Johnston, Saini, Sullivan, & Saini, 2023, p. 380).

The theoretical development of the understanding of any phenomenon must be differentiated from the validity and legitimacy of the phenomenon itself. This official synopsis of parental alienation (PA) theory by the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) demonstrates the impressive progress scholars have made in refining our understanding of the PA phenomenon. As can be seen by the ongoing controversies that exist regarding PA theory, it is still a work in progress. The development of theories about various forms of family violence (intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, and coercive and controlling coparenting behaviors) has been a process of arduous scholarly work. These activities have sometimes been collaborative and consensual and sometimes more controversial and adversarial, due to the strong advocacy pulls in the social, cultural, and legal context that surrounds families suffering from the impact of family violence. The controversies and lack of consensus that still exist about some aspects of parent–child contact problems (PCCPs)—regarding terminology, theory, and models of intervention—should not be used as a weapon to discredit the legitimacy of work on understanding and intervening with PCCPs, but as further motivation to advance our scholarship in this area.

The mission of the PASG is laudable and evident in publishing this official synopsis of PA theory: to create a platform to build more precision and

consensus among relevant professionals regarding PA theory. I highlight two ongoing, mutually reinforcing threats to all family law professionals in our efforts to support and protect the welfare of families and children and the encouraging responses to these threats provided in this synopsis.

Misinformation and Disinformation about Parental Alienation

There has been a proliferation of inaccurate and harmful information to parents and family law professionals about PA. Some contributions to this destructive impact on our field have been from (1) sources of easily accessed, unvetted information on the internet; (2) extreme advocacy groups who exploit misinformation to support their positions; (3) the “echo-chamber” phenomenon in which participants increasingly listen only to information that supports their already held views on an issue; and (4) the erosion of confidence in science in our “post-truth society.”

This synopsis provides an antidote to this issue by offering a concise, comprehensive summary of current information about PA grounded in the impressive accumulation of evidence from social science about this complex area of family law. It counters information on PA from sources that lack rigorous social science methodology and/or propagate advocacy positions without an evidence base.

Polarization of Advocacy Groups Addressing Parental Alienation

It is not surprising that “polarization” was the Merriam-Webster Word of the Year for 2024. Polarization is defined as “division into two sharply distinct opposites.” It is a destructive relationship dynamic that has become more prevalent particularly with complex, challenging issues, where advocacy groups adopting more extreme, adversarial positions can easily thrive. PA is such an issue.

One antidote to polarization in any context (socio-political, scholarly, in family courts, and within the family) is to support engagement in respectful and constructive conversations among groups that have different views. This synopsis highlights several initiatives, some supported by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), to create forums for professionals from different, often adversarial, viewpoints to engage in scholarly, constructive conversations about PA. This shift away from polarized engagement at the professional level is essential to helping children and families manage PA.

I encourage you to engage in your personal conversation with this synopsis, having these perspectives in mind.

Matthew J. Sullivan, Ph.D.

CONTRIBUTORS

The author of *Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis* is an organization, the Parental Alienation Study Group, Inc. (PASG). This is a large, international, nonprofit corporation consisting of mental health professionals, legal professionals, targeted parents and grandparents, adult children of alienation, and child and family advocates who are interested in the topic of parental alienation. PASG owns the copyright for this book; all royalties belong to PASG.

This book was written and edited by 16 contributing authors. The editors and authors are members or former members of the Board of Directors of PASG. Readers with comments, corrections, or suggestions may use the Contact Us link on the organization's website (www.pasg.info) or contact any individual listed below.

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Angel N. Acosta's work in the field of divorce and separation has inspired her continued pursuit of a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling at the University of Houston–Clear Lake. She has a commitment to making a lasting impact in the lives of those who need it most.

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Tessie Robins, an alienated parent, holds a master's of arts in leadership and an undergraduate degree in social work. Following a successful 30-year career in sales, she recently retired to focus on writing her upcoming book, *HOW?? Coping with Parental Alienation*.

Robert Samery, who came from authoritarian Eastern Europe after WWII, describes his life's work as combating injustice in various relationship areas. In 2004, he turned his attention toward protecting children from alienation by building several educational and advocacy organizations internationally, focusing on North America, while also building organizations combating gender inequality.

Matthew J. Sullivan, Ph.D., was the president of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) during 2019–2020. He is the co-founder of Overcoming Barriers, Inc., which has developed a variety of professional training programs to intervene in parent–child contact problems.

Michael P. Thomas is the president of Charles C Thomas, Publisher, Ltd. This company has published several important books regarding parental alienation.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health and legal literature regarding parental alienation theory is vast. The Parental Alienation Database—on our website, www.pasg.info—contains more than 1,000 journal articles, book chapters, and books. Many of the articles are peer-reviewed and authoritative; however, they generally focus on a very specific aspect of this very broad field of study. Some books on this topic are encyclopedic, almost overwhelming, and difficult to fully comprehend. There is a need for a succinct overview and explanation of parental alienation theory. This synopsis summarizes the key features of parental alienation theory and includes references to source material for readers who want more detailed information.

This book—*Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis*—is called “official” because it was (1) developed by leading clinical and legal writers in this field of study and (2) published on behalf of the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG), the foremost scholarly organization devoted to research on, interventions for, and education regarding parental alienation. No other organization of professionals or family advocates has undertaken this task. The organizations that have endorsed this project are listed at the end of the book. If a group of mental health or legal professionals wants to join us in creating a subsequent edition of this book, we welcome their collaboration.

What is a “theory”? In this document, we are using “theory” to mean a set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based. For example, “a theory of education” and “the theory of evolution.” Also, “theory” refers to a scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena. “Parental alienation theory” refers to a set of principles that explain the phenomenon of parental alienation.

The chapters in this book are divided into two parts. Part One consists of core concepts, the basic information about parental alienation theory that researchers and practitioners—both mental health and legal—need to know. Part Two addresses additional topics that many readers will find interesting and useful. This book has about 280 references. They are all located at the end of the book instead of after each chapter. The Top Twenty references—in

the opinion of the contributing authors—are indicated with an asterisk. The following abbreviations are used throughout the book:

- PA = parental alienation
- AB = alienating behavior
- PCCP = parent–child contact problem
- DV = domestic violence
- DSM = *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

Printed copies of this book can be purchased from the publisher and from typical booksellers. Also, the PDF of this book is available on our website (www.pasg.info) at no cost. Researchers and family advocates may want to translate this book into other languages. To make arrangements, contact Michael P. Thomas, President, Charles C Thomas, Publisher, Ltd., Springfield, Illinois, USA. Mr. Thomas may be reached at mthomas@ccthomas.com.

Readers of this book, who have an interest in parental alienation scholarship and advocacy, may want to join PASG. To do that, simply visit our website and click on the link for “Membership.” There are no dues or financial obligations in joining PASG.

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Welcomes</i>	viii
<i>Foreword by Matthew J. Sullivan, Ph.D.</i>	xiii
<i>Contributors</i>	xv
<i>Introduction</i>	xxi

Part One: Core Concepts

1. Definitions and Terminology	5
2. The Diagnosis of Parental Alienation	9
3. The Psychosocial Assessment of Contact Refusal.....	15
4. Levels of Severity of Parental Alienation	23
5. The Prevalence of Parental Alienation and Alienating Behaviors.....	30
6. The Prevention of Parental Alienation.....	35
7. Interventions for Parental Alienation.....	40
8. Limitations of Traditional Therapeutic Approaches	46
9. Alienated Parents, Grandparents, and Adult Alienated Children	54
10. Similar and Related Psychological Phenomena	59

Part Two: Clinical and Legal Considerations

11. A Brief History of Parental Alienation Theory.....	67
12. Qualitative Research Regarding Parental Alienation.....	73
13. Quantitative Research Regarding Parental Alienation	80
14. Parental Alienation and Domestic Violence	85
15. Parental Alienation and American Family Courts.....	92
16. The Recognition of Parental Alienation by Professional Organizations.....	101
17. International Aspects of Parental Alienation	109
18. Sociopolitical Perspectives Regarding Parental Alienation.....	119

19. Parental Alienation, DSM, and ICD 125

20. Misinformation Regarding Parental Alienation Theory 132

21. The Importance of Different Perspectives 139

References 145

Legal References..... 165

Affiliated Organizations..... 167

Index..... 179

**PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY:
OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS**

Part One

CORE CONCEPTS

Part One consists of core concepts, the basic information about parental alienation theory that researchers and practitioners—both mental health and legal—need to know. This part addresses definitions and terminology, diagnosis, assessment procedures, prevention of parental alienation, and interventions for alienation.

Chapter 1

DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Any discussion of parental alienation theory needs to be clear about definitions and terminology. Otherwise, there will be confusion among researchers and editorial chaos in journal articles and book chapters. The authors of this book agree on the following definitions of terms related to parental alienation theory.¹

Core Definitions

Parental alienation theory holds that some children who reject a parent do so because they have been manipulated by the favored parent to maintain false and distorted thoughts and feelings about the rejected parent. The principles of this theory pertain to the causes of parental alienation (PA), manifestations of PA, consequences of this condition for the child and their family members, prevalence of PA, prevention of and interventions for PA, sociopolitical perspectives, legal implications, similar and related psychological phenomena, and qualitative and quantitative research.

Parental alienation is a mental condition in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies strongly with one parent (the favored parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without a good reason. PA also refers to the impaired relationship between the child and the rejected parent.

Alienating behaviors (ABs) are the words and actions of the favored or alienating parent, which contribute to the child's rejection of a relationship with the alienated parent.

1. This chapter is based partly on Bernet (2020a).

The **alienating parent** is the parent who is indoctrinating or influencing the child to fear or shun the other parent. The alienating parent is sometimes called the loved parent, the favored parent, and the preferred parent.

The **alienated parent** is the parent the child rejects and/or refuses to visit or communicate with. The alienated parent is sometimes called the rejected parent, the hated parent, and the targeted parent.

The **alienated child** is the victim of ABs by the alienating parent, which influence the child to inappropriately reject the alienated parent.

The **Five-Factor Model**—also known as the Baker Five-Factor Model—is a systematic method for identifying and diagnosing PA in a child or a family. (For further discussion, see Chapters 2 and 13.)

Related Terms and Distinctions

“Alienated parent” vs. “targeted parent.” An alienated parent is not exactly the same as a targeted parent; it is possible to be targeted but not alienated. For example, Parent A might engage in many alienating behaviors, so Parent B would be considered a targeted parent. However, it is possible that Parent B still has a good relationship with their child, so Parent B has been targeted but is not alienated.

“Alienation” vs. “estrangement.” Estrangement refers to a child’s rejection of a parent for a good reason, such as a history of abuse, neglect, or severely deficient parenting. Alienation refers to a child’s rejection of a parent without a good reason, i.e., as a result of indoctrination by the favored parent. These distinctions—proposed by Kelly and Johnston (2001)—have become widely adopted terms of art by clinical and legal writers.

Parent-child contact problem (PCCP)—also called “contact refusal” and “resist/refuse dynamic”—refers to a child’s refusal to visit with or have a relationship with one or both parents. PCCP is a broad, general concept because it embraces all the different reasons why a child might manifest contact refusal.

PA vs. PCCP. PA is a particular mental condition in a child, manifested by a specific set of behavioral signs in the child and caused by specific, visible ABs of the favored parent. PCCP, on the other hand, is

a general term that includes not only PA but also other possible causes of contact refusal. (See Chapter 2 for further discussion of PCCP.)

Hybrid case refers to a case of PCCP that has multiple causes acting and interacting at the same time. Regarding prevalence, the proportion of PCCP cases that are predominantly PA, predominantly estrangement, hybrid, or some other family dynamic is not known.

Consensus Among Professionals

These definitions related to PA theory are widely accepted among mental health practitioners who conduct parenting plan evaluations and family law professionals. For example, a survey of child custody evaluators revealed a strong level of endorsement regarding terminology related to PA theory (Bernet, Baker, & Adkins, 2022). This includes definitions for terms such as “contact refusal,” “parental alienation,” “estrangement,” “alienating parent,” “alienated parent,” and the “Five-Factor Model” for the diagnosis of PA.

Bonus Information: Evolution of Terminology

The proliferation of fluctuating terminology related to PA theory has an interesting history. Over time, the phenomenon we call “parental alienation” has had many different names, listed below.

- Aligned children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976)
- Strong alignment (Johnston, Campbell, & Mayes, 1985)
- Brainwashing (Benedek & Schetky, 1985)
- Parental alienation syndrome (Gardner, 1985)
- Medea syndrome (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989)
- Not-based-on-actual-interaction (NBOAI) (Bricklin, 1995)
- Alienated child (Kelly & Johnston, 2001)
- Pathological alienation (Warshak, 2003)
- Parental alienation disorder (Bernet, Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010)
- Child affected by parental relationship distress (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016)

It is common for medical and psychological terms to evolve in this manner. For example, the following expressions regarding the condition

of ADHD all mean the same thing: “simple hyperexcitability,” “abnormal defect of moral control,” “hyperkinesis,” “hyperkinetic reactions of childhood,” “minimal brain dysfunction,” “attention-deficit disorder with and without hyperactivity,” and “attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.”

Chapter 2

THE DIAGNOSIS OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

It is important to have a consistent method for identifying and diagnosing parental alienation (PA). Uniformity is necessary in several contexts: in research so that results are reliable and reproducible; in clinical settings to implement appropriate interventions; and in legal proceedings to ensure decisions conform to relevant precedents.²

The Five-Factor Model for Diagnosing Parental Alienation

The *Five-Factor Model*—also known as the *Baker Five-Factor Model*—is a systematic method for identifying and diagnosing PA in a child or family. When a mental health professional is assessing a child with a parent–child contact problem (PCCP) and is considering PA in the differential diagnosis, the evaluator should determine whether the following five criteria are met.

Factor One: The Child’s Contact Resistance or Refusal

The child manifests contact resistance or refusal, avoiding a relationship with one of the parents. This factor is inherent in the definition of PA, which involves the child’s rejecting the targeted parent. There are several possible underlying causes of PCCP, and it is necessary to conduct an evaluation to determine whether the cause in a particular case is PA or some other issue within the child or the family.

2. This chapter is based partly on Bernet and Greenhill (2022).

Factor Two: Existence of a Prior Positive Relationship

This factor requires that the rejected parent was an involved and loving parent prior to the separation or divorce. Evaluators should investigate the family history to determine whether Factor Two is present. For example, there may be information from third parties (e.g., teachers, babysitters, family friends, therapists, clergy) who report that the now-rejected parent was involved in the child's life and that the parent and child had a healthy attachment to each other.

Factor Three: Absence of Abuse, Neglect, or Seriously Deficient Parenting

It is essential to determine whether the now-rejected parent engaged in the types of abusive or neglectful behaviors that would justify fear, hatred, and rejection by the child. This factor requires that the child's rejection of the targeted parent is far out of proportion to anything that parent has done to justify the rejection. The inquiry requires: a detailed history from the parents and the child (as appropriate) regarding possible domestic violence and child maltreatment; information from relatives and family friends; and a review of records from medical personnel, child protection agencies, and law enforcement.

Factor Four: Alienating Behaviors by the Favored Parent

For a child to be considered alienated, they must have been exposed to multiple alienating behaviors (ABs) by the favored parent. These behaviors can be observed in the actions and attitudes of the preferred parent, their written statements and social media posts, interviews of the parents, and reports from third parties. Hundreds of specific ABs have been identified (Harman & Matthewson, 2020).

Baker and Chambers (2011) developed the Baker Strategies Questionnaire by operationalizing a list of behaviors and iteratively piloting the list with community samples of adults who had experienced ABs as children. That process resulted in a list of 17 common ABs:

- Badmouthing the rejected parent
- Limiting the child's contact with the rejected parent
- Interfering with the child's communications with the rejected parent

- Limiting mention of the rejected parent
- Withholding approval when the child shows an interest in the rejected parent
- Telling the child that the rejected parent does not love them
- Allowing the child to choose between their parents
- Creating the impression that the rejected parent is dangerous
- Forcing the child to reject the other parent
- Confiding in the child about adult topics
- Asking the child to spy on the rejected parent
- Asking the child to keep secrets from the rejected parent
- Referring to the rejected parent by their first name
- Referring to a stepparent as “Mom” or “Dad”
- Withholding medical, social, or academic information from the rejected parent
- Changing the child’s name to remove association with the rejected parent
- Undermining the authority of the rejected parent

Factor Five: Behavioral Manifestations of Alienation

The child exhibits many of the eight behavioral manifestations of alienation, as described by Gardner (1992):

- Campaign of denigration, whereby the child repeats their list of criticisms of the rejected parent to counselors, evaluators, attorneys, and, ultimately, the judge
- Weak, frivolous, and absurd rationalizations for the child’s rejection of a parent
- Lack of ambivalence regarding both the favored parent and the rejected parent, i.e., the child considers one parent all good and the other parent all bad
- The “independent thinker” phenomenon, whereby the child strongly professes that the decision to cut off the rejected parent is theirs alone
- Absence of guilt about their rude, hurtful treatment of the rejected parent
- Reflexive support for the favored parent in parental conflict

- Presence of borrowed scenarios, i.e., making accusations about the rejected parent that utilize phrases and ideas adopted from the favored parent
- Rejection of the alienated parent's extended family

(For research regarding Factor 4 and Factor 5, see Chapter 13, "Quantitative Research Regarding Parental Alienation.")

Five-Factor Model vs. Four-Factor Model

The term "Five-Factor Model" for the assessment of PA was introduced several years ago in *Parental Alienation – Science and Law* (Lorandos & Bernet, 2020). The Five-Factor Model was not a new creation, since all the individual components of the model had a long history in PA literature. Baker, Burkhard, and Kelly (2012) had identified and written about a version of this model almost a decade earlier. Also, Baker (2020) published "Reliability and Validity of the Four-Factor Model of Parental Alienation." The Baker Five-Factor Model was a minor modification of the Baker Four-Factor Model.

Ownership of the Word "Diagnosis"

Some critics of PA theory have objected to our use of the word "diagnosis" when we refer to the clinical identification of PA. They say that we should not use "diagnosis" because PA is not included as a specific mental disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5-TR, American Psychiatric Association, 2023). This criticism of PA theory is unfounded for two reasons: (1) Several well-known and widely accepted mental conditions have never been included in the DSM, such as "psychopathy," "complex posttraumatic stress disorder," "battered woman syndrome," "sexual addiction," and "pathological lying." Clinicians and researchers commonly refer to these conditions as "diagnoses." (2) The DSM does not "own" the concept of diagnosing mental conditions. Other organizations have created their own systems of psychiatric nomenclature, including the National Institutes of Mental Health, which uses "Research Domain Criteria" (RDoC) instead of DSM diagnoses. The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (GAP), a large, influential organization, developed its own system of classification of mental conditions. And, of course, the World Health Organization uses the *International Classification of Diseases*.

Furthermore, federal courts in the U.S. have repeatedly held that witnesses can testify about diagnoses even if those terms are not in the DSM. In an important case regarding pedophilia, the U.S. Supreme Court stated the general principle, “Legal definitions . . . need not mirror those advanced by the medical profession” (*Kansas v. Hendricks*, p. 359). More specifically, in two cases involving the diagnosis of hebephilia, federal appellate courts held that “a mental disorder or defect need not necessarily be one so identified in the DSM in order to meet the statutory requirement [for testimony]” (*U.S. v. Carta*, p. 9; *U.S. v. Vandivere*, p. 23).

Alternative Diagnoses for Cases of Parental Alienation

Although the *actual words*, “parental alienation,” are not in the DSM-5-TR, the *concept* of PA is expressed in several official diagnoses. These diagnoses may be appropriate to use in cases of PA, depending on the details of the clinical presentation and the focus of the practitioner’s attention. For example:

Parent–child relational problem (PCRP) (Z62.820). The definition of this mental condition includes: “. . . negative attributions of the other’s intentions, hostility toward . . . the other, and unwarranted feelings of estrangement.” The diagnosis of PCRP would be appropriate if the focus of clinical attention is on the relationship between the alienated child and the rejected parent.

Child affected by parental relationship distress (CAPRD) (Z62.898). The definition of CAPRD includes “. . . negative effects of parental relationship discord (e.g., high levels of conflict, distress, or disparagement) on a child in the family. . . .” The diagnosis of CAPRD would be appropriate if the focus of clinical attention is on the mental condition of the alienated child (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016).

Child psychological abuse (T74.32X). The definition for this mental condition includes: “. . . harming/abandoning people or things that the child cares about.” The diagnosis of child psychological abuse can be given to the adult perpetrator of maltreatment or the child victim of maltreatment. This diagnosis would be appropriate if the focus of clinical attention is on the activities of an abusive, alienating parent (Kruk, 2018).

Delusional symptoms in the context of relationship with an individual with prominent delusions (F28). This is DSM-5-TR

terminology for the mental disorder that previously was called *folie à deux* and shared psychotic disorder. In severe cases of PA, the underlying explanation might be a delusional disorder in the favored parent. In such a case, it would be appropriate to diagnose the child with delusional symptoms in the context of relationship with an individual with prominent delusions (Tucker & Cornwell, 1977).

Factitious disorder imposed on another (F68.A). This is DSM-5-TR terminology for the mental disorder that previously was called factitious disorder by proxy. In some cases of PA, the alienating parent might falsify physical or psychological signs or symptoms to cause the child to appear ill, injured, or abused. In such a case, it would be appropriate to diagnose the perpetrator (not the child) with factitious disorder imposed on another.

Identity disturbance due to prolonged and intense coercive persuasion (F44.89). In some cases of parental alienation, the child who has been subjected to intense coercive persuasion (e.g., indoctrination, thought reform) may present with prolonged changes in, or conscious questioning of, their identity. In such a case, it would be appropriate to diagnose the child with identity disturbance due to prolonged and intense coercive persuasion.

Bonus Information: Exceptions to the Rule

Although it is usually required for all five components of the Five-Factor Model to be satisfied in order to identify or diagnose PA, there are exceptions. For example, Factor 2 might be absent if the favored parent took control of the child from their infancy, thus never allowing the rejected parent to form a healthy relationship with the child. Factor 3 might be absent if intimate partner violence took place many years ago and subsequently the parents enjoyed a mutually satisfying relationship. But at a later time, the favored parent resurrected that old history as evidence of domestic violence by the now-rejected parent.

Chapter 3

THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ASSESSMENT OF CONTACT REFUSAL

In explaining how to conduct an evaluation of most medical and psychosocial conditions, it is necessary to describe two distinct components of the assessment process: (1) determining the differential diagnosis of the condition under consideration and (2) implementing appropriate procedures and tests used during the evaluation. The *differential diagnosis*—a medical term that is also useful in psychology—refers to all the disorders or conditions that share the same signs and symptoms as those being evaluated. The *procedures and tests* refer to the step-by-step methods used by the evaluator to narrow down the list of possibilities and ultimately arrive at a specific diagnosis.³

Differential Diagnosis of Contact Refusal

Some children who are exposed to family conflict—especially children whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—ally closely with one parent and avoid having contact with or a relationship with the second parent. The child may be described as manifesting *contact refusal* toward the rejected parent. Contact refusal is a generic term that simply reflects the child’s manifest behavior of avoiding contact or a relationship with one of their parents; this term itself *does not* specify or imply the underlying reason for the child’s oppositional behavior. Contact refusal has also been described as a *resist/refuse dynamic* and *parent-child contact problem* (PCCP). These three terms all mean the same thing; they are generic terms that describe a child’s manifest behavior,

3. This chapter is based partly on Freeman (2020).

but they do not specify or imply the underlying reason for the child's behavior. Importantly, contact refusal is distinct from parental alienation (PA), which is just one possible cause of this behavior.

The differential diagnosis of contact refusal was discussed by the following:

- Kelly and Johnston (2001): a famous article about “the alienated child”
- Drozd and Olesen (2004): discussion of “the differential analysis of allegations of alienation”
- Bernet, Boch-Galhau, Baker, and Morrison (2010): a proposal that PA be included in DSM-5
- Cavedon and Magro (2010): a book by Italian psychologists with guidance on how to diagnose PA
- Freeman (2020): a primary source for this chapter
- Garber (2024): introduction of the “Ecological Model” for understanding PCCP

The differential diagnosis of contact refusal includes the following circumstances or mental conditions, although many other scenarios might be considered.

Normal Preferences

The most benign explanation for contact refusal is that the child is simply expressing a normal, understandable preference. When parents divorce, the child may express a desire to spend more time in the household of the parent who is preferred at that time and may try to avoid spending time with the other parent. That may occur because the less preferred parent has minor deficits in their parenting skills, for example, being less demonstrative in their affection, less nurturing, less energetic, or simply not particularly fun to be with. Successful co-parents navigate these preferences by encouraging the child to enjoy activities with both parents. They collaborate with each other in deciding whether to adjust the parenting time schedule to accommodate the child's preferences.

Loyalty Conflict

While divorcing parents may be angry and hostile toward each other, the child may attempt to retain affection and good feelings toward both

their mother and father. However, a child with a high level of divided loyalty may become uncomfortable, e.g., if one or both parents expect the child to support that parent's side in the daily and weekly disagreements that occur. A child who experiences significant loyalty conflict over a period of time is likely to develop emotional or behavioral symptoms such as sadness, worrying, somatic symptoms, and oppositionality. Prolonged loyalty conflict may prompt the child to devise a solution that removes them from the battleground between the parents. That is, the child may escape the ongoing conflict by gravitating to one side of the dispute and forming a strong alliance with that parent. That solution requires that the child reject the other parent, even though they previously enjoyed a loving, mutually satisfying relationship with that parent.

Worried or Depressed Child

Parental separation can be profoundly distressing. A child may become anxious or depressed. In a high-conflict divorce—when parents recruit their children for endless warfare—a child may develop a mental disorder that causes them to reject one of the parents. For example, when the parents separated, suppose the child was frightened and worried that more bad things might happen. After the departure and loss of the non-custodial parent, the child worried they might lose the custodial parent as well. Thus, the child resisted leaving that parent, had nightmares, and had severe anxiety when the custodial parent left them with a babysitter. In this scenario, severe separation anxiety may be the explanation for the child's contact refusal.

Stubborn Child

Many children feature a stubborn streak in their personalities. A child with oppositional tendencies may react poorly to the stresses that arise when their parents separate and divorce. The child may blame the noncustodial parent for messing up their life and refuse to see that parent. Rather than gracefully accommodate to the inconvenient, court-imposed schedule of transitioning between two households, the child may sullenly dig in their heels and refuse to participate in the parenting plan ordered by the court. Thus, the stubborn child may manifest the behavioral symptom of contact refusal.

Maltreated Child

In some divorced families, the child is abused, neglected, or disliked by one of the parents. In that case, it is understandable that a child would not want to spend time with or have a relationship with a parent who treated them badly. It is understandable that the child would protest loudly, be highly oppositional, and even threaten to run away if plans were made for them to visit an abusive parent. Most authors make a distinction between “estrangement” and “alienation.” *Estrangement* refers to a child’s rejection of a parent that is justified because of that parent’s history of maltreatment. On the other hand, *alienation* refers to a child’s rejection of a parent that is unjustified, typically under the influence of the favored parent.

Indoctrination

It is easy to see how an angry, spiteful, vengeful parent might purposefully brainwash or systematically indoctrinate a child against the other parent. For example, the indoctrinating parent might repeatedly emphasize their affection for the child and repeatedly comment on actual, perceived, or fabricated deficiencies in the other parent. Persistent, relentless criticism of the targeted parent may cause the child to develop PA and reject that parent.

Shared Delusional Disorder

The term *folie à deux* is the historical term for a syndrome in which two individuals with a close, long-lasting relationship share the same delusional belief. The current official term for this condition is “delusional symptoms in the context of relationship with an individual with prominent delusions” (American Psychiatric Association, 2022, p. 138). Severe cases of PA may resemble a shared delusional disorder. For example, Parent A may have paranoid delusions regarding Parent B and talk about them so much that their child adopts the same false beliefs about Parent B. Typically, separation from the delusional parent diminishes and eliminates the child’s delusional beliefs.

Procedures and Tests to Assess Contact Refusal

Judges, attorneys, and guardians ad litem in family court sometimes refer families to mental health professionals (MHP) because a child is manifesting contact refusal or PCCP. The MHP's general plan should be to conduct an assessment in such a way as to determine if contact refusal is occurring and, if that is the case, identify the most likely cause or causes. A typical assessment of contact refusal proceeds through the following steps.

Clarify the Reason or Reasons for Referral

Sometimes the reason for the referral is obvious, especially if it was already specified by the court or other referral source. But sometimes, there are several presenting behaviors that must be considered together, such as "My daughter has gotten very rebellious and cussed out her teacher in the sixth grade," "I'm divorced. My daughter refuses to eat dinner with my new wife and me," and "My daughter has stomach aches and nausea every time she comes to our house." The examiner will need to ask each parent about the time they spend with the child and how the child behaves during the transition period between the two homes. Learning about contact refusal is not always straightforward. One parent may attempt to cover up the contact refusal, or the child may give inaccurate details about the situation.

It is important to emphasize that PA is one of several possible causes for a child's contact refusal. As discussed previously in this chapter, there is a broad range of explanations for the generic behavior of contact refusal or PCCP. Thus, it is almost always inappropriate for a court to order a family to have an evaluation with a MHP specifically "for the purpose of identifying the presence or absence of parental alienation." An appropriate court order may require a family to see the MHP because the child may be manifesting contact refusal or a PCCP.

Develop a Differential Diagnosis

As a starting point, the evaluator should keep in mind the different possibilities for the child's problematic behavior or mental condition. Some of these possibilities are reasonable and normal, while others are pathological. If the presenting problem is contact refusal, the initial

differential diagnosis includes all the conditions discussed in the first part of this chapter and perhaps additional plausible explanations.

Narrow Down the Differential to a Short List of Possibilities

Usually, this step occurs during the MHP's interviews with the parents and the child. During these interviews, the MHP develops a complete account of the child's presenting problem and also collects information about the child's relationships with each parent and other family members, the child's experiences at school and with peers, the developmental history, and medical information. That is the standard historical information the MHP is likely to collect during the initial assessment of any new client or patient. During this step of the evaluation process, the MHP can rule out the less likely causes of the child's contact refusal after considering and testing various possibilities.

In this step of the evaluation process, the MHP collects information in several ways. The evaluator meets with each parent individually, typically for several hours. The evaluator meets with the child at least twice, i.e., since each parent separately brings the child to the office of the MHP. During those appointments, the MHP will also have joint meetings involving the child with each parent. The MHP may arrange to make home visits to each parent's household. Also, the MHP collects collateral information from other individuals (such as stepparents, grandparents, pediatricians, teachers, etc.) and records (such as medical records and material from law enforcement and child protection agencies).

Identify a Specific Cause for the Presenting Problem

During the latter part of the evaluation, the investigation may become very specialized as the MHP tries to confirm whether a particular mental condition or family circumstance is or is not the cause of the child's problematic behavior. For example, if the MHP strongly suspects that the child's contact refusal is driven by separation anxiety, the evaluator may decide to utilize a standardized psychological test such as the child version of the Child Behavioral Checklist. If the MHP strongly suspects that the child is experiencing shared delusional disorder, the evaluator may seek permission to talk with the parent's own mental health provider.

Consider Psychological Testing

In addition to interviews and collecting information from a variety of sources, the administration of psychological tests and screening tools may be useful in complex cases. The following psychological tests are discussed more completely in Freeman (2020):

- Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI)
- Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)
- Bricklin Perceptual Scales (BPS) and Perception-of-Relationships Test (PORT)
- Baker Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ)
- Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS)
- Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ)
- Bene–Anthony Family Relations Test (BAFRT)

Apply Diagnostic Criteria for Specific Conditions

The evaluation process should narrow the differential considerations down to one or two possibilities. The MHP should apply standard diagnostic criteria to determine which underlying cause (or combination of causes) applies to the family being studied. If the evaluator thinks that the underlying cause of the child's contact refusal is PA, they should be able to confirm the diagnosis with the Baker Five-Factor Model, which requires: (1) the child avoids or refuses a relationship with a parent; (2) prior positive relationship with the now rejected parent; (3) absence of abuse or neglect or serious deficient parenting by the now rejected parent; (4) use of multiple alienating behaviors on the part of the preferred parent; (5) exhibition by the child of many or all of the eight behavioral manifestations of PA. (For more information, see Chapter 2 of this book and Freeman, 2020.)

Bonus Information: Alienation and Estrangement Together

Human behavior is complex, and often there are multiple underlying causes of a person's actions. If a child or adolescent is manifesting contact refusal, there may be two or more underlying processes that

prompted the behavior to occur. For example, separation anxiety and parental indoctrination might occur together and reinforce each other. Suppose a parent has generalized anxiety disorder, so they tend to catastrophize and worry endlessly when their daughter has time with the other parent. The anxious parent gives the child multiple admonitions and instructions, such as “I’m going to worry myself to death until you return home” and “If you have a bad dream tonight, call me on my cell phone.” The child may adopt the parent’s worries and generate their own system of worries. In the end, the child’s contact refusal is a result of an internal process (separation anxiety disorder) and an external process (indoctrination by their anxious parent).

Also, it is possible for estrangement (due to family violence) and PA (from parental indoctrination) to occur together. Suppose that Parent A—under the influence of alcohol—was physically abusive to the child on one or two occasions. Then, Parent A made a commitment to abstain from alcohol and became an attentive, nurturing parent. However, Parent B made a very big deal of the past abuse incidents and indoctrinated the child against Parent A. Since the child’s rejection of Parent A is far out of proportion to anything that parent had done, the child is manifesting PA. This combination of estrangement and PA is sometimes referred to as a hybrid case (Friedlander and Walters, 2010).

Chapter 4

LEVELS OF SEVERITY OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

Parental alienation (PA) is a complex phenomenon that encompasses varying levels of severity rather than existing in a binary mode. Most psychiatric and medical conditions, including PA, are characterized by degrees, such as mild, moderate, and severe. Established psychiatric conditions—such as schizophrenia, major depressive disorder, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder—include criteria for mild, moderate, and severe levels of severity.⁴

Understanding the levels of severity is beneficial for several reasons:

- Levels of severity accurately reflect the reality that most psychiatric conditions occur on a continuum and cannot be classified simply as present and not present.
- They provide flexibility in applying diagnoses, since a given mental disorder or condition may have various appearances depending on specific circumstances.
- In many cases, the levels of severity guide practitioners regarding the most appropriate interventions for affected individuals. That is true for parental alienation (PA), since the recommended intervention usually depends on whether it is a case of mild, moderate, or severe PA. (See Chapter 7 regarding interventions for PA.)

The Continuum from Normality to Parental Alienation

The most important features of PA involve one parent's badmouthing and denigrating the other parent and the painful dilemma for children

4. This chapter is based partly on Bernet and Alvarez (2025).

caught between battling parents. Although both of these characteristics are very prominent in cases of PA, they also occur in other family scenarios. It is possible to construct a continuum of family dynamics that includes the following incremental milestones: normal family relations, parental denigration, loyalty conflict, mild PA, moderate PA, severe PA, and extreme PA. Extreme PA involves the death of a family member. The seven steps reflect increasing “doses” of parental denigration and other alienating behaviors (ABs). The early steps of denigration and loyalty conflict do not constitute PA per se but in some cases are precursors to its onset. As the levels of denigration and ABs escalate, more severe behavioral indicators of PA may be observed in children. This process may also be characterized as increasing levels of coercive control by the alienating parent (Harman & Kruk, 2022).

Normal Families

In typical, loving, and intact families, children generally maintain a positive perception of both parents. The mother and father show respect for one another and support the children’s relationships with both parents. Of course, these multiple relationships among family members are not exactly equal. Although children may share specific interests (e.g., music, mathematics, football) with one parent and consequently spend more leisure time with that individual, that does not imply rejection of the relationship with the parent with whom they have fewer common interests. This pattern of mutual respect and healthy relationships among all family members also occurs in many separated and divorced families.

Parental Denigration

Parental denigration refers to problematic interactions between married, separated, and divorced parents. In this context, Parent A engages in occasional badmouthing of Parent B. From the point of view of the child, typical examples of badmouthing are: “This parent said bad things about my other parent in front of me,” and “This parent made me feel guilty if I enjoyed time with my other parent.” This type of denigration tends to occur sporadically in the context of a low level of parental conflict.

Rowen and Emery (2014, 2018, 2019) published several research studies regarding parental denigration based on questionnaires administered to college students. The authors drew an unexpected conclusion in their research when they reported that the young adults who experienced parental denigration tended to have a closer relationship with the denigrated parent than with the denigrating parent. These results are the opposite of what occurs in cases in PA, where children ally with the denigrating or alienating parent and reject a relationship with the denigrated parent. Rowen and Emery incorrectly concluded, however, that their data challenged PA theory, saying, “Perhaps most important, no support was found for the alienation hypothesis among mothers or fathers, married or divorced families. . .” (Rowen & Emery, 2019, p. 13). Their conclusions were fundamentally flawed because they conflated mild, infrequent levels of denigration found in their surveys of college students with the incessant, intense, and pervasive denigration that occurs in severe PA.

Loyalty Conflicts

Loyalty conflicts occur when parents attempt to enlist children’s support and affection in opposition to the other parent. Generally, when children are caught in the battleground between their mother and father, they initially attempt to maintain positive relationships with both parents. This is likely to create an uncomfortable state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). Children with a severe loyalty conflict often say to themselves: “I’m unhappy when I’m with Dad because I miss Mom,” and “I’m unhappy when I’m with Mom because I miss Dad.”

Mild Parental Alienation

Mild PA refers to cases where children say they do not want to visit the targeted parent, but when they do have parenting time with that person, they are generally fine. These children appear to have a satisfactory relationship with both parents as long as they interact with only one parent at a time. The behavior of children experiencing loyalty conflicts and mild parental alienation may be similar in that both may be uncomfortable transitioning from the home of one parent to the home of the other. However, children with a loyalty conflict try to have

good feelings about both parents, whereas children with mild PA have already started to ally with Parent A and reject Parent B.

Moderate Parental Alienation

Moderate PA refers to situations where children say they do not want to visit the rejected parent but are required to have parenting time with that person anyway. During their time together, moderately alienated children tend to be oppositional and negative. However, there may be brief episodes when they are pleasant and enjoy time with the targeted parent. The progression from loyalty conflict to mild PA and then to moderate PA was described long ago by a German child psychiatrist, Gunther Klosinski (1993), who said that when children are caught in loyalty conflicts and can no longer bear the feelings of guilt, “A frequently observed defensive reaction of the child is a sudden and exaggerated taking of sides with one parent and turning against the other: resorting to unrealistic black and white, good and bad dichotomous thinking” (p. 561). These children resolve the extreme cognitive dissonance created by the loyalty conflict by abandoning efforts to please both parents. They solve the dilemma by gravitating to the favored parent and rejecting the alienated parent.

Severe Parental Alienation

Severe PA refers to cases in which children adamantly assert that they do not want to visit or have a relationship with the rejected parent. They may refuse to visit or have any relationship with that parent for months or years. Severely alienated children employ the psychological mechanism of splitting, perceiving one parent as totally good and the other parent as totally evil. Some severely alienated children do have parenting time with the rejected parent—e.g., in response to a court order—but during that time, they tend to be persistently oppositional and negativistic. For example, they may isolate themselves in their bedroom throughout the entire parenting time, continually communicating with the favored parent through text messages and phone calls.

Extreme Parental Alienation

Extreme PA refers to the rare circumstance in which one or more members of the alienation triad are killed. According to Korosi,

Bernet, Graham, and Ross (2023), potential scenarios may include: “an alienated child killing their alienated parent; an alienating parent killing the child and then themselves; an alienated child or alienated parent becoming so hopeless and frustrated that they kill themselves” (p. 117). Of course, when severely alienated children die from suicide, PA theorists have no way of knowing the specific thoughts of those children at that time. However, it is inferred that the children become so depressed, angry, confused, and frustrated that they are no longer able to engage in extreme splitting as a way to deal with the conflict between their parents. Instead of aligning with Parent A and rejecting Parent B, they give up on both parents and perceive a lack of meaningful support from anyone.

Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire

The definitions and distinctions among the seven steps of the continuum described in this chapter are descriptive or qualitative, rather than quantitative. However, a psychological instrument—the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ)—has been helpful in distinguishing some of the steps of the continuum in an objective, quantitative manner (Rohner, 2005; Rohner & Ali, 2025). The child PARQ is a self-report questionnaire administered to children and adolescents. The PARQ is useful in identifying an alienated child’s “lack of ambivalence” or the psychological mechanism of “splitting,” which is a key behavioral indicator of PA in a child. Splitting is manifested when the child’s PARQ score for one parent is extremely low (indicating a very positive perception of that parent, the favored parent) and the PARQ score for the other parent is extremely high (indicating a very negative perception of the rejected parent).

Children in normal, intact families manifest no splitting on their PARQ scores. However, alienated children have been found to have significant changes from the normal range on the PARQ. Alvarez and Turner (2023) found that mildly alienated children had low PARQ scores for the favored parent and normal scores for the targeted parent, indicating the child’s positive perception of the favored parent. They found that moderately alienated children had low scores for the favored parent and high scores for the targeted parent, consistent with considerably more rejection than acceptance of the alienated parent. Rather dramatically, Bernet, Gregory, Reay, and Rohner (2018, p. 780)

found that in cases of severe PA, the mean PARQ scores for the favored or alienating parents were extremely low and the mean PARQ scores for the rejected parents were extremely high. These results were consistent with PA theory, i.e., an extreme level of splitting in severely alienated children.

Severity of Alienating Behaviors

Most of this chapter pertains to the levels of severity of PA, i.e., the behavioral signs observed in alienated children. It is also possible to characterize the levels of severity of ABs, i.e., the activities of the favored parent to turn the child against the targeted parent. We generally follow the terminology of Darnall (2010, pp. 7–9), who said the activities and attitudes of the alienating parent could be “naïve,” “active,” or “obsessed.” Thus, ABs may be classified as the following:

- **Mild ABs:** Naïve alienators make negative comments about the other parent but without serious intent to undermine the child’s relationship with that parent.
- **Moderate ABs:** Active alienators intentionally criticize and undermine the targeted parent, and they realize that what they are doing is wrong and potentially harmful to the child.
- **Severe ABs:** Obsessed alienators are determined to destroy the child’s relationship with the targeted parent. They persistently pressure the child to adopt their own negative views of the other parent.

Discussion

The denigration-to-alienation continuum discussed here differs from the “continuum of child-parent relationships after separation and divorce” described by Kelly and Johnston (2001, p. 251). The Kelly and Johnston continuum consists of the various relationships children might experience with their parents after separation and divorce. Those authors emphasized several psychosocial processes that cause this diversity of parent–child relationships. In contrast, the continuum of denigration to alienation described in this chapter illustrates the psychological processes children might undergo as they encounter

increasing levels of indoctrination and coercive control from one or both parents.

There is a dose–response relationship as cases progress from loyalty conflict to mild, moderate, and finally to severe levels of PA. A dose–response relationship means that the magnitude of an individual’s response is a function of the level of their exposure to a stimulus or stressor. As children on the continuum are exposed to increasing levels of parental coercion and indoctrination, the resulting dose–response effect is reflected in their behaviors and PARQ scores. This dose–response effect helps demonstrate that the expression of PA in children is the outcome of continuing and increasingly pathological interactions between the alienating parent and the child. Research reported in this chapter supports the value of using the PARQ as one component of a comprehensive child custody evaluation. Although the PARQ alone does not diagnose PA, it effectively contributes to a comprehensive evaluation that explores children’s perceptions of the parent–child relationship.

Chapter 5

THE PREVALENCE OF PARENTAL ALIENATION AND ALIENATING BEHAVIORS

Accurately measuring the frequency of parental alienation is critical to understanding the scope and potential impact of this issue, as well as informing interventions in family court, mental health, and child welfare contexts. Indeed, reliable measurement is essential for influencing policy and judicial decision-making and ensuring that both children and parents receive appropriate support, safeguarding the child’s right to a healthy relationship with both parents whenever possible.

Parental Alienation vs. Alienating Behaviors

A fundamental challenge in the study and measurement of parental alienation lies in the frequent conflation of alienating behaviors as a *process* and alienation as an *outcome* (Hine, 2024). This conceptual blurring has resulted in varying prevalence estimates and theoretical inconsistencies. To provide clarity, it is crucial to distinguish between *parental alienation* (PA) and parental *alienating behaviors* (ABs). PA is best understood as an outcome of persistent ABs—the condition in which a child becomes unjustifiably resistant or hostile toward one parent (the targeted parent) due to the psychological influence of the other parent (the alienating parent). This outcome is often characterized by a strong alignment with the alienating parent and a disproportionate rejection of the targeted parent, absent legitimate justification. For instance, Harman, Bernet, and Harman (2019) defined PA as “a psychological condition in which a child allies himself or herself strongly with an alienating (or preferred)

parent and rejects a relationship with the alienated (or targeted) parent without legitimate justification” (p. 212).

Confusion of Definitions

However, some previous writers have used PA to identify what we call ABs. For example, Darnall (2010) provided this definition of PA: “A parent’s purposeful campaign of vilification characterized by anger, resistant and inconsistent compliance with court orders, conscious or unconscious denigration of the child’s other parent. . .” (pp. 6–7). Also, Darnall used “parental alienation syndrome” to identify what we call “parental alienation.” McCarten (2022) described PA as “a situation whereby one parent has a negative influence on a child’s relationship with the other parent and makes a deliberate effort to intervene and prevent the relationship from developing, continuing, or improving” (p. 2). Similarly, Haines, Matthewson, and Turnbull (2020) defined PA as “the process where a child’s relationship with one parent (the targeted parent) is negatively influenced by the actions of the other parent (the alienating parent)” (p. 3). These authors are in fact speaking about parental ABs and are referring to the process—the specific actions and strategies employed by a parent to disrupt or undermine the child’s relationship with the other parent. These behaviors can include denigrating the other parent, restricting contact, or manipulating the child’s perceptions through coercive tactics. This is why Rowlands (2019) more specifically differentiated between PA as the outcome and ABs as “activities that contribute to the child’s rejection of the alienated parent” (p. 317).

This distinction is crucial when considering prevalence estimates and conceptual clarity in PA research. The broader estimates often capture the presence of ABs, while lower estimates focus specifically on cases where ABs result in a fully alienated child. Throughout this book, we adhere to the following definitions:

- Parental alienation (PA): The outcome where a child unjustifiably rejects a parent due to ABs.
- Parental alienating behaviors (ABs): The words and actions used by a parent that can lead to the outcome of PA.

By maintaining this distinction, we aim to provide a clearer framework for discussing the prevalence and impact of both ABs and PA.

Prevalence of Alienating Behaviors

Efforts to measure the prevalence of parental ABs have yielded varying estimates due to differences in sample populations and methodological approaches. While earlier research demonstrated a high frequency of such behaviors, recent studies have provided a more nuanced understanding by distinguishing between ABs as a process and PA as an outcome.

Clawar and Rivlin's *Children Held Hostage* (1991) reported that elements of parental programming and brainwashing, aimed at implanting false and negative perceptions about the other parent, were present in 86% of the 700 children of high-conflict divorce cases they reviewed. Their breakdown revealed frequent use of ABs: 23% more than once a day; 22% about once a day; 12% more than once per week; etc. These findings were later supported in a larger follow-up study with 1000 children (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013). Similarly, Johnston and Campbell (1988) found ABs present in 40% of cases involving parental conflict. More recent studies, such as Campbell and Lorandos (2001/2020), have reported rates of ABs between 12%–43%, with nearly all custody evaluators indicating they had encountered these behaviors. However, these findings often relied on clinical samples, which are likely to over-represent high-conflict cases. Such clinical samples, while important, may not reflect broader population-level patterns.

To address the challenges of measuring the prevalence of parental ABs across diverse populations, recent research has begun to explore general population data rather than relying solely on clinical or legal samples. Harman, Leder-Elder, and Biringen (2016) conducted a large-scale, representative poll in North Carolina, which found that 13.4% of all parents (married, separated, divorced) had been exposed to ABs. A follow-up study expanded this work using nationally representative online panels from the U.S. and Canada, revealing that 35.5% (U.S.) and 32% (Canada) of separated or divorced parents reported experienced ABs (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2019). In the U.K., Hine, Harman, Leder-Elder, and Bates (in press) conducted a similar representative study of 1,005 separated or divorced parents, where between 39% and 59% of participants reported being subjected to ABs, with 36.5% identified as non-reciprocal targeted parents.

The consistent finding that a significant proportion of separated or divorced parents report experiencing ABs emphasizes the need for

robust sampling methods to fully understand the scope of ABs and ensure effective intervention strategies for affected families. Moreover, it is extremely important to acknowledge the impact of methodology on prevalence, as significant variation in reported prevalence across studies can often be attributed to differences in sampling methodologies—clinical populations often show higher rates compared to general population samples. There is also a need for broader cross-cultural research, as most existing data is drawn from North American and U.K. contexts.

Prevalence of Parental Alienation

While the presence of ABs is often reported at higher rates, research focusing on the outcome—that is, PA—suggests a more complex and less frequent phenomenon. This may be in part due to the challenge in distinguishing between justified estrangement (e.g., in cases of abuse) and true alienation arising from psychological manipulation. Nonetheless, several key studies have explored the prevalence of PA from representative samples. Harman et al. (2019) studied nationally representative online panels in the United States and Canada. They found that 6.7% of separated or divorced parents thought their children were moderately to severely alienated, with the broader prevalence of AB exposure ranging between 32% and 35.5%.

Similarly, Bernet (2010) and Warshak (2015b) both estimated that 20%–25% of children in high-conflict divorce situations experience some degree of alienation, though this estimate includes a range from mild to severe cases. In contrast, Johnston (1993) reported a lower prevalence, finding that in a clinical sample, 7% of children exhibited a strong alignment with one parent and rejection of the other, increasing to 27% in a different subset of cases with more intense family conflict.

In the U.K., Hine et al. (in press) conducted a large-scale study involving 1,005 separated or divorced parents, showing that while 39%–59% of parents reported experiencing ABs, the proportion of children meeting the criteria for moderate to severe alienation dropped significantly to 3.5% when contextual factors were considered (such as prior positive parent-child relationships). Furthermore, nearly all parents reported some degree of alienation symptoms in their children (96.7%), but only 2.9% met a stricter threshold for PA when considering additional relational and historical factors.

These findings collectively underscore a critical distinction: While ABs are frequently reported and widespread, the actual outcome of PA—where a child fully rejects a parent without legitimate cause—is far less common. This discrepancy highlights the importance of using robust, context-sensitive measures like the Five-Factor Model (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022) to assess PA, ensuring it is not conflated with temporary contact resistance or justified estrangement.

Conclusions

While there is little doubt that parental ABs are frequent in the context of family breakdown—particularly in high-conflict separation and divorce—clarity in distinguishing between these behaviors and PA as an outcome remains essential for accurate prevalence estimates and understanding impact. Parental ABs are commonly reported across both clinical and general population samples. However, the outcome of PA occurs at significantly lower rates, emphasizing the need for conceptual precision in both research and practice.

The discrepancy between the high prevalence of reported ABs and the lower rates of confirmed PA outcomes highlights the importance of context-sensitive measurement tools. Recent studies have demonstrated that ABs are widespread, with rates ranging between 32% and 59% of separated or divorced parents, but the proportion of cases meeting stricter definitions of PA, such as those accounting for prior positive parent–child relationships and the absence of safety concerns, is much lower, often below 5% of children of separated or divorced parents. Most existing research has been conducted in Western contexts, particularly the U.S., Canada, and the U.K., leaving significant gaps in understanding how ABs and PA manifest globally.

Moving forward, further cross-cultural, methodologically robust research is essential to clarify the scope of both ABs and PA. This work should prioritize diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and consistent definitions to ensure that findings can effectively inform policy, judicial decision-making, and interventions aimed at safeguarding children's relationships with both parents. By maintaining clarity between behaviors of alienating parents and outcomes for alienated children, the field can better address the complexities of family breakdown and contribute to the development of more effective strategies for supporting families in conflict.

Chapter 6

THE PREVENTION OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

Prevention of parental alienation (PA) is never guaranteed because there are three parties to the alienation process (the child, the targeted parent, and the favored parent) and at best the targeted parent has control only over themselves. That being said, there are three strategies a targeted parent can do in an effort to prevent the alienation and certainly with an eye toward mitigating it. The first is for the targeted parent to be the best parent they can be so that they don't inadvertently reinforce the alienation falsehood about them. The second is to be a good co-parent so as not to unnecessarily hurt, antagonize, or upset the other parent. And the third is to negotiate a parenting plan that limits ambiguity and opportunities for the other parent to encroach upon the parenting time of the targeted parent. Each of these will be described in turn.⁵

Be the Best Parent

Targeted parents do not have the luxury of being a mediocre or “good enough” parent. They have to up their parenting game in order to counteract the lies that are being told about them, usually that they are unsafe, unloving, and unavailable. Anything they do that the child experiences as unsafe, unloving, and unavailable reinforces the lie and in fact it makes it a truth. To be clear, that does not mean the parent should give their child everything they want. Nor does it mean they agree with everything the child says. But it does mean that they relate to their child with love, compassion, respect, and understanding

5. This chapter is based partly on Baker and Fine (2023).

at all times. According to Baker and Fine (2023), there are four main ways for a targeted parent to be the best parent they can be. The first is to enhance the attachment, which means parenting with the intent that the child will experience them as safe, loving, and available. Targeted parents should speak to the child with love in their heart, make time for the child, show interest in what the child is interested in, and avoid responding in a dismissive, negative, unkind, or harsh way. Targeted parents should follow the magic ratio (Gottman, 1998) of five times as many positive sentiments as negative, they should know their child's love language (Chapman & Campbell, 2016), and they should create an atmosphere of love and respect to promote a secure parent-child attachment (Bowlby, 1969).

The second way to be the best parent is to not take the bait. Oftentimes, alienated children behave in a provocative, challenging, or unkind manner. They may accuse the targeted parent of doing terrible things and they can treat the targeted parent with an unnerving callousness and lack of consideration. It is vitally important for the targeted parent to not take the bait, meaning they don't become emotionally dysregulated and behave in a harsh or hurtful manner toward the child. They should not call the child mean names, and they shouldn't threaten to end the relationship. Targeted parents need to respond to their child's negativity in a way that doesn't give the child more ammunition to be hurt and angry. Baker and Fine (2023) present numerous strategies for responding to a child's anger and hostility. Nonviolent communication can also be very helpful as well as positive parenting and positive discipline resources (Rosenberg, 2015). It is better for the targeted parent to calmly and lovingly pause a conversation than do or say something in the heat of the moment that they will regret and will certainly be used against them.

Third, targeted parents can foster specific values in their children to help them not become unduly influenced by the other parent: compassion (kindness even when angry), forgiveness (even when someone has done something wrong), integrity (knowing their own truth and acting accordingly), and critical thinking (thinking for themselves rather than being influenced or pressured). Each of these values can be fostered through a parent's recognition of times when the child spontaneously exhibits behavior consistent with the value, can role model it in their own lives, and can discuss moments when characters in books and movies could choose to act according to these values. When children

know their own truth, act with integrity, have compassion for someone else's predicament, and know when it is time to forgive someone who has hurt, frustrated, or disappointed them, they are less likely to become alienated. Baker and Andre (2015) have a workbook of activities to teach children these values.

The fourth way to improve parenting is to utilize the positive parenting philosophy for addressing a child's misbehavior. Positive parenting is a term for a childrearing approach that originated with Alfred Adler (1927), Rudolf Dreikurs (1991), and Jane Nelsen (2006), although the term is now applied to a whole host of parenting resources that do not necessarily ascribe to all of the essential features of the founders (Baker, Holden, Rycus, & Schneiderman, 2024). A recent analysis of the positive parenting literature resulted in the identification of 14 essential ingredients: treat the child with warmth and respect; be encouraging and avoid criticizing the child; communicate openly; have clear and appropriate expectations; recognize that the child's behavior is purposeful; help the child manage their emotions and behaviors; avoid power struggles; take time to train the child; teach and model cooperation; teach problem-solving; share power; and promote responsibility. Any parenting approach or resource that embodies these 14 ingredients is sure to be a vitally useful resource for targeted parents. In sum, a targeted parent who enhances the attachment, doesn't take the bait, fosters the four notable values, and follows the positive parenting approach is likely to be the best version of themselves as a parent.

Be a Good Co-Parent

Another important way to prevent alienation is for the targeted parent to be a good co-parent. This includes being respectful, not lying or spreading rumors about the other parent, responding to communication in a timely manner, and settling up financial issues in a timely and equitable manner. But there are two additional co-parenting behaviors to think about.

First, the targeted parent should not engage in alienation as a countermeasure. That means the targeted parent should not badmouth the other parent, limit their parenting time, withhold information from them, ask the child to spy or keep secrets from the other parent, encourage the children to call somebody else mommy or daddy, and any of the other 17 primary PA strategies (Baker & Fine, 2013). There

are ways to counter the alienation efforts of the other parent that do not involve counter-alienation (e.g., Baker & Fine, 2014). When a parent first comes to an awareness that the other parent may be engaging in alienation, a very important first step would be for that parent to look at themselves and their own behavior and make sure they are not doing something to threaten or destabilize the other parent such that the parent feels they have to respond with alienation efforts of their own. Anything that causes the other parent to feel devalued or shut out of the decision making is likely to instigate them to retaliate or respond with alienating behaviors.

Second, the targeted parent should communicate (in person, by email, text, etc.) in a clear and productive manner. Too often, communication devolves into an exhausting, convoluted, and hostile exchange of accusations, often referencing events that date back several months, if not years. Targeted parents might want to follow the guidelines provided by Eddy in the BIFF approach (<https://highconflictinstitute.com/high-conflict-strategies/how-to-write-a-biff-response/>). BIFF stands for brief, informative, friendly, and firm. In this approach the writer is brief and doesn't introduce more than one topic at a time and does not dredge up complaints from the past. The message is informative by stating in one or two sentences their main idea (a request, a clarification, a question). The tone is friendly starting with a greeting and ending with an appropriate sign off such as, "Have a good day." And, finally, the message is firm. The writer does not invite unnecessary debate by being equivocal or vague in their statements. BIFF communication can eliminate some of the triggers that instigate alienating behaviors in the other parent.

Have a Good Parenting Plan

Much PA takes place in the context of a parenting schedule that is vague or unfair. This incites feelings of resentment and invites the other parent to try to bend the plan to their advantage. Any ambiguity creates an opportunity for confusion and chaos and can lead an alienating parent to create a status quo that was not intended by the spirit of the plan. A good parenting plan spells out not just which days the child is with each parent but also includes precise starting and ending times (including time zone). The plan should also describe contingency plans. For example, if transfer days are school days (as opposed to

weekends), the plan should state what happens if there is a school holiday, snow day, or half a day. A good parenting plan anticipates future issues such as who will buy the children their cell phones (ideally both parents will pay for the phones) and whose plan the phones will be on (ideally each parent will have at least one child on their plan), whether parents can attend extracurricular activities on the other parent's parenting time (this is generally not a good idea), and provide a much more narrow move-away clause than what most states include as their default (one proposed solution is that neither parent can move out of the school district without forfeiting their parenting time). Too many targeted parents walk away from mediation with a parenting plan that fails to consider these and other important aspects of sharing a child, which can lead to bad feelings and poor behavior on the part of one or both parents.

Bonus Information: Improving Family Court

While this chapter focuses on what a parent can do to prevent or mitigate alienation of their child, there are also important factors outside of the family that can play a role. In an ideal world, the family court system would facilitate a healthy co-parenting relationship between the two parents rather than exacerbating the tension and hostility. But too often the attorneys, guardians, evaluators, mediators, and judges—among other legal and mental health professionals—inadvertently contribute to the problem by delaying action, over-empowering the child, and failing to hold a parent accountable even when they blatantly violate the terms of the parenting plan. Legal and mental health professionals sometimes base their conclusions on a pre-existing belief that both parents equally contribute to interparental conflict or the mistaken idea that children always choose the “better parent.” These beliefs can be misguided and can result in bias and decisions and recommendations that are not in the child's best interests. Miller (2013) provided a detailed explanation of these mistaken ideas and how to counter them.

Chapter 7

INTERVENTIONS FOR PARENTAL ALIENATION

A Framework for Interventions

As with other psychiatric disorders and conditions, parental alienation (PA) can be treated effectively. In a review of the research literature regarding the treatment of PA (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2017), the following guidelines for effective intervention were offered: (1) provide each family member with psychoeducation about PA and its consequences; (2) protect the alienated child from harm caused by the alienation; (3) use therapeutic interventions that reduce the alienated child's distress and improve psychological well-being; (4) use techniques that challenge the alienated child's distorted thinking and teach critical thinking skills; (5) work to improve the alienated child-rejected parent relationship; (6) prepare the alienating parent for an improvement in the quality of the alienated child-rejected parent relationship and challenge their distorted thinking; (7) employ conflict resolution techniques to repair the co-parenting relationship; and (8) establish healthy boundaries and communication within the family. These guidelines indicate that both legal and therapeutic management are needed to resolve PA and restore the child's healthy functioning. Success in a case is when PA has ended and the child is able to love both parents freely and fully. These general principles can be modified depending on whether the family is experiencing mild, moderate, or severe PA (Blotcky, Bernet, & Harman, 2022).

Importance of Court Involvement

Interventions for PA must include both a legal and a therapeutic response to facilitate restoration of healthy family functioning. Court intervention is usually required in PA cases to establish the clear expectation that treatment must proceed in a coordinated, orderly, and timely fashion (Blotcky & Bernet, 2024). Ordering the correct treatment protocol is the key to correcting these fraught family situations. Ordering an incorrect treatment plan can impede the resolution of PA and make the unhealthy family dynamics more convoluted and intransigent. Legal practitioners—including attorneys and judges—must understand and appreciate the toxicity of PA and make its remedy a top priority. Issuing timely orders, denying lengthy continuances, providing consequences for noncompliance with orders, expressing definite expectations for treatment success, and listening to treating mental health professionals are a few of the proactive steps that can be taken by the court.

Roadblocks to Overcome in Intervention

PA cases are difficult to treat because the parties involved—the alienating parent, the alienated child, and the alienated parent—are at cross purposes and/or in collusion in a powerful way. The alienating parent always strives to maintain the status quo of rejection of the targeted parent by the child; the alienated child is aligned with the favored parent and is an unwitting or witting participant in the alienation process; the rejected parent cannot fix the situation because their hands are tied by the alienation stranglehold (Blotcky & Bernet, 2024).

In PA cases, it is a mistake to assume that both parents are contributing equally to the family quagmire (Warshak, 2015a). In truth, the alienating parent is the aggressor, while the rejected parent is the victim who does not deserve their plight. As such, intervention with each parent must be very different. An alienating parent's disavowal of responsibility for his or her child's rejection of the other parent is another major roadblock in the treatment of PA (Warshak, 2020b). An alienating parent may not be cooperative, helpful, or an active participant in making meaningful changes in the family dynamics. The alienating parent and the alienated child may fight against change, preferring instead to sabotage the therapeutic goals.

Focusing on an alienated child's perspective and beliefs can take an intervention down a rabbit hole (Miller, 2013; Warshak, 2015b). Allowing an alienated child to complain and rehash concerns about a rejected parent does not move their relationship in a positive direction. Validating the child's feelings, encouraging the child to express grievances, and giving the child decision-making choices while advising the rejected parent to listen and apologize are not helpful approaches. Forcing a rejected parent to apologize for misdeeds not actually committed is further victimization of that parent and highly counterproductive. A rejected parent can apologize many times and still no progress will be made in reconnecting with an alienated child.

Research shows that a marked reduction in alienation can only occur in a child who has extended periods of time with their rejected parent (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Fidler & Bala, 2020). Treatment can only be successful if the child is having regular contact with that parent. An alienated child's contact with a rejected parent should be immediate rather than slow or gradual. A phase-in strategy is not necessary, and it conveys the wrong message that the child's "concerns" about the alienated parent have merit when, in fact, they do not. Some therapists believe their basic therapeutic skills can be applied effectively to all cases (Miller, 2013). This notion is false. PA cases are unique and require very specific treatment protocols. Even seasoned therapists can be misled and confused by PA dynamics and its treatment needs. (See Chapter 8 for "Limitations of Traditional Therapeutic Approaches.")

Treatment Protocols for Three Levels of Severity

A PA-specific treatment plan is called for based on the severity of the case in question (Blotcky, Bernet, & Harman, 2022; Blotcky & Bernet, 2024).

In **mild PA**—where the child's contact reluctance or refusal is limited—a parent's ABs may be interrupted with strong directives from an attorney, judge, parent coordinator, or mental health practitioner. More extensive treatment may not be necessary. This severity of PA is the easiest and quickest to resolve. Yet, some cases of mild PA, which closely resemble moderate PA, may prove to be more difficult and entrenched.

For **moderate PA**—where the child persistently refuses contact and is mostly oppositional during parenting time—a multifaceted treatment

approach is indicated. The alienating or favored parent must have individual therapy with a seasoned clinician who is skilled in PA tactics. The singular goal of this intervention is to help the offending parent stop all ABs. Concurrently, reunification therapy of the alienated child and the rejected parent must focus on repairing and restoring their prior good relationship. This treatment plan will be successful if the alienating parent stops their dysfunctional behavior and does not sabotage the reunification process for the child. If the alienating parent does not have individual therapy or coaching, reunification of the alienated child and the rejected parent will be stalled or sabotaged.

In **severe PA** cases—where the alienated child is completely cut off from the rejected parent—a different treatment protocol is indicated. In these cases, the alienated child must be removed from the care of the alienating parent, placed with the rejected parent, and have no contact with the offending parent for an extended period of time, perhaps 90 days or more. Simultaneously, the alienating parent must have individual therapy or coaching and the alienated child and rejected parent must have reunification therapy. Once significant improvement is seen, the alienating parent can begin to have supervised visits with the child. A standard visitation schedule may be a reasonable goal if parental ABs have ceased and progress is sustained.

In moderate and severe cases, the two therapists—the individual therapist/coach for the alienating parent and the reunification therapist for the alienated child and the rejected parent—must be free to communicate and compare notes on a regular basis. Ideally, both therapists need to ensure that all parties are making significant progress. Sometimes, it is wise to have a parenting coordinator assigned to a case who can combine the inputs and recommendations from the two therapists.

In severe cases, the notion that an alienated child should not be removed from their favored parent is false and harmful. Such removal is not traumatic for the child and is far better than leaving them with an offending parent (Warshak, 2020b). PA does not spontaneously improve or disappear without clear, focused interventions.

Reunification therapy is a modification of family therapy, which focuses on the reconnection and repair of a broken parent–child relationship (Clawar, 2020). It is often utilized with an alienated child and their rejected parent. But if the offending parent has not stopped their

ABs, reunification therapy is unlikely to be effective. This is a rule of thumb that cannot be ignored. Ordering reunification therapy alone is a common mistake made in court proceedings.

Research on Reunification Workshops

Turning Points for Families, Family Bridges, Family Reflections, Overcoming Barriers, and other reunification workshops are aimed at repairing moderately to severely alienated parent–child relationships (Reay, 2015). Research on the outcomes of such programs has been promising. A study of Family Bridges documented that a significant number of intractable and severely alienated children and adolescents repaired their damaged relationship with a parent whom they had rejected for many years and were ready to cooperate with court orders that placed them in the custody of the formerly rejected parent (Warshak, 2019). Similarly, a study of Turning Points for Families found that its intervention was safe, did not cause harm, and produced positive changes in the alienated child–rejected parent relationship (Harman, Saunders, & Afifi, 2021).

Bonus Clarification: Therapeutic and Diagnostic Intervention

Usually, when a court orders an intervention for contact refusal or a parent–child contact problem (PCCP), the family has been evaluated by mental health experts and the judge has at least a fair understanding of the underlying issues in the family that are causing the PCCP. Occasionally, however, the family has not been evaluated and the judge simply knows this is a case of moderate or severe PCCP but does not know the specific cause of the problem. In that situation, the judge may want to order Multi-Model Family Intervention (MMFI), which has been developed and described by Friedlander and Walters (2010) and Walters and Friedlander (2016). The court orders the parents to participate in the intervention with the understanding that everyone (the parents, the children, the guardian ad litem, the attorneys, the therapists) have the same goal, that is, for the children to have comfortable, satisfying relationships with both parents. It is a comprehensive approach, in that everyone in the family has a therapist or a coach and everyone is expected to support the same treatment goal. The outcome

of MMFI may be both therapeutic and diagnostic. Hopefully it will be therapeutic: the family members cooperate with the treatment plan and they achieve the prescribed goal. On the other hand, MMPI may be diagnostic: if the goal is not achieved, the therapy team should be able to determine who is sabotaging the progress and what that person is doing. In that case, the treatment team reports the lack of progress back to the judge, who may then order a more elaborate intervention, such as transfer of parenting time from the uncooperative and sabotaging parent to the cooperative, participating parent.

Chapter 8

LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

Role of Conventional Talk Therapy

Conventional therapy, or “talk therapy,” includes established approaches like psychoanalysis, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, relying on verbal communication to explore emotions, thoughts, somatic sensations, and behaviors. The therapist generally assumes the child’s feelings and opinions are legitimate, and the therapist generally accepts the narrative of the parent who brings the child to the therapist. In parental alienation (PA) cases, conventional therapy typically leaves the parenting schedule unchanged and focuses on improving the relationship between the child and the rejected parent, aiming to restore communication and emotional connection.

Also, traditional family therapy (involving both parents, all the children in the family, and perhaps members of the extended family) may be helpful in mild and some moderate cases of contact refusal or parent–child contact problem. That is, if both parents participate sincerely in family meetings and if all the adults seem open to implement change in order to improve their relationships, this type of therapy may be a quick and fairly easy way to help these families. However, traditional methods often fail to address the complexities of moderate to severe alienation and may even exacerbate the issue. This chapter explores the limitations of these approaches and their impact on affected families.

Ineffectiveness of Conventional Therapy

Clinical literature and research studies have consistently shown that conventional therapy is inadequate for addressing moderate to severe PA. Traditional therapies operate under flawed assumptions about these families. Traditional therapy models struggle to address the complexities of manipulation and emotional distress. The dynamics of PA often resemble cult-like environments, where the alienating parent controls the child's perception, stifling their critical thinking (Baker, 2005b). As a result, these children adopt the favored parent's distorted views, alienating themselves from the rejected parent and their extended family. Moreover, severely alienated children demonstrate "splitting," defined as "a pathological, primitive defense mechanism in which the [child] . . . segregates experiences, into all-good and all-bad categories" (Bernet, Gregory, Reay, & Rohner, 2018, p. 777). Viewing a world populated "by devils and angels," alienated children perceive their targeted parents as the former and alienating parents as the latter (p. 777).

Traditional interventions often fail to resolve the underlying issues and can even worsen the situation. Warshak (2015a) emphasizes, "No evidence supports the efficacy of treating severely alienated children while they remain primarily in the custody of their favored parent and out of touch with their rejected parent. Not only is such treatment unlikely to succeed, it postpones getting children the relief they need" (p. 243). Blotcky and Bernet (2024) state, "Traditional family therapy fails because the parties involved—the alienating parent, the alienated child, and the rejected parent—are at cross purposes with one another in a powerful and entrenched way" (p. 5). Reay (2015) stresses that families experiencing severe alienation need entirely different therapeutic skills. This critical distinction is often overlooked by legal and mental health professionals, highlighting the necessity for special competencies when working with families facing moderate to severe alienation.

Risks for the Therapist–Client Alliance in Parental Alienation Cases

When therapists attempt to treat moderate and severe levels of PA with traditional outpatient "talk therapy," several problems usually emerge.

Lack of Training and Experience with Personality Disorders

Alienating parents typically engage in behaviors consistent with various personality disorders (Blotcky & Bernet, 2024; Darnall, 2010). Therapists who lack experience, skills, and knowledge related to the assessment and treatment of personality disorders as well as PA may misinterpret the behaviors and dynamics involved in PA cases. These therapists might overlook the manipulation tactics and psychological abuse that an alienating parent can employ, often perceiving their actions as justified or reasonable. Alienating parents, especially those with personality disorders, may present as charming, persuasive, or victimized, leading inexperienced therapists to side with them or reinforce the alienation without recognizing the harm done to the child or the other parent.

Here are some common examples: An alienating parent with narcissistic personality disorder may use the child to bolster their self-image or punish the other parent, presenting themselves as the “ideal” parent while vilifying the other. A parent with borderline personality disorder may display erratic behavior, greatly devalue the other parent, and emotionally manipulate the child to maintain control or avoid abandonment. A parent with antisocial personality disorder may engage in manipulative, deceitful, or even exploitative behavior with little regard for the emotional well-being of the child or the damage inflicted on the other parent. Alienating parents with histrionic personality disorder may use dramatic and exaggerated emotions to manipulate situations, often seeking attention and sympathy, which could lead therapists to underestimate the seriousness of the alienation. A parent with paranoid personality disorder may exhibit distrust, leading them to project unwarranted fears onto the other parent, influencing the child to adopt these fears and reinforcing a belief that the other parent is a threat.

Therapists without expertise in these areas may not fully understand the complexity of these behaviors, which could result in inappropriate interventions or decisions that escalate the alienation. Effective intervention requires understanding the underlying personality disorders, recognizing manipulative strategies, and employing specific therapeutic approaches to address both the alienating parent’s behaviors and the impact on the child.

Inability to Differentiate Between Alienation and Estrangement

Some therapists who utilize conventional therapeutic approaches in working with children and families have not developed the core ability to differentiate between genuine cases of PA and estrangement. Yet, this is a vital diagnostic skill for practitioners. Inexperienced practitioners may mistakenly attribute all instances of a child's withdrawal to parental conflicts or assume each case involves a simple conflict of perspectives. Or inexperienced therapists may believe PA is legitimately taking place when, in fact, it is a case of estrangement. Authentic PA can be diagnosed and distinguished from both false allegations and estrangement by utilizing a variety of scientifically valid and reliable assessment tools including the Baker Five-Factor Model (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022; Chapter 8 of this book), the Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale (Rowlands, 2018), and the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) (Bernet, Gregory, Reay, & Rohner, 2018; Bernet, Gregory, Rohner, & Reay, 2020; Rohner, 2005).

Valid Allegations of Child Abuse Versus False Claims

Untrained child protection workers and therapists may inadvertently contribute to the problem by failing to accurately discern between valid allegations of abuse and false claims that often arise in severe PA cases (Sauber, 2010). This diagnostic challenge complicates the intervention strategies available to families in need. Moreover, personality-disordered alienating parents are known for making unfounded child abuse allegations. This in itself greatly complicates the risk assessment process in distinguishing valid child abuse claims from invalid claims.

Third-Party Alienation

Numerous therapists who are not trained in the specialized techniques that these families require often fall into the trap of believing the alienating parent and the programmed child and make the egregious mistake of contributing to the problem. Therapists can unintentionally reinforce alienation by siding with the alienating parent or child, contributing to the problem rather than alleviating it. This phenomenon has been called “third-party alienation” (Garber, 2004). When

therapists team up with the alienating parent and the alienated child, the target parent is excluded. In doing so, these clinicians run the risk of creating complete family annihilation. They get so caught up in the alienator's and child's manipulation and delusional thinking that they lose sight of the realities of PA. They may even form a strong bias against the target parent.

Misguided Focus in Therapy

Focusing on the perspective and beliefs of an alienated child can lead family therapy astray. Permitting such a child to vent grievances about a rejected parent does not foster positive developments in the relationship. Traditional family therapy often aims to validate the child's feelings, encourage them to express concerns, and provide decision-making autonomy, while advising the rejected parent to listen and apologize. However, compelling a parent to apologize for wrongdoings they did not commit further victimizes that parent and is highly counterproductive. In many scenarios, even if a rejected parent apologizes repeatedly, no progress is made toward reconnecting with an alienated child. This detrimental outcome occurs when PA dynamics are overlooked or misunderstood in family therapy sessions.

During traditional therapy sessions, therapists intervening with an alienated child and the targeted parent may unconsciously foster a psychological alliance with the child that undermines the targeted parent's role. Clinical literature and research studies indicate that children experiencing alienation often articulate compelling justifications for perceiving the targeted parent in a negative light (Baker, 2005b; Darnall, 2010; Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2013; Miller, 2013; Reay, 2011, 2015; Warshak, 2010b). In situations of PA, it is imperative for therapists to possess a comprehensive understanding of the associated psychological concepts and presentations. Without such knowledge, there is a risk that the therapist may erroneously attribute the children's profound and absolute rejection of one parent to rational and reality-based factors.

The "Two Against One" Dynamic

Any interactions the therapist has with the favored parent may inadvertently reinforce the children's negative perceptions of the targeted

parent. They may even form a strong bias against the targeted parent, thus, perpetuating a “two against one” dynamic that exacerbates the alienation process. The alienated parent often experiences an amplified perception of victimization, as the therapist and child align against them. The experience of rejection by a parent can lead to feelings of being judged by therapeutic professionals, thereby intensifying the parent’s negative cognitive assessments and emotional responses. This encompasses a spectrum of psychological phenomena, including chronic frustration, despair, anger, anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, which are further compounded by ongoing disruptions in their relational dynamics with their children.

Misinterpretation of Family Dynamics

Therapists who are not trained in the specialized techniques these families require often fall into the trap of believing the alienating parent and the programmed child and make the egregious mistake of contributing to the problem. The alienated parent’s presentation in a therapeutic session may be perceived as suboptimal, which could lead therapists to erroneously conclude that such rejection is warranted. These dynamics elucidate why many alienated parents report traditional therapeutic approaches with their alienated child as detrimental rather than beneficial, indicating that non-PA specialists or often exacerbate the situation.

Inappropriate Traditional Therapeutic Interventions

Moderately to severely alienated children typically show little to no positive response to traditional interventions like cognitive-behavioral therapy, systematic desensitization, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (Garber, 2018; Lampel, 1986). Therapists using conventional methods may feel confused and frustrated, as their approaches often fail to recognize that the child’s refusal to engage with the rejected parent stems from loyalty to the alienating parent’s opinions, not genuine fear. This misunderstanding leads to superficial therapy that fails to address deeper emotional factors. The child’s suppressed love for the rejected parent, combined with pressure from the alienating parent, creates a façade of fear rather than legitimate concerns for safety. Without tackling the alienating parent’s manipulations, traditional methods become ineffective.

Resistance to Therapy

In severe cases, the alienating parent and alienated child are too determined and too delusional to respond to any form of traditional therapy (Fidler et al., 2013; Reay, 2015). Failure of traditional talking therapy strengthens the resolve of the alienated child because the child simply ignores the recommendations of the therapist and gets away with it. An alienating parent may utilize unsuccessful family therapy sessions as “evidence” to support the notion that the rejected parent is indeed at fault. They argue, what other explanation could there be for a child’s ongoing rejection of that parent? The rejected parent appears understandably confused and frustrated as the therapeutic intervention fails to yield positive results; in fact, it exacerbates the issue by concentrating on either the incorrect parent or addressing the spurious and misleading beliefs held by the alienated child. Throughout this process, both the alienating parent and the alienated child actively undermine progress at every turn. It is important to note that these challenges arise not because of any inherent issues with the rejected parent.

Lack of Commitment to Therapy

In court-ordered as well as non-court-ordered cases, alienating parents may fire therapists who question their motives and actions. If the therapy is focused on improving the relationship between the child and the rejected parent, the favored parent may stop the child from seeking further interventions. It is also common for alienating parents to shop around for clinicians who will eventually buy into their delusional thinking and manipulative games (Reay, 2015). In court-ordered and non-court ordered cases, alienating parents and alienated children are typically not motivated to attend therapy. They are obsessively determined to undermine both the therapist and the therapy (Darnall, 2010; Fidler et al., 2013; Miller, 2013; Reay, 2011, 2015; Sauber, 2010).

Ineffective Judicial and Therapeutic Strategies

In traditional therapeutic settings, no attempt is made to physically remove the severely alienated child from the toxic home environment. The therapist attempts to influence the child for one hour a week while

the child continues to reside with the alienating parent for the rest of the week (Miller, 2013). Lorandos (2020a) noted, “The problem of traditional therapies with this population is compounded by the continued presence of the alienating parent in the child’s life, whose own disrespect of court orders and unremitting manipulation of the child sabotages efforts at reunification” (p. 16).

Misguided Focus on Symptoms

Traditional reunification therapies often aim to address symptoms by trying to repair the strained relationship between the rejected parent and child. However, this approach has proven ineffective. Instead, therapists must focus on identifying and addressing the root causes of alienation. One parent typically manipulates or conditions the child to reject the other, often with a conscious and unconscious agenda. In moderate to severe cases, the favored parent actively seeks to destroy the relationship between the child and the other parent.

Conclusions

Traditional therapeutic approaches have significant limitations in addressing severe levels of PA. The complexity of these cases necessitates specialized reunification intervention strategies that differ from conventional methods to effectively address the unique psychological dynamics at play. Mental health professionals must undergo advanced training or supervision to avoid confusing alienation with estrangement, mismanaging personality-disordered alienators, mishandling false allegations of abuse, and a whole host of other risks associated with this highly specialized field of practice. On the legal front, inadequate training and ineffective strategies further complicate these cases.

Chapter 9

ALIENATED PARENTS, GRANDPARENTS, AND ADULT ALIENATED CHILDREN

The science of parental alienation (PA) has been flourishing in recent years (Harman, Warshak, Lorandos, & Florian, 2022). A growing body of research is focused on the toxic effects of PA on alienated parents, alienated grandparents, and adult children of PA. Concurrently, there are now a variety of advocacy groups in place to assist these harmed parties.

Alienated Parents

Harman, Kruk, and Hines (2018) provide the best review of the literature on the negative impact of PA on targeted or rejected parents. Alienated parents describe their situation as highly stressful, confusing, and anguishing. Intense feelings of grief are the initial reaction to the loss of their children. Following that, many alienated parents report struggling with anxiety, depression, lower life satisfaction, social isolation, loss of identity, feelings of powerlessness, and suicidal ideation. Alienated parents report being diagnosed with major depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Many rejected parents are unable to work efficiently because of the impact of anguish and despair. Physical symptoms associated with stress are noted. Alienated parents may lose their jobs and drain all their financial resources while trying to stay afloat to pursue legal remedies for the loss of their children. Because the focus is almost always on the alienated children themselves, rejected parents' concerns and documentation of PA go unattended, minimized, or disbelieved. Alienated parents' anxiety and depression can become severe as they attempt to untangle their sad situations and reestablish ties with their children.

Alienated parents have limited or no contact with their children during PA; thus, they may tend to become defeatist and passive in their thinking, giving alienating parents a stronger sense of empowerment. At times, in response to increased feelings of frustration and hopelessness, rejected parents may engage in unhelpful and even self-defeating behaviors that are due to their victimization and not a reflection of a disorder. It must be kept in mind that alienated parents are victims and not aggressors. Not only are alienated parents distressed over the loss of their children, but they are also overwhelmed with the responsibility of convincing others that their PA narrative is true and that corrective action must be taken immediately.

Procuring social and professional support is crucial during times of grief and psychological distress. Unfortunately, many alienated parents fail to seek support because of increasing pessimism and the belief that the courts and even their friends will fail to help them. Courts are viewed as being slow, overworked, indecisive, and ultimately unjust. Often, it is found that alienating parents will belittle and ridicule rejected parents to their friends, family members, work associates, and others, leaving them isolated from those who might otherwise help. In many instances, alienated parents may not be aware of available professional services and how to access them. The end result is that these parents remain isolated, lonely, misunderstood, and dismissed.

Alienated Grandparents

Research has demonstrated that children's closeness with grandparents is associated with academic, personal, and social competence as well as with self-confidence and maturity (Agllias, 2017). Moreover, grandparents provide emotional support, deliver a sense of security, offer life experiences, serve as role models, offer connection to family heritage and historical events, bolster identity formation, and provide caretaking support for their grandchildren. Research shows that depriving children of their grandparents can lead to distress and depression in the children themselves (Park, 2018; Jappens & Van Bavel, 2019).

During PA, the alienated parent's extended family members become alienated as well. This includes grandparents. Exclusion of grandparents from a child's life has been repeatedly validated as one of the 17 behavioral strategies of alienating parents. According to research (Bounds & Matthewson, 2022), the following 13 tactics are used by alienating

parents against grandparents: brainwashing, controlling contact, emotional manipulation, banning information, denigration, interrogation, threatening correspondence, secret-keeping, social media blackout, encouraging disrespect, rejecting gifts and cards, manipulating, and false allegations of abuse.

Grandparents forcibly separated from their grandchildren feel grief, shame, betrayal, profound sorrow, and worry about the effects on their grandchildren. This separation adversely affects grandparents' relationships with others in their lives, their sense of life satisfaction, and their role fulfillment. Research has found that alienated grandparents worry about never seeing their grandchildren again, their victimization, their failing physical health, their increased awareness of alienation, and their decreased optimism about the future (Kaganas & Piper, 2020; Avieli & Levy, 2022).

Loss of contact with their grandchildren can lead to depression. As such, grandparent alienation is a form of elder abuse perpetrated by alienating parents who deny grandparents access to their grandchildren. Legal remedies for grandparent alienation are not available because grandparents' rights have been stripped across the country. Correcting PA falls on the rejected parents themselves, who are often so focused on their own anguish and stalemated status that the grandparents' rejection gets forgotten or pushed aside.

Adult Alienated Children

The childhood effects of PA are enduring (Baker, 2005a). Adult alienated children experience depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and trauma reactions in response to being alienated from a parent as a child. They also exhibit guilt and shame as well as mistrust in themselves and others. Adults who were exposed to parental alienating behaviors as a child have a higher likelihood of developing poor self-esteem, perceiving only negative aspects of situations, and having inadequate coping skills in stressful situations. These adults report having moderate to high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, social isolation, loneliness, suicidal ideation, and feelings of powerlessness.

Verhaar, Matthewson, and Bentley (2022) found that problems in adult alienated children fall along four dimensions: mental health difficulties, addiction and substance abuse, emotional pain, and coping and resilience. Mental health problems include depression, anxiety, eating

disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, psychosomatic symptoms, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and traits of personality disorders. Alcohol abuse, illicit drug abuse, and pornography have been found. Emotional pain includes shame and guilt, low self-esteem, loneliness and isolation, helplessness, grief and loss, anger, feelings of abandonment, and difficulties with trust. Maladaptive coping and limited resilience are another problem area. A final major finding is that adults who were alienated as children are at high risk of becoming alienated from their own children in future relationships.

The process for reunification by adult alienated children with their rejected parents has been described as well (Matthewson, Bowring, Hickey, Ward, Diercke, & Niekerk, 2023). Reunification is an undertaking that takes time, is quite fragile, and can ebb and flow in progress. A number of general variables have been found to contribute to the successful reunification of alienated adult children with their rejected parents, such as an ability to trust, close geographical distance, the rejected parent's engaging behavior during the reunification process, catalyst events, understanding PA dynamics, and more.

Advocacy Groups Make Their Mark

Many advocacy groups have been established to help alienated parents, alienated grandparents, and adult alienated children by providing resources and support. These groups are international in their scope, and their online presence is impressive. For rejected parents, some important advocacy groups include the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG, www.pasg.info), International Support Network of Alienated Families (ISNAF, www.isnaf.info), Parental Alienation Advocates (www.PA-A.org), Parental Alienation Awareness Organization (PAAO, www.paaousa.org), Eeny Meeny Miney Mo Foundation (www.emmm.org.au), Association Contre L'aliénation Parentale (www.acalpa.info), Support Fathers' Rights (www.supportfathersrights.org), and others. Alienated Grandparents Anonymous (AGA, www.alienatedgrandparentsanonymous.com) is a major group for alienated grandparents. The Anti-Alienation Project (AAP, www.theantialienationproject.myspreadshop.com) is available for adult alienated children. Many other advocacy groups exist and are easily accessible online. These advocacy groups play a vital role since many victimized parties do not know how to seek out and utilize specialized professional help.

Bonus Information: Coaching Alienated Parents

Alienated parents and grandparents frequently ask their therapists, lawyers, friends, relatives, and colleagues for advice on how to handle the extremely frustrating situations they find themselves in. Of course, substantive and specific advice depends on the family's unique circumstances and the current status of any legal proceedings. However, it is reasonable to suggest the following basic principles to almost any alienated parent and grandparent:

Do your homework. Learn everything you can about PA. Read a few books. Watch videos on YouTube. If possible, attend a national or international conference on PA and take notes during the presentations.

Create your own support network. Don't try to get through these difficult weeks and months on your own. Invite close friends and family members and perhaps a mental health and legal professional to join your support group. You might want to stay in touch through monthly video conference calls. Also, consider participating in an in-person or remote support group led by a qualified moderator, such as a mental health professional.

Maintain realistic hope. Experiencing PA in your family is one of the most devastating events a parent can encounter. Although not always, many parents persevere and achieve a good relationship with their children. Sometimes that happens later in life when a child gets distance from the alienating parent by going away to college, moving to another community, or getting married. Your personal support network should help you maintain hopefulness.

Turn victimhood into action. Avoid getting bogged down in frustration and disappointment. If you have learned about PA through your own personal experience, try to use your knowledge to educate others in your community, speak the truth, and even influence legislation. Sometimes this is called the journey from victim to hero (www.victimtohero.com).

Chapter 10

SIMILAR AND RELATED PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA

Parental alienation (PA) theory does not exist in a vacuum. It is embedded in a broad range of psychological concepts and theories. This overlapping and interdependence of many lines of research helps to support the reality and validity of the respective disciplines. This chapter pertains to several psychological topics that support PA theory.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory provides a compelling framework for understanding the dynamics of PA, particularly in how disrupted attachment bonds affect both the behaviors of alienating parents and the reactions of children. John Bowlby's (1969, 1988) foundational work on attachment emphasizes the critical role of early relationships in shaping a child's sense of security and emotional health. Secure attachments, marked by trust and reliability, enable healthy psychological and social development. Conversely, insecure attachments can leave children vulnerable to anxiety, mistrust, and emotional instability.

At its core, PA represents a profound distortion of the child's natural attachment system, which is designed to seek security, comfort, and connection with caregivers. The alienating parent often exploits the child's vulnerability during periods of heightened stress, such as family conflict or divorce. By fostering enmeshed and insecure attachment dynamics, the alienating parent may present themselves as the sole source of safety and stability. This undermines the child's relationship with the targeted parent, portraying them as threatening or unloving. Such manipulation not only warps the child's perception of the targeted

parent but also fosters dependency on the alienating parent for emotional regulation and security.

Parent Loss

Parent loss is widely regarded as one of the most traumatic experiences a child can endure, particularly when the relationship with the parent was previously loving and secure. The loss of a parent disrupts a child's sense of safety, belonging, and identity, as parents typically provide the foundation for emotional support, guidance, and security during development. Loss is especially traumatic when it involves *ambiguous loss*, a term coined by Pauline Boss (2000) to describe situations where a person is physically present but emotionally or relationally absent. This kind of loss can leave children in a state of unresolved grief, as the ambiguity prevents them from achieving closure. The result is often heightened anxiety, depression, and difficulty forming secure attachments later in life.

In the context of PA, the loss of a parent is particularly damaging because it is engineered and prolonged, creating a unique form of psychological trauma. Alienated children are not only deprived of the emotional support and stability provided by the alienated parent but are also manipulated into rejecting them. Harman, Matthewson, and Baker (2022) emphasized that PA alters the child's perceptions, beliefs, and memories of the alienated parent, fundamentally severing a once-healthy relationship. This imposed rejection exacerbates the child's grief, as it forces them to view their loss through a distorted and often negative lens, leaving little room for healthy emotional processing.

Psychological Maltreatment of Children

PA has been increasingly recognized as a form of psychological maltreatment, with profound implications for the affected child's emotional and developmental wellbeing. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (2019) defines psychological maltreatment as:

A repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwart the child's basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved,

unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another's needs, and/or expendable. (p. 3)

Slep, Glaser, and Manly (2022) provide an operationalized definition of psychological maltreatment, emphasizing its focus on behaviors that significantly harm a child's emotional wellbeing and developmental trajectory. These behaviors include verbal abuse, emotional neglect, and coercive control, all of which are core components of PA.

By distorting a child's perception of a loving parent, PA fundamentally undermines the child's need for secure relationships, leading to long-term harm that aligns closely with established definitions of child psychological abuse. The alienating parent often employs psychological tactics that foster fear, insecurity, and rejection of the targeted parent. These tactics can include bad-mouthing, gaslighting, and encouraging loyalty conflicts. The alienating parent positions themselves as the sole source of care and safety while portraying the targeted parent as dangerous or unworthy of love. As such, scholars explicitly frame PA as a form of child abuse (Isailă & Hostiuc, 2022; Kruk, 2018). This perspective recognizes that alienating behaviors (ABs) fundamentally disrupt the child's psychological wellbeing by fostering insecurity, confusion, and long-term emotional harm. Manipulating a child to reject a loving parent violates their need for balanced, nurturing relationships, impeding their ability to form healthy attachments and trust others later in life.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theorists and practitioners have long identified parent-child alignment against the other parent as a significant problem in the dynamics of a family. The concept of triangulation has been employed to explain the origin and maintenance of dysfunctional family relationships. Triangulation involves two members of a family excluding a third family member. Many family therapists (e.g., Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974) have linked triangulation to the development of maladjustment in children. Cross-generational coalitions develop when one or both parents try to enlist the support of the child against the other parent. PA can easily be conceptualized as an extreme form of such a pathological coalition.

False Memory Research

The extensive research of Stephen J. Ceci and his colleagues regarding childhood suggestibility and false memory formation shows that children are susceptible to being influenced by others, even to create beliefs of events that have not actually occurred (Ceci & Bruck, 1995, 2006). The research on children's suggestibility is part of a broader field of study of influence and persuasion tactics (Cialdini, 2021). Decades of research on psychological processes and consumer marketing have identified the key elements of the art of influence. When an alienating parent engages in ABs, the child can be manipulated into believing the truthfulness of a lie about the targeted parent, in the same way that a consumer can be tricked into buying a product they do not need or want.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive dissonance theory states that individuals experience a strong motivation to resolve inconsistencies in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Festinger, 1957; Kolko & Swenson, 2002). Individuals holding opposite and contradictory views will often find it necessary to modify one belief or another, to resolve the logical inconsistency. The theory of cognitive dissonance helps to explain the phenomenon of PA. The child presumably experiences a strong emotional connection with each of their parents but finds the emotional connection to the alienating parent threatened by that parent's strong rejection of the targeted parent. Resolution of the inconsistency is achieved by the child's likewise rejecting the other parent. This type of resolution results in the psychological mechanism of "splitting," also called "lack of ambivalence." When the child employs splitting to resolve the uncomfortable feeling of cognitive dissonance, they perceive one parent in extremely positive terms (e.g., "my angel") and the alienated parent in extremely negative terms (e.g., "my devil"). The degree of splitting can be measured by a psychological test, the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ), which can assist in distinguishing severely alienated from non-alienated children (Bernet, Gregory, Rohner, & Reay, 2020).

Interpersonal Acceptance–Rejection Theory

Interpersonal acceptance–rejection theory (IPARTheory) and PA theory have overlapping domains of interest. Both fields of study

pertain to how children relate to parents and other significant caregivers. They both posit that parents and other adults influence—for good or bad—the behavior, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and psychological development and functioning of children. Unlike PA theory, however, IPARTheory focuses specifically on individuals' experiences of interpersonal acceptance and rejection, especially from parent(s). IPARTheory argues that parents may express their love (acceptance) physically, verbally, or symbolically by acts of emotional support, caring, nurturance, warmth, and affection. Parental rejection, in contrast, is manifested in physical, verbal, and symbolically hurtful behaviors. IPARTheory argues that children and adults tend the world over to react in specific ways when they experience rejection from people important to them such as parents (Rohner & Ali, 2025). PA theory, on the other hand, has a much narrower scope of interest. It pertains chiefly to one type of parental behavior, i.e., the methods by which the favored parent indoctrinates and influences the child to fear and reject the alienated parent. It also pertains to one type of outcome, i.e., the child's intense rejection of the alienated parent. IPARTheory and PA theory interact in a significant way: IPARTheory has developed self-report questionnaires that can be used in PA research. Especially popular is the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ), which is used to quantitatively measure aspects of PA such as the “lack of ambivalence.”

Part Two

CLINICAL AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

Part Two addresses additional topics that may be of interest to mental health and legal practitioners. For example, an issue that sometimes arises in legal settings is whether parental alienation theory meets *Frye* and *Daubert* criteria. Pertinent information may be found in Chapters 12 and 13 (research regarding parental alienation), Chapter 15 (testimony in U.S. family courts), and Chapter 16 (recognition of parental alienation by professional organizations).

Chapter 11

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY

The term “parental alienation syndrome” (PAS) was introduced by Richard Gardner in 1985. However, the essence of this maladaptive family dynamic had been described for centuries in legal and mental health literature. The fundamental definition of parental alienation (PA) has remained the same since Gardner (1985). Despite the constancy of basic principles of PA theory, our understanding of the etiology, diagnosis, prevention, and interventions for PA has evolved and expanded. This chapter traces the history of PA theory, with an emphasis on its origins, key developments in its conceptualization, and its application in clinical and legal settings. At times, proponents of PA theory have disagreed about nuances—such as diagnostic criteria and appropriate interventions for varying levels of severity of PA—and these discussions have ultimately advanced the field. Of course, contemporary scholars are standing on the shoulders of pioneers and hopefully can see both the past and the future more distinctly.⁶

Early History of the Parental Alienation Concept

Terms such as “poisoning the child’s mind” and “alienating the child’s affection” have appeared in legal cases and public discourse for over two centuries. Early cases in England—such as *King v. De Manneville* (1804), *Shelley v. Westbrook* (1817), and *Earl of Westmeath v. Countess of Westmeath* (1826)—were discussed by historians Stone (1993), Wright (2002), and Stephens and Gunsberg (2010). Early alienation cases in

6. This chapter is based partly on Bernet and Lorandos (2023).

the United States were *Schutz v. Schutz* (1988) and *Karen B. v. Clyde M.* (1991). Even Albert Einstein, during his contentious divorce from Mileva Marić, expressed concerns in letters that she was “poisoning” the children against him and that, “My fine boy had been alienated from me . . . by my wife, who has a vengeful disposition” (Isaacson, 2007, p. 188).

Historical descriptions of PA phenomena can also be found in the writings of psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental health scholars. For example, psychoanalyst David M. Levy (1943), described fathers protesting against “a mother–child monopoly” (p. 153). Child psychiatrist Louise Despert (1953) observed custodial parents alienating children and wrote, “This can be a temporary relief to the parent who does so, but it can do only hurt to the child” (p. 63). Psychiatrist Phillip J. Resnick (1969) wrote about parents who engaged “in a deliberate attempt to make their spouses suffer” (p. 330). Jack Westman and his colleagues (1970) related cases where one parent appeared to deliberately undermine the other through a child.

The academic origins of PA theory can be traced back to early family systems theory, which explored dysfunctional family dynamics such as enmeshment, triangulation, and cross-generational coalitions. These concepts laid the groundwork for understanding how children could be manipulated during conflictual divorces to ally closely with one parent and reject a relationship with the other. For example, Salvador Minuchin (1974) described a parent joining the child “in a rigidly bounded cross-generational coalition against the other parent” (p. 102). Other proponents of family systems theory—which posited that families function as emotional units, within which individuals are influenced by the relationships and patterns of interaction among family members—were Gregory Bateson, Murray Bowen, and Jay Haley. This theoretical framework was crucial in understanding how children could become pawns in parental disputes.

Additional mental health writers who described PA phenomena—prior to Gardner (1985)—include Judith Wallerstein and Joan Kelly, Janet Johnston and her colleagues, Elissa Benedek and Diane Schetky, and Leona Kopetski. Two early articles in peer-reviewed journals are noteworthy. Writing in the *Journal of Psychiatry and Law*, Levy (1978) described children who were pathologically unambivalent, where their statements seemed “well-rehearsed, almost programmed . . . often repeating the exact phraseology used by the preferred parent” (p. 207).

In the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Tucker and Cornwall (1977) described a case of *folie à deux*, in which a paranoid mother induced her son to attempt to murder his father.

Richard A. Gardner and His Colleagues

Richard Gardner (1931–2003) was a psychoanalyst and a clinical professor of child psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University. He was a prolific writer, publishing 40 books and 130 peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals. He addressed important topics related to child psychiatry, such as the experience of children who grieve the death of a parent, the treatment of separation anxiety, the diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and techniques for conducting psychotherapy with children. As a forensic child psychiatrist, Gardner conducted many child custody evaluations and testified in legal proceedings. Through that work, Gardner became aware of how some children reject a parent as a result of the other parent's deliberate psychological manipulation and also the serious issue of false allegations of sexual abuse. His influential publications regarding those topics were a newsletter article (Gardner, 1985) and a book, *The Parental Alienation Syndrome and the Differentiation Between Fabricated and Genuine Child Sex Abuse* (1987).

In his description of PAS, Gardner identified key behaviors in the alienating parent, including denigrating the targeted parent, limiting contact between the child and the other parent, and fostering a dependency between the child and the alienating parent. His groundbreaking work also provided a structured framework for identifying and understanding the behavioral signs of PAS in the child: a campaign of denigration, weak or absurd rationalizations for the child's disdain of the alienated parent, and the lack of ambivalence in the child's feelings, among other factors. Early critics of PAS objected to Gardner's use of the word "syndrome." Thus, subsequent writers chose to avoid saying "syndrome" and used "parental alienation" for the condition that Gardner called "parental alienation syndrome."

Very quickly, mental health and legal professionals realized that Gardner's PAS described a phenomenon they had seen many times in family court, although they did not have a name for it. During the 1990s several practitioners and researchers published journal articles and books describing their own observations regarding PAS/PA, which

provided independent support for Gardner's assertions. For example, Clawar and Rivlin wrote *Children Held Hostage: Dealing with Programmed and Brainwashed Children* (1991), which was commissioned by the American Bar Association. Their research, a comprehensive study of hundreds of children of divorced parents, examined how children could be manipulated by one parent against the other parent in high-conflict custody cases. Dunne and Hedrick (1994) explained how severely alienated children were very resistant to traditional clinical interventions. Bricklin (1995) introduced quantitative measures for use in child custody evaluations, which included the phenomenon he called "not-based-on-actual-interactions" (NBOAI), his term for PAS (pp. 105–106). Darnall (1998) proposed a three-tier classification system, still in common use, that distinguishes naïve, active, and obsessed alienators. At the turn of the century, Warshak (2001) published *Divorce Poison, How to Protect your Family from Bad-Mouthing and Brainwashing*, which became the most widely read book in the world regarding PA.

Research, Education, Advocacy

The modern era in the evolution of PA theory began with several important events in the 2000s. Gardner died in 2003. His final book was published posthumously: *The International Handbook of Parental Alienation Syndrome: Conceptual, Clinical and Legal Considerations* (Gardner, Sauber, & Lorandos, 2006). *The International Handbook* was a pivotal accomplishment. It was a large, comprehensive, multifaceted text written by 31 authors from eight countries, which launched a more widespread awareness of PA theory among mental health and legal professionals. Also, the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG)—the author of this *Official Synopsis*—was created in 2009 at an informal gathering of several European colleagues in Florence, Italy. PASG is an international, nonprofit corporation with more than 1,000 members from 65 countries. Since its founding, the members of PASG have played critical roles in the development of PA theory. For example:

- **Research:** Baker (2007); Bernet, Gregory, Reay, and Rohner (2020); Haines, Matthewson, and Turnbull (2020); Harman, Warshak, Lorandos, and Florian (2022).
- **Interventions:** Harman, Saunders, and Afifi (Turning Points for Families, 2021); Reay (Family Reflections, 2015); Templer,

Matthewson, Haines, and Cox (2017); Warshak (Family Bridges, 2018).

- **Prevention:** Baker and Fine (2023); Marcus (2020).
- **Education for Professionals:** Baker and Sauber (2013); Lorandos and Bernet (2020).
- **Education for Parents:** Byrne and Byrne (2016); McCall (2016); McGee (2018).
- **International Scope:** Boch-Galhau, Kodjoe, Andritzky, and Koeppel (Germany, 2003); Broca and Odinetz (France, 2016); Hellblom Sjögren (Sweden, 1997); Lowenstein (United Kingdom, 2007).
- **Legal Analysis:** Joshi (2021); Lorandos (2020c).
- **Legislation:** Cracknell (United Kingdom); Kloth-Zanard (United States); Korosi (Australia); and Lohse (Denmark).
- **PA Misinformation:** Bernet and Xu (2023); Kruk and Harman (2024).
- **Support Groups:** Association contre L'Aliénation Parentale (France); Eeny Meeny Miney Mo Foundation (Australia); Happy Parenting Malta (For Happier Children) (Malta); International Support Network of Alienated Families (United States); Parental Alienation Support & Intervention (United States).

Resistance to Parental Alienation Theory

During the 1990s and 2000s, PAS gained traction in both clinical and legal settings. Family courts were increasingly confronted with cases where one parent accused the other of alienating behaviors. However, the introduction of PAS into the courtroom was met with mixed reactions. Some critics argued that PAS lacked sufficient empirical support, while others contended that it was essential for courts to recognize the impact of alienating behaviors on children. Despite the controversies, the work of Gardner and his associates was frequently cited in custody disputes (Lorandos, 2020c). Much of the criticism of PAS arose from law schools. For example, Wood (1994) was a student publishing in a law review; Bruch (2001), Hoult (2006), and Meier (2009) were faculty members of law schools.

The criticism of PA theory gave rise to a widespread proliferation of misinformation. Some of the misinformation constituted *ad hominem*

attacks (“Richard Gardner was a proponent of pedophilia.”); some was blatantly false (“Parental alienation is not admissible in court.”) Some of the false information may have simply been a misunderstanding of PA theory, e.g., the common mistaken notion that PA proponents hold that all children who manifest contact refusal were indoctrinated by one parent to reject the other parent. During the past 20 years, PA misinformation has been discussed and refuted by Gardner (2002), Lorandos (2006), and Bernet (2023).

Conclusions

The history of PA theory reflects an ongoing evolution in the understanding of how children can be manipulated in the context of high-conflict parental disputes. From early theoretical frameworks—such as triangulation and cross-generational coalitions—to the formalization of PAS by Gardner, to contemporary research regarding PA, this topic has become a critical issue in both mental health and legal fields. Today, PA is an increasingly recognized phenomenon, with growing support for its inclusion in diagnostic frameworks and pertinent legislation.

Chapter 12

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REGARDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

The current understanding of parental alienation (PA) has evolved through a multitude of research methodologies over the last 40 years. Qualitative research (Harman, Warshak, Lorandos, & Florian, 2022) has contributed significantly to establishing PA as a mature area of scientific inquiry with an empirically trustworthy knowledge base. Personal narratives and professional case studies (Gardner, 1985; Minuchin, 1974) initially identified this unique family dynamic by providing descriptive analyses of unhealthy parent–child alignments and maladaptive behaviors exhibited by children during separation and divorce. Social scientists wanting to understand how children could be driven to reject a parent conducted more systematic analyses of parenting behaviors in larger samples of divorcing families (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994). Scientific understanding was advanced by retrospective accounts from adult children and parents who experienced alienation (Baker, 2005a; Baker, 2006; Baker & Darnall, 2006), and professional discourse was stimulated by procedural guidelines put forth by practitioners for assessment and differentiation of the problem (Drozd & Olesen 2004; Warshak, 2003).

Quantitative methodologies can be valued as stronger scientific evidence than qualitative methods, but the use of different methodologies with varied strengths and weaknesses helps to create a robust scientific understanding in a field of study (Sandelowski, Voils, Leeman, & Crandell, 2012; Torrance, 2017). Additionally, quantitative methods—that require randomly assigning subjects to clinical trials where one group receives a treatment and the other group does not and then comparing the outcome—are often not applicable or ethical when studying family dynamics.

Qualitative methods that systematically explore individual experiences and help us better understand and define the components of PA have been integral in creating a rich scientific understanding of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the universal nature of the causes, characteristics, and consequences of PA on children, parents, and grandparents has been confirmed by qualitative publications in many languages from more than 30 countries across the world. This chapter provides a sampling of the international scope of qualitative research published on PA.

Causes of Parental Alienation

It is common knowledge that children are positively and negatively influenced by their parents. When parents negatively influence a child in a way that interferes with the child's relationship with the other parent, the parents' words and actions are called alienating behaviors (ABs) (Bernet, Baker, & Adkins, 2022). Exposure to ABs was shown to be associated with a child's negative treatment of their other parent in a sample of 109 college students (Baker & Eichler, 2016). Research participants were asked to complete surveys about exposure to ABs by a parent during childhood. The students were also asked questions about how exposure to ABs impacted their treatment of the other parent. Statistically significant results demonstrated an association between exposure to parental ABs and the child's negative treatment of the other parent. Various forms of ABs have been documented in qualitative studies around the world.

Parental Behaviors

In an archival review of 65 U.S. court cases (Lorandos & Campbell, 2005) involving PA, the authors found support that ABs—consisting of (1) denigrating a parent, (2) moving the child away, and (3) making false allegations against the other parent—interfered in the child's relationship with the other parent.

Similar reports resulted from interviews of 150 post-divorce families in Germany (Napp-Peters, 2005), which found parental behaviors that (1) limited the child's time with the non-custodial parent, (2) made the child feel that they should not communicate with the other parent, and/or (3) required the child to refer to a step-parent as a parent, were described by participants who believed they had been alienated from their child.

Researchers from The University of Tasmania (Poustie, Matthewson, & Balmer, 2018) interviewed 126 alienated parents about the parenting behaviors they believed influenced their child to reject them. Self-reports from these parents identified the following ABs: (1) denigrating comments that led the children to believe the parent was unfit, (2) brainwashing and manipulation tactics that made the children feel hatred toward the parent, and (3) exercising control over the child when they were with the other parent.

Qualitative research conducted in the U.S. (Baker, 2006; Baker & Darnall, 2006) resulted in a comprehensive list of parental ABs. Interviews were conducted with adults who were alienated as children, and surveys were given to parents currently alienated from their children. The results identified 17 behaviors used by parents that negatively impacted the child's perspectives, feelings, and beliefs about their other parent. Some examples of the most common were (1) limiting time and contact with the other parent, (2) badmouthing the parent, (3) creating fear in the child about the other parent, (4) withholding educational and medical information, and (5) making the child choose between the parents. In another survey of 105 college students, Baker and Chambers (2011) found that all the students who reported that a parent tried to turn them against the other parent endorsed badmouthing as one of the ABs to which they were exposed. This study also found that college students whose parents divorced during their childhood reported more exposure to ABs than college students whose parents did not divorce, demonstrating that PA is associated with the experience of separation and divorce.

Parental Conflict

Parental conflict has been found to increase the likelihood that a child may reject a parent during separation and divorce by causing loyalty conflicts. Practitioners from Great Britain have described case studies where children felt immense pressure transitioning between parents who were in conflict and spoke negatively about each other (Woodall & Woodall, 2017). To relieve the internal stress, the children engaged in a primitive defense mechanism called "psychological splitting," where one parent was deemed "right" and the other parent "wrong." The practitioners reported that managing their stress this way provided short-term relief from parental conflict but interfered in

learning healthy problem-solving skills necessary for maintaining long-term relationships.

Parental conflict can include forms of domestic violence (Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018). Coercive control refers to types of psychologically aggressive behaviors meant to control another person by limiting the person's power. They are considered a form of interpersonal violence. Coercively controlling behaviors have been described as a form of PA when they serve to limit the parent's access to their child. Examples of these behaviors were identified as (1) actions that threaten to take the child away or limit the parent's time with the child, (2) threatening to use disabilities or mental health crises against the parent in court, (3) humiliating the parent by denigrating them socially, (4) limiting the parent's access to social and family support, and (5) using law enforcement and child protection agencies to make false allegations of abuse.

Interviews and surveys of alienated parents in Canada and the United States have found that limiting access to the child is one of the most common tactics of alienating parents (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Kruk, 2011). A researcher from the Netherlands (Dijkstra, 2019) found that mothers were more likely than men to try and limit contact by stating that the child was too sick to make the transition to the father's home. Personal accounts of mothers from Portugal who were alienated from their daughters were shared at a domestic violence conference in 2017. They described how coercively controlling behaviors of their ex-husbands negatively affected their relationships with their daughters.

The use of false allegations of abuse was documented in the Australian family courts as a form of PA (Death, Ferguson, & Burgess, 2019; Jenkins, 2013). Clinical psychologists in South Africa (Viljoen & van Rensburg, 2014) conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of psychologists working with high-conflict divorce cases where PA was a factor. A common theme reported was that alienating parents often attempted to gain a legal advantage by making false allegations of abuse. Several of the psychologists interviewed stated that the presence of false allegations decreased their ability to work with PA cases.

Characteristics of Children Affected by Parental Alienation

Researchers in Mexico (Pérez Agüero & Andrade, 2013) surveyed 212 alienated parents and asked them to describe the characteristics exhibited

in their alienated children and the tactics used by the parent who had custody of the child. The items in the questionnaire were formulated according to the eight characteristics of alienated children proposed by Gardner (1985); six dimensions showed high reliability after statistical analysis. They concluded, “The factors obtained do not deviate from the initial theoretical proposal, reflecting that all of these ultimately contribute to the rejection of the non-custodial parent by the child” (p. 20).

Archival review of 91 court cases in Italy (Lavadera, Ferracuti, & Togliatti, 2012) compared the descriptions of alienated and non-alienated children and found support for the eight characteristics identified by Gardner (1985). Additionally, the alienated children belittled the targeted parents more than the non-alienated children. In a separate study (Mazzoni, Meneghetti, & Panizza, 2015), expert clinicians conducted an archival review of six Italian families defined as high-conflict separating families. They found that the descriptions of the children’s behaviors were representative of alienated children, as defined by Gardner (1985) and Kelly and Johnston (2001).

Clinical descriptions of alienated children have been published by professionals in Turkey (Torun, 2011), Germany (Boch-Galhau, 2013, 2018), Netherlands (Koppejan-Luitze, 2014), the United States (Gardner, 1985), and the United Kingdom (Woodall, 2014), confirming that practitioners across the world are noting distinct symptoms in this population of children, which are not apparent in other children experiencing divorce or parent–child relational issues. In a survey of mental health professionals, Baker, Murray, and Adkins (2020) found that half of those who assessed for PA used the eight characteristics originally described by Gardner as part of their assessment. In Polak’s (2020) hermeneutic phenomenology study of 14 clinicians conducting reunification therapy, over half of the clinicians reported the need to address distorted beliefs and rigid thinking patterns in the children to improve the child’s relationship with the targeted or rejected parent. This reflects Gardner’s child characteristic called “lack of ambivalence,” identified as the child’s tendency to engage in black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking about their parents.

Consequences of Parental Alienation

Parental ABs have been found to cause emotional and psychological harm to children. The negative effects have been found to be

long-term, lasting into adulthood (Miralles, Godoy, & Hildago, 2021). Boch-Galhau (2021) provided an international perspective in a journal article discussing the widespread problem of PA as emotional abuse to children in many countries. Legal perspectives about the emotional harm caused to children and the need for courts to intervene to protect alienated children have been published in Brazil (Silva, 2003; Ferreira da Rocha, 2018), Ecuador (Castañeda Orosco, 2016), India (Joshi, 2020c), Israel (Marcus, 2019, 2020), and the U.S. (Lorandos, 2020a). Interviews and surveys of Australian adults who were alienated from a parent as children described lifelong struggles with depression, substance abuse, and professional and relationship failures. Many of these adults viewed the behavior of the alienating parent as psychological maltreatment and abusive (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Verhaar, Matthewson, & Bentley, 2022).

Among adult children of PA, negative effects to self-esteem and self-worth were caused by: (1) telling the child that the other parent's absence was due to the other parent not loving them or wanting them, (2) denigrating the other parent which caused the child to feel like half of who they were was bad, (3) the child/adult harbored guilt and shame for the way they treated the rejected parent, (4) the child/adult realized they were used as a means for the favored parent to express their hatred of the other parent, rather than being truly loved by the favored parent, and (5) creating over dependency in the child/adult on the favored parent (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

PA practitioners and scholars from Australia (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2017), Canada (Kruk, 2018), Germany (Boch-Galhau, 2018), Great Britain (Woodall & Woodall, 2017), Italy (Baker & Verrocchio, 2014), and the U.S. (Warshak, 2015b) have argued that severe parental ABs are a form a child abuse. An article regarding the DSM-5 (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016) stated that the diagnosis code for child psychological abuse is appropriate in cases of severe PA and should be used when evaluating an alienating parent who engaged in parental ABs causing distortions in the child's feelings and beliefs about the rejected parent.

Italian adults who were exposed to ABs as children describe a decreased quality of life as adults and viewed the ABs as psychological maltreatment (Baker & Verrocchio, 2014; Verrocchio, Marchetti, Carrozzino, Compare, & Fulcheri, 2019). Baker (2005a) conducted qualitative interviews of 40 adults who were alienated as children,

which revealed long-lasting consequences like those experienced by adults who had been involved in cults as children. These included low self-esteem, guilt, depression, and lack of trust in themselves.

This chapter is only a quick overview of qualitative research regarding PA. It is intended to show that PA research addresses important topics such as the causes of PA (e.g., parental behaviors and parental conflict), the characteristics of children affected by PA, and the consequences of PA for the alienated children and the rejected parents. Also, this chapter provides a brief world-tour of qualitative research regarding this topic.

Bonus Information: Standards for Qualitative Research

Several years ago, the American Psychological Association published, for the first time, “Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research” (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson, & Suárez-Orozco, 2018). They made the point that both quantitative and qualitative research advances the knowledge base of psychological science. Levitt et al. commented, “Qualitative data sets typically are drawn from fewer sources (e.g., participants) than quantitative studies, but include rich, detailed and heavily contextualized descriptions from each source” (p. 27). They listed a broad range of qualitative methods, which included: narrative, grounded theory, phenomenological, discursive, ethnographic, case study, psychobiography, thematic analysis, and others. During the early years of PA scholarship, the published research was predominantly descriptive and qualitative, such as case studies of families that manifested ABs and PA. As PA scholarship matured, the published research has become more quantitative, which is a common phenomenon as scientific disciplines grow and blossom over several decades.

Chapter 13

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH REGARDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

The term parental alienation (PA) was coined by Richard Gardner in the 1980s and summarized in his seminal book in 1998 to describe a pattern of children's behavior in a family dynamic usually associated with a contested custody arrangement. Since that time, the theory has been refined and what began as careful clinical observations (as all theories do) has now been studied and confirmed in numerous quantitative research studies. Understanding the research basis of PA theory is essential for both legal and mental health professionals, especially those who may falsely believe that such knowledge does not exist. This information can also be used to inform clinical practice (i.e., assessment and treatment) as well as case management.

Parental Alienation Theory and the Baker Five-Factor Model

The core of PA theory is the understanding that some children who reject a parent do so because that parent has behaved in an egregiously improper manner. These children are referred to as realistically estranged because they are responding to that parent in a manner commensurate with that parent's behavior, be it abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient and insensitive parenting. Conversely, some children reject a parent because they have been unduly influenced by the favored parent to falsely experience the rejected parent as unsafe, unloving, and unavailable. Their rejection is not commensurate with that parent's normative human parenting limitations.

According to PA theory, the way to differentiate an estranged from an alienated child is through the Baker Five-Factor Model (Baker, 2020; Baker, Bone, & Ludmer, 2014; Baker, Burkhard, & Kelly, 2012). The first three factors are self-evident and do not require research to establish their validity as they are integral to the definition of alienation as unjustified rejection. Factor 1 establishes that there is, in fact, a breach in the relationship; Factor 2 determines that there was a prior positive relationship between the child and the now rejected parent; and Factor 3 rules out abuse or neglect or seriously deficient parenting as the cause of the child's rejection. Factor 4 and Factor 5 each require empirical support.

Quantitative Research on Factor 4

Factor 4 establishes that the preferred parent has, in fact, engaged in multiple examples (with no established cut-off for the exact number) of the 17 primary parental alienating behaviors (ABs). That is, for the child to be considered alienated, they must have been exposed to parental ABs and the ABs must be demonstrated, not simply inferred. (For example, one should not conclude: "My child is rejecting me. He must have been alienated by the other parent.")

Based on in-depth interviews with formerly alienated children (Baker, 2007) and surveys with currently alienated parents (Baker & Darnall, 2006), 17 primary parental alienation strategies were identified and then codified in the Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ) (Baker & Chambers, 2011). Internal validity of the measure was established in that the authors demonstrated that scores were statistically significantly higher for participants whose parents were divorced/separated than for participants whose parents were still in an intact marriage. Likewise, scores were statistically significantly higher for items 1–19 for those who endorsed item 20 ("one parent tried to turn me against the other parent") than for those who did not endorse that item. These two outcomes establish that scores on the measure are consistent with PA theory. This was the case in the original study and in subsequent studies using the measure.

External validity of the BSQ was established by demonstrating that scores on the BSQ were significantly correlated with scores on other measures that are consistent with PA theory, such as psychological maltreatment and self-esteem (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011), depression

(Baker & Brassard, 2013), life skills (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012), and mental health symptoms (Bernet, Baker, & Verrocchio, 2015). Collectively, the quantitative empirical research using the BSQ establishes that children exposed to parental ABs are more likely to experience themselves as being psychologically maltreated and are more likely to have a range of mental health and behavioral issues, as PA theory would predict.

These are just a handful of the studies that have established the reliability and validity of the BSQ and hence Factor 4 of the Baker Five-Factor Model. In addition to the above-referenced studies conducted by Baker and colleagues, other researchers as well have conducted empirical examination of parental ABs including Hands and Warshak (2011), Johnston (2003), Laughrea (2002), and Lopez, Iglesias, and Garcia (2014).

Quantitative Research on Factor 5

Factor 5 of the Baker Five-Factor Model establishes that the child who is rejecting a parent is exhibiting some or all of the eight behavioral manifestations of PA. Simply rejecting a parent is not in and of itself proof that the child is alienated, although it may feel that way to the rejected parent. The Baker Five-Factor Model requires that the child actually exhibits this set of highly unique and specific behaviors. These behaviors were first identified by Gardner (1985) as highly unusual in any setting except for contested custody cases. They were found to be clinically relevant by front-line practitioners and experts in the field of children of divorce—even those who do not uniformly accept all aspects of PA theory (Kelly & Johnston, 2001)—and then subsequently validated through empirical research.

For example, Baker and Darnall (2007) provided self-identified rejected parents with a list of behaviors to check which ones their rejecting child was exhibiting. The list contained the eight behaviors identified by Gardner as well as other behaviors that a rejecting child could plausibly exhibit. The parents were also asked to write a narrative description of each behavior that they endorsed. The findings demonstrated consistent endorsement only for the original eight behaviors along with congruent narratives.

Baker, Burkhard, and Kelly (2012) asked alienated children as well as non-alienated children of divorce to complete a question-

naire about their relationship with their parents (designed to elicit responses related to the eight behaviors of alienation). Using the scores on the Baker Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ), researchers were able to reclassify the children with 96% accuracy. College students completed the BAQ in another study and were found to have higher scores if they also endorsed more items on the BSQ (Baker & Eichler, 2016).

Baker and colleagues (Baker, Miller, Bernet, & Adebayo, 2019) also tested the validity of the eight behavioral manifestations of PA with mental health professionals who rated the relevance of these behaviors for their physically abused child clients. Most clinicians rated the abused children as exhibiting attachment-enhancing behaviors (i.e. worried about the feelings of the abusive parent, recalled positive memories of that parent, saw both good and bad in that parent), while they rated the abused children as rarely exhibiting any of the eight behavioral manifestations of alienation. This means that even children of abusive parents do not generally exhibit these behaviors, which are, in fact, unique and specific to alienated children. Looking at just one of the behavioral manifestations, Bernet and colleagues (2020) found that alienated children and non-alienated children could be differentiated by their degree of splitting (i.e., seeing one parent as all good and the other as all bad) using the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, 2005).

This corpus of research provides considerable support for the reliability and validity of the components of the Five-Factor Model as well as the model itself.

Bonus Information: Reviews of the Literature

For additional reading, there have been several comprehensive reviews of PA research, including: Baker (2020), a book chapter; Harman, Warshak, Lorandos, and Florian (2022), an article in a peer-reviewed journal; and Marques, Narciso, and Ferreira (2020), a journal article by Portuguese psychologists. A frequently quoted review of PA research, a book chapter, was published by Saini, Johnston, Fidler, and Bala (2016), which summarized the current status of PA research:

There is remarkable agreement about the behavioral strategies parents can use to potentially manipulate their children's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs in ways that may interfere with their relationship with the other parent. The cluster of symptoms or behaviors indicating the presence of alienation in the child can also be reliably identified. (p. 423)

Saini et al. were referring to PA research regarding Factors 4 and 5 of the Baker Five-Factor Model, and their conclusions were the same as the findings in this chapter.

Chapter 14

PARENTAL ALIENATION AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Current terminology for domestic violence (DV) is *intimate partner distress* (e.g., incessant arguing) and *intimate partner violence* (e.g., physical and sexual abuse). The concepts of DV and parental alienation (PA) interact in two important but distinct ways: (1) Causing PA in a child may be a component of DV. That is, after the couple divorces, the abuser may continue to control the children and alienate them from the ex-spouse as a way to punish the former partner. (2) An abusive parent may claim that the children shun and dislike that parent because the favored parent has indoctrinated the children and alienated them, not because of the abusive acts of the rejected parent. In (1), the abusive parent has added alienating behaviors (ABs) to their repertoire of physical and sexual abuse of the former spouse. In (2), the abusive parent wrongly attributes the children's rejection to the ABs of the former spouse.⁷

Alienating Behaviors as a Form of Domestic Violence

DV comes in many forms—physical, social, sexual, and emotional. For almost 40 years, family courts have acknowledged ABs as emotional or psychological abuse of a child and have entered orders, decrees, and opinions to address this abusive behavior and put a stop to it (Lorandos, 2020a). One of the most challenging aspects of litigating or adjudicating a case involving allegations of PA are the simultaneous allegations of DV. In some cases, the issue of DV is raised to either detract or

7. This chapter is based partly on Joshi (2020a) and Joshi (2020b).

defend against claims of PA. In other cases, they are the opposite sides of the same coin and PA, similar to DV, is a part of the family violence dynamic. The concepts of DV and PA are intertwined: causing PA is a form of DV. The abuser—the alienating parent—continues to control the children following divorce or separation and alienate them from the ex-spouse as a way to punish the former partner. PA causes significant psychological and emotional harm to children.

Increasingly, alienating behaviors are being recognized not as isolated incidents but as part of broader patterns of family violence (Hine, 2024). These behaviors are enacted over time, both before and after parental separation, and often coexist with other abusive strategies, such as psychological abuse, verbal and emotional manipulation, and coercive control. Harman, Kruk, and Hines (2018) wrote, “This complex form of aggression entails a parental figure engaging in the long-term use of a variety of aggressive behaviors to harm the relationship between their child and another parental figure, and/or to hurt the other parental figure directly because of their relationship with their child” (p. 1275). Also, Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, and Bala (2008) found that “abusive ex-partners are likely to attempt to alienate the children from the other parent’s affection (by asserting blame for the dissolution of the family and telling negative stories), sabotage family plans (by continuing criticism or competitive bribes), and undermine parental authority (by explicitly instructing the children not to listen or obey)” (p. 503).

It can be argued that parental ABs are tantamount to child abuse. Child abuse is a broad and amorphous term but is “generally defined as a specific form of harm to children that is *significant* and may be attributed to *human agency* that is proscribed, proximate, and preventable” (emphases in original) (Harman et al., 2018, p. 1278). Family courts have viewed these behaviors as a form of “emotional abuse that should not be tolerated” (*McClain v. McClain*, 2017). Courts have also acknowledged that such behaviors can cause “a child lifelong suffering” (*In re H.M.*, 2019). Mental health professionals have cautioned us that ABs that cause PA constitute child psychological abuse (Verrocchio, Baker, & Bernet, 2016). Indeed, experts have found that the tactics used by alienating parents are often tantamount to extreme psychological maltreatment of children and of targeted parents (Baker, 2010).

Research by Harman, Maniotes, and Grubb (2021) highlights how the power imbalances observed in PA mirror those seen in intimate

terrorism, a form of DV characterized by dominance and control (Johnson, 2008). When the alienating parent holds primary or sole custody, they are in a position to exercise significant power over the child's access to and perception of the targeted parent. This monopolization of influence reflects the same patterns of coercion, isolation, and psychological abuse documented in traditional cases of intimate terrorism.

ABs have a harmful impact on children, even if alienation itself is not evident. When ABs are present in a family, the child is exposed to a range of abusive behaviors such as coercion, control, and/or manipulation (Verhaar, Matthewson, & Bentley, 2022). Similarly, Harman and Matthewson (2020) describe ABs as a form of family violence regardless of their severity because they involve emotional abuse, coercion, intimidation, threats, isolation, denial, and more. Even if a child is resilient enough to resist being alienated, ABs singularly and collectively constitute the vehicle of harmfulness within families.

Claiming Parental Alienation to Avoid Responsibility for Deficient Parenting

There appears to exist a meme of misinformation: Men who successfully defend against accusations of abuse or DV and thereafter win custody are called “batterers” and “abusers with custody” (Meier, 2009, p. 234). Given that the majority of states employ rather low standards of proof to “substantiate” or “indicate” a child abuse allegation during the initial investigation, this is a preposterous assertion and an example of ideology masquerading as science. Nevertheless, DV exists and so do ABs and PA and none should be condoned. The problem lies in binary thinking: the either-or approach and the false dichotomy. Courts do not ignore the evidence of DV or abuse when asked to make a finding of PA. Nor do they ignore evidence of PA or ABs when asked to adjudicate DV or abuse allegations. Both PA and DV are part of the equation that a court is expected to resolve when asked to rule in the best interests of a child.

For instance, the Baker Five-Factor Model is a method for determining whether a child who is aligned with one parent while rejecting the other has been alienated. It is only when all five factors are present that one can conclude the child is alienated. Factor 3 of this model requires that the now-rejected parent did not engage in abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient parenting, which could reasonably be

expected to cause a child to reject a parent. This requires a factfinder to investigate exactly what the rejected parent is alleged to have done to the child and whether such action (or omission) justifies the child's rejection of the parent. (See Chapter 2 for discussion of the Five-Factor Model.)

Distinguishing Alienation and Estrangement

It is generally understood that there are many possible causes of parent-child contact problem, also called resist/refuse dynamic and contact refusal (Garber, 2024). In practice, however, the most frequent possibilities are estrangement (rejection of a parent for a good reason, such as abuse or highly deficient parenting) and alienation (rejection of a parent without a good reason, prompted by the ABs of the favored parent). Thus, it becomes the task of mental health evaluators, child protection personnel, guardians ad litem, and judges to investigate whether PA, DV, or some combination of the two drive a child's contact refusal. (See Chapter 3 for the "Psychosocial Assessment of Contact Refusal.")

It is important to distinguish estrangement and alienation for several reasons. First, DV and child maltreatment are serious matters, and such abusive behavior should neither be ignored nor condoned. A child who has been subjected to severe abuse or who has witnessed a persistent pattern of DV may reject the abusive parent not because of indoctrination by the favored parent, but because of the psychological and cognitive harm such abusive behavior wreaks on the child's psyche. Also, false allegations of abuse or DV are not uncommon in contentious divorce and child custody proceedings. It is important to investigate these allegations to ensure they have merit. Perhaps most importantly, treatment interventions differ when comparing PA cases with those involving abuse or neglect; it is important to rule out child maltreatment on the part of the rejected parent before making a decision regarding the most suitable intervention.

The treatment should be tailored to the cause of the ruptured or damaged parent-child relationship. If the rejected parent actually engaged in abuse or neglect of the child (not just alleged by the favored parent and/or child), then the appropriate treatment would be the one designed for abusive parents. For instance, "abuse-specific treatment models," such as Alternatives for Families: A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (AF-CBT), are designed to decrease the reliance on

punitive parenting styles of an abusive parent and increase the use of non-punitive behavior management strategies on the part of the parent, while simultaneously helping the child process the trauma from the abuse (Kolko & Swenson, 2002). But an abuse-specific treatment model would be ill-suited, if not catastrophically counter-productive, for PA cases. An alienation-specific treatment is typically designed to gently but firmly confront the child's false beliefs and distorted perceptions about the rejected parent and to provide them with tools and opportunities to correct such false and distorted thoughts and feelings. Such treatment provides experiential opportunities for the alienated parent to once again function as a safe, loving, and available attachment figure for the child (Warshak & Otis, 2010). It would be contraindicated to put an abused child in an alienation-specific treatment and vice versa. (See Chapter 7 for interventions for PA.)

Finally, in cases involving PA, allegations of DV or abuse are likely to continue to be made by the favored parent or the child as an excuse for the child's resistance to or rejection of the rejected parent. It is important that the court and the court-involved professionals fully address this issue at the earliest opportunity to make findings of fact and resolve it one way or the other.

It is rare to come across a situation where a hybrid case of alienation and estrangement, involving past allegations of abuse or DV, turns into a pure alienation case; but it is by no means impossible. Even in cases where there is a bonafide history of DV, it is not a *fait accompli* that a court will see this evidence as a danger to the child and therefore award primary custody to the victim of such DV. Evidence of ongoing severe ABs has raised more alarm for courts than evidence of DV or abusive conduct in the remote past—irrespective of gender.

A highly counterintuitive feature of PA is that most abused children continue to seek a relationship with their abusive parents. On the other hand, alienated children (who were never abused) strongly reject a relationship with the targeted parent. How does one address this apparent conundrum? One way is to acknowledge just how rare and unusual it is for a child to actually reject a parent, especially in a vehement manner without any ambivalence as typically occurs in cases involving PA. Baker and Schneiderman (2015) explained that children who have been beaten, molested, and abandoned by a parent generally do not behave in a callous and extreme manner when dealing with the abusive parent. It is well known among those in the field of child maltreatment

that despite the abuse and neglect experienced at the hand of a parent, most children want to maintain a relationship with the abuser. This counterintuitive phenomenon of abused children wanting to maintain a relationship with their abuser is referred to as “bonded to the abuser” by the researchers. It strongly supports the premise that children form and maintain attachment relationships with their caregivers, even abusive caregivers.

So severe are ABs and their effect on the children’s emotional and psychological well-being that it is plausible a court may grant custody to a parent who is the target of ABs even if that parent was once guilty of engaging in abusive behavior or DV. But it is not because the courts choose to ignore evidence of DV or abusive behavior. Rather it is because they give greater weight to the concern for protecting the child from the ongoing ABs compared to the risk of reoffending by a parent with a prior history of DV.

Bonus Information: Trial and Appellate Cases

Many trial and appellate legal cases in the U.S. illustrate the interactions between allegations and findings of DV and PA. For example:

Jillian EE v. Kane FF (2018). A New York appellate court affirmed a trial court’s rejection of a father’s allegations of PA. The trial court awarded custody to the mother because of a documented history of DV, which explained and justified the mother’s efforts to keep the child away to protect him from the father’s violent behavior.

Delekta v. Delekta (2019). The Michigan Court of Appeals affirmed a trial court’s denial of a mother’s motion to change the custody of the parties’ two children because, as the mother alleged, the father had “physically and emotionally abused them.” The Court found that the mother had called in 17 complaints [to Child Protective Services], making false accusations against the father, that “no evidence substantiated [mother’s] . . . allegations of domestic violence or abuse,” and that it was logical for the trial court to consider the presence of PA.

In re the Marriage of Henry John Shen (2002). A Washington trial court acknowledged that though the father had admitted assaulting the mother during the marriage, the father did not pose a present danger to the parties’ daughter. The court considered the totality of circumstances: the father’s proactive efforts to undergo psychiatric treatment for DV counseling, the signs of PA in the child, and the mother’s sending letters to the father’s friends, which included allegations against him.

Joy B. v. Everett B. (2019). The Supreme Court of Alaska affirmed a trial court's ruling that awarded the father sole legal and primary custody of the child and awarded the mother supervised visitation despite the father's having a history of DV. The court determined that the father's acts though problematic were "situational" and that he posed no threat of committing future acts of DV. On the other hand, the court was alarmed by the mother's behaviors that demonstrated PA and how her behavior interfered with the father's relationship with the child.

Chapter 15

PARENTAL ALIENATION AND AMERICAN FAMILY COURTS

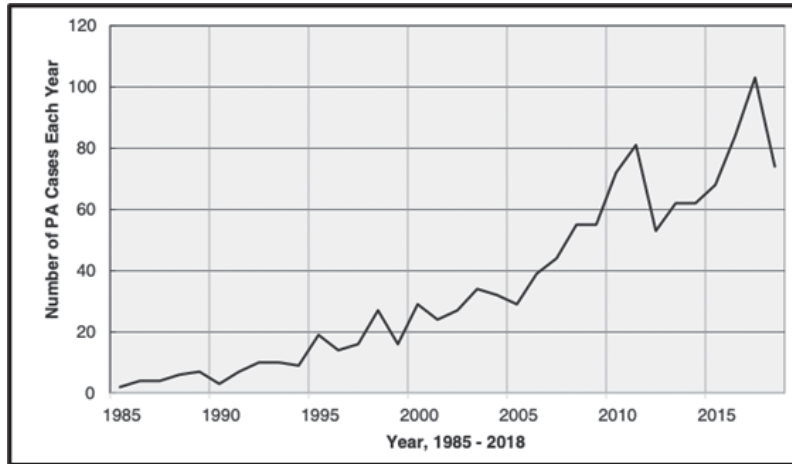
Parental alienation (PA), the unjustified rejection by a child of a once-beloved parent, has been present in American courts almost since their inception (Bernet, 2020b). Its appearance in family courts has been both as a shield employed by truly alienated parents to improve their relationships with, and custody of, their children, as well as a sword wielded by justifiably estranged parents who attempt to pass the buck to the other parent for the consequences of their poor relationship with their child. This chapter addresses testimony regarding PA and also legislation that affects how courts handle PA cases.

Prevalence of Parental Alienation Testimony

PA is prevalent in legal settings: One study found 1,181 cases where PA was raised through 2019 (Lorandos, 2020b, 2020c; see Figure 1). Similarly, in 2021, researchers found 953 appellate cases in the U.S. where one parent was found or alleged to be alienating the children (Harman & Lorandos, 2021). Accordingly, U.S. judges are quite familiar with and adept at ferreting out PA: As one family court judge stated, “There is no doubt that parental alienation exists. . . . ‘Anybody old enough to drink coffee knows that embittered parties to divorce can and do manipulate their children’” (*J.F. v. D.F.*, 2018, p. 10). Another wrote, “There is no reasonable dispute that high-conflict custody disputes frequently involve acts by one parent designed to obstruct or sabotage the opposing parent’s relationship with the child” (*Martin v. Martin*, 2020, p. 7).

Figure 1

Number of cases where PA was found admissible in U.S. Courts, 1985–2018, showing increase over time.



From Lorandos (2020b), *Parental Alienation – Science and Law* (p. 371). Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publisher, Ltd. Reprinted with permission.

Critics of Parental Alienation

Yet, while the “overwhelming majority of mental health and legal professionals accept the basic premise of the theory of PA, i.e., that some parents manipulate or indoctrinate their children to dislike or fear the other (targeted) parent,” there is a contingent of detractors who have both carried on and been swayed by a campaign of misinformation that PA does not exist (Joshi, 2024, p. 23). These folks turn a blind eye to the 40 years of qualitative and quantitative research demonstrating PA, including the Parental Alienation Database with 800 references to qualitative and 200 to quantitative research (www.pasg.info/pasg-database). Keeping their heads firmly in the sand, they characterize the phenomenon as a “pseudo-scientific theory” and “pseudo-scientific mythology” (Leonetti, 2023, pp. 223–224). Their primary explanation for the phenomenon is that protective parents never lie; instead, damaged, violent parents falsify allegations of PA to explain their children’s rejection (Leonetti, 2023).

In order to reach this conclusion, these PA deniers assert that protective parents never make false allegations of child abuse in custody disputes—a claim that anyone familiar with high-conflict divorces

knows to be false (*Martin v. Martin*, 2020). More than just anecdotal evidence, quantitative research of child abuse reports, generally, also demonstrates that the vast majority of these reports are unsubstantiated (Holbrook & Hudziak, 2020). At the same time, PA deniers unironically claim that all allegations of PA are lies. And yet the reach of PA deniers remains strong, particularly through the opportunistic use of discrete tragedies to force unhealthy changes to existing laws, which undermine courts' abilities to order effective interventions. Consider two recent statutes enacted in California and Colorado—both used to limit a tried-and-true therapeutic method for reversing PA in severely alienated children.

From Kayden's Law to Attacks on Reunification Therapy

In 2018, 7-year-old Kayden Mancuso was killed by her biological father, while in his custody, despite her mother's allegations of the father's domestic violence (Zupancic, 2024). This, rightfully, triggered federal legislation under the reauthorized Violence Against Women Act to add Keeping Children Safe from Family Violence (Leonetti, 2023). Under this legislation, family court personnel must be educated about domestic violence (Leonetti, 2023). And yet, somehow, recent legislation has transformed this excellent addition to family court proceedings into an attack on proper reunification therapy for severely alienated children.

Severe Parental Alienation and Its Treatment

As noted above, alienated children reject the targeted parent to some degree. Mild to moderately alienated children may demonstrate some hostility, but those that are severely alienated demonstrate they “diligently and resolvedly oppose contact with the target parent and may shroud or flee to prevent any form of contact” (Reay, 2015, p. 198). For these children and teenagers, traditional reunification therapy simply doesn't work. As Warshak (2019) identified, in traditional “talking therapy,” severely alienated children are often “permitted to regulate whether and under what circumstances they will spend time in each parent's care,” which means they don't spend time with the targeted parent (p. 646). Moreover, even if the court awards custody to the tar-

geted parent, because the “children . . . have become accustomed to resisting the custodial arrangements. . . . They may threaten to defy court orders, run away, destroy property, harm themselves, or hurt the parent” (p. 647).

In addition to losing a relationship with the targeted parent, severely alienated children are actually the victims of child abuse by the alienating parent (Bernet & Lorandos, 2023b). Long-term effects of PA include low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, inability to trust, alienation from their own children, and their own divorce (Baker, 2007). To repair these terribly damaged relationships, extraordinary (yet humane) efforts are required. One is the temporary exclusion of the alienating parent. Why? Because severely alienating parents have only been emboldened by years of successfully violating court-ordered parenting plans (Kelly, 2010). Absent the exclusion, the alienating parent will continue to actively and avidly influence the children to similarly defy the intervention (Warshak, 2019).

A second reason for the temporary exclusion and multi-day overnight program is that the therapy must be intensive in order to be effective. Why? Severely alienated children need time and space to process the fact that they’ve been alienated and what they want to do about it. For example, with the multi-day, overnight Family Bridges program (Warshak, 2010a), children spend an entire day just learning how authority figures generally manipulate others and their relationships and how easy it is to believe something true is false and vice versa. A second day is spent addressing divorcing families and children in the middle, and a third on the children’s own experience of being manipulated. Throughout this time, the children spend quality time with the targeted parent and begin to heal the relationship; and, thereafter, they remain with the targeted parent and away from the alienating parent in order to help the lessons take hold.

Recent Misguided Legislation

Colorado began the foray into limiting this type of effective reunification therapy in 2023, with a harmful adaptation to Kayden’s law (Dreyfus, 2023). Failing to understand the dynamics of severe PA and what is required to reverse it, the Colorado law precludes the cessation of contact with the alienating parent (Uniform Dissolution of Marriage Act, 2023).

California enacted legislation in 2023, following the tragic killing of a young boy by his father similar to that which triggered Kayden’s law (Chow & Chambers, 2023). The legislation, “Piqui’s Law,” likewise prohibits courts from entering the type of strong reunification orders that are solely effective in rectifying severe PA. That is, the law prohibits orders for programs that require: (1) no-contact orders; (2) overnight, out-of-state, and multi-day stays; (3) transfer of custody; and (4) private transportation that may be “acutely distressing” (Counseling of Parents and Child, 2024).

While these laws may reflect a justifiable reaction to the tragedies that occur when a judge clearly got competing allegations of domestic violence wrong, the statutory provisions will do far more harm than good. The protective separation of the child from the alienating parent, followed by a temporary no-contact period or supervised visitation, is frequently necessary to reverse the alienation. Moreover, it is highly effective; a study of Family Bridges found that it had a success rate of between 75% and 96% with the sample studied (Warshak, 2019). Thus, these well-meaning but misguided laws prevent judges—and, in particular, judges who are knowledgeable of PA—from making orders that will actually be effective against severe PA.

Judicial Continuing Education

Most judges are well-trained in identifying PA and crafting solutions. Consistent with Kayden’s law, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (2022) also advocate for improving the training of legal professionals so they are better able to identify ABs. When judges are properly trained, they are very capable of evaluating the opinions of court-appointed evaluators as well as the parties’ experts. Judges can determine when “experts failed to adequately consider reasonable alternative explanations,” as well as if they have “a poor understanding of parental alienation, insufficient efforts to reduce bias, or both” (Warshak, 2020a, p. 63).

Well-trained judges know how to avoid false positives of PA, such as when a parent’s “personality trait (e.g., narcissistic personality trait)” is problematic but does not interfere with proper parenting (Joshi, 2024, p. 24). Similarly, well-trained, wise judges know not to over-simplify a family dynamic into “either parent A must be abusive towards the

children or parent B must be alienating the children” (Joshi, 2024, p. 24). They recognize this false dichotomy and are aware that parent–child contact problems (PCCP) “may derive from a complex interplay of multiple dynamics” within the family and, in fact, that family violence and PA “often exist in tandem” (Sullivan, Pruett, & Johnston, 2024, pp. 71, 72). They are also vigilant in finding (or refuting) any confirmatory bias of the evaluator, who may be “on a hunt” for alienation as opposed to being open to alternative explanations (Joshi, 2024, p. 24).

These well-trained judges are aware of how any given action can be evidence of alienation—or twisted into seeming like it. For instance, Warshak (2020a) set out an excellent scenario for how one action may (or may not) be PA: a parent gives a child a cell phone. Signs that this is part of an alienation campaign would include: the parent has planted a seed of the “dangerousness” of the other parent and that the phone is for calling 911; the parent told the child to use it to record the other parent; or the parent insists the child use the phone incessantly to call the providing parent—and ignore the targeted parent. On the other hand, if the parent merely provided a phone for the child to call when she felt like it, this is not a sign of PA. Savvy judges are aware of these possibilities and exercise due diligence to get the determination correct.

Likewise, well-trained judges know of the possibility of misconstruing a child’s potentially negative reactions to a parent that also do not show PA, including: “(1) parental separation; (2) behavior reflecting a difficult temperament; (3) reluctance to leave a parent who needs emotional support; (4) situation-specific resistance to being with a parent; (5) feeling closer to or having more rapport with one parent; (6) feeling more comfortable in one parent’s home, either because of differences in parenting styles or in the emotional atmosphere of the home; and (7) typical adolescent psychological functioning” (Joshi, 2024, p. 25). As Sullivan et al. (2024) described it, even if some alienating behaviors are present, this is “not necessarily the dominant factor accounting for PCCPs,” and a myriad of influences from parents, siblings, and extended family may be to blame (p. 73). Judges know this.

The wise judge in a New York custody dispute is a good example. The court made several findings that indicated PA, but refused to be captured by its specter and instead focused on three aspects of the family’s dynamics: (1) the alleged targeted parent was engaged in some of the same alienating behaviors as the other; (2) the behaviors

were occasional; and (3) most importantly, the children did not display any of the signs of alienation (*J.F. v. D.F.*, 2018).

In sum, the well-trained judges of U.S. family courts do a good job of recognizing and distinguishing between true and false claims of PA, as well as justifiable estrangement. When trained in alienating behaviors, evaluator bias, and the potential for false positives, combined with cognizance of the fact that children—and in particular adolescent children—often have negative reactions to their parents, properly educated judges successfully craft custody and visitation orders that repair, preserve, and protect family relationships.

Misinformation at the United Nations

The debate over the existence of PA, and what is needed to remedy it, extends far beyond the United States. In 2023, the Special Rapporteur to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, Reem Alsalem, submitted a report, *Custody, Violence against Women and Violence against Children*, to the Council (Alsalem, 2023). In it, Alsalem attempted to completely discredit the concept of PA, which she describes as a “pseudo-concept” (p. 1).

Among its many claims, the report strongly criticizes family court findings of PA, describing this as a “tendency to dismiss the history of domestic violence” and “ignoring histories of domestic violence” (p. 2). It also claims, without support, that “domestic violence and parental alienation are often blurred in family law systems,” and, consistent with other PA deniers, it completely rejects the idea of manipulative, alienating parents, whom the author characterizes as “protective mothers” (p. 5).

In response, two institutional authors, the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) and Global Action for Research Integrity in Parental Alienation (GARI-PA) submitted a scathing analysis of Alsalem’s report to the Human Rights Council, describing the report as containing “many misleading statements, extensive misinformation, blatant errors, use of science denial techniques, and deliberate misrepresentations of the current state of peer-reviewed published research, scientific inquiry, and case law support for the family dynamic of parental alienation” (PASG & GARI-PA, 2023, p. 9).

For example, Alsalem claims that PA “has been dismissed by medical, psychiatric, and psychological associations,” but she fails to support this

broad statement with a citation to a single such association (Alsalem, 2023, p. 3). As noted by the response authors, PA has been accepted by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (AFCC & NCJFCJ, 2022), the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Academy of Forensic Psychology (PASG & GARI-PA, 2023). In addition, it has also been described by the European Court of Human Rights as emotional child abuse (*Pisica*, 2019; *I.S.*, 2021).

Likewise, Alsalem's claim that there is "no commonly accepted clinical or scientific definition of 'parental alienation,'" was challenged by the response authors who pointed to a peer-reviewed article in *The Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, which defined the construct as: "a mental state in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies strongly with one parent (the favored parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without a good reason" (PASG & GARI-PA, 2023, p. 20). The response authors noted that 80% of child custody evaluators queried in one study agreed with this definition (PASG & GARI-PA, 2023).

Furthermore, the report is remarkably biased, with 175 of the 180 references (and 175 of the 198 footnotes) to works of PA critics (Alsalem, 2023; PASG & GARI-PA, 2023). While it is not clear how many PA proponents made submissions for the report, it is known that at least six were sent—and ignored (PASG & GARI-PA, 2023). And while "stakeholders and experts" were said to have been consulted in the report's preparation, there is nothing to indicate any PA and/or shared parenting experts were consulted, nor does it appear that any PA victims were either (Alsalem, 2023, p. 2; PASG & GARI-PA, 2023). As the response identifies: "The use of data from PA-detractors and totally ignoring data from PA-proponents is a testament to the fundamentally biased nature of this Report" (PASG & GARI-PA, 2023, p. 21).

In addition, the report repeatedly uses the pejorative "pseudo-science" in an attempt to attack the decades of research behind the construct of PA, which the report ignores (Alsalem, 2023; PASG & GARI-PA, 2023). Those decades of research include "213 empirical studies in ten different languages" regarding PA (Harman, Warshak, Lorandos, & Florian, 2022), as well as the 1,000 books, book chapters, and journal articles

related to the construct maintained at the Parental Alienation Database (www.pasg.info/pasg-database).

The report also claims that “[w]hen a father has alleged alienation by the mother, her custody rights have been removed 44 percent of the time” (Alsalem, 2023, p. 5). Yet, at least in the United States and Canada, studies have found that mere allegations of alienation did not result significantly in custody losses—only proven alienation did (Harman & Lorandos, 2021). Likewise, the author’s claim that fathers gained custody on such allegations 44% of the time, and mothers only 28% of the time is also belied by recent research that found the contrary to be true, i.e., that fathers had a 63.3% greater likelihood of losing custody where PA was found (Harman & Lorandos, 2021).

Finally, the report elides the fact that a variety of countries recognize PA and support efforts to remediate it, including Brazil, Colombia, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom (England and Wales) and the United States (Alsalem, 2023).

Chapter 16

THE RECOGNITION OF PARENTAL ALIENATION BY PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

The expanding recognition of parental alienation (PA) by professional organizations has been a crucial step toward understanding and addressing this complex family dynamic. This chapter provides examples of how PA is prompting legal and mental health professional bodies to establish guidelines, shape professional standards, develop assessment protocols, and implement legal and mental health interventions. Additionally, there are hundreds of relevant peer-reviewed articles published by journals related to child development, family law, forensic psychology and psychiatry, social work, child custody evaluation, trauma and abuse research, and family systems therapy.

Although the term “parental alienation” remains a subject of debate, its underlying cause—parental alienating behaviors (ABs)—is widely acknowledged as potentially harmful to children. Organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts have incorporated PA-related considerations into their practice guidelines, reinforcing its relevance in clinical and legal settings. A growing number of professional organizations recognize the seriousness and impact of PA, signifying a critical step toward broader understanding and acceptance within the professional community. Here are some key examples (in alphabetical order):

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP, 1997) published *Practice Parameters for Child Custody Evaluation*, an “AACAP Official Action,” which was adopted by the governing body of the organization. The practice parameters included a section with the heading “Parental Alienation,” which stated:

There are times during a custody dispute when a child can become extremely hostile toward one of the parents. The child finds nothing positive in his or her relationship with the parent and prefers no contact. The evaluator must assess this apparent alienation and form a hypothesis of its origins and meaning. Sometimes, negative feelings toward one parent are catalyzed and fostered by the other parent; sometimes, they are an outgrowth of serious problems in the relationship with the rejected parent. . . . Courts have great difficulty interpreting these dynamics and turn to evaluators for guidance. (pp. 59S–60S)

AACAP also publishes suggestions for parenting called Facts for Families. The Facts for Families regarding “Children and Divorce” explains: “In rare situations, a child may reject contact with one parent. This may happen for no apparent reason or with the encouragement of the other parent. This can be harmful and painful for the child and the rejected parent” (AACAP, 2017).

American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers

The American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) recognizes the phenomenon of parental alienation, although it does not use those specific words. In their *Child-Centered Residential Guidelines*, the AAML (2015) emphasized the importance of protecting children from ABs and provided guidance to family law professionals on how to identify and respond to this issue. The *Guidelines* stated:

A child may also resist parenting due to contrived or magnified concerns regarding a parent that may be supported by the non-rejected parent. In cases where the concerns are unsupported or exaggerated, early and ongoing Court intervention is imperative to halt the conduct of the parent and to provide immediate consequences for the violation of court orders. (p. 5)

The *Guidelines* also provide a list of ABs that parents may engage in that can harm a child, including denigrating the other parent in front of the child, limiting the child's contact with the other parent, making false accusations against the other parent, interfering with the child's relationship with the other parent, and creating a hostile environment for the other parent. The AAML *Guidelines* emphasize the importance of early intervention in cases of PA and recommend that family law professionals take steps to protect children from further harm. They also recommend that parents who engage in ABs seek professional help to address their own issues and improve their parenting skills.

American Academy of Pediatrics

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recognizes PA as a contributing factor to the difficulties faced by children of divorce. In their clinical report, "Helping Children and Families Deal with Divorce and Separation," the AAP (2016/2022) acknowledged that PA can cause distress in children. The report emphasized the importance of pediatricians being aware of parental attitudes and behaviors that may indicate family dysfunction and the need for intervention. The AAP also provided guidance for pediatricians on how to address PA, including counseling parents and children, recommending reading material, and referring families to mental health professionals.

American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children

In official position papers on their website, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) has expressed conflicting and perhaps contradictory opinions regarding PA. On the one hand, APSAC leadership acknowledges PA exists and it may sometimes be identified in a child custody evaluation; on the other hand, they strongly discourage the introduction of PA and similar constructs in legal proceedings.

For example, an APSAC Position Paper (2019) from several years ago provided this guidance for child custody evaluators, indicating an awareness of the reality of PA:

If interpersonal violence is determined unlikely, one possible explanation for the false allegation [of family violence] may be an attempt to alienate the child from a parent. Significant evidence of intentional indoctrination by a parent should be considered in determining best interest. Such indoctrination is a form of psychological maltreatment.

However, a more recent APSAC Position Statement (2022) actively discouraged the use of PA and related concepts:

APSAC stands opposed to the use of PAS, PAD, and PA as a presumptive explanation for child resistance, refusal, and fear of contact with the less preferred parent in contested child custody cases. Science and careful evaluations of the causes of child resistance, refusal, and fear of contact in particular cases should guide investigations by Child Protective Services and evaluations by child custody experts.

Of course, the sixteen authors of this book—*Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis*—agree that no child custody evaluator should “presume” that a child’s contact refusal is the manifestation of PA without conducting a scientific and careful evaluation.

American Psychological Association

The American Psychological Association (APA) recognizes PA as a complex phenomenon that can have detrimental effects on children in high-conflict divorce cases. The APA’s *Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings* (2022) highlighted the importance of addressing pathogenic parenting practices, including ABs, and the need for culturally competent practice when evaluating families. The APA *Guidelines* also acknowledged the challenges and controversies surrounding PA, particularly the indiscriminate use of the term and the potential for misuse in custody disputes. The *Guidelines* said:

Addressing parent-child contact problems can be a controversial concept in child custody proceedings. . . . These problems may be subsumed under such terms as resist-refusal dynamics, alienating behaviors, domestic violence and/or child abuse, restrictive gatekeeping, and parental alienation, among others.

Association of Family and Conciliation Courts

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) recognizes PA as a serious issue with potentially devastating consequences for children and families. For example, the AFCC *Guidelines for Parenting Coordination* (2019) acknowledge PA as a form of emotional abuse that can occur in high-conflict, co-parenting cases. The AFCC *Guidelines* recommend that practitioners of parenting coordination should have training regarding the “Continuum of parent–child contact problems and resist–refuse family dynamics, including affinity, alignments, realistic estrangement and alienation” (Appendix A, p. 5).

Also, the AFCC *Guidelines for Parenting Plan Evaluations in Family Law Cases* (2022) recommended that evaluators assess and describe the co-parenting relationship, including PA concerns. They said that child custody evaluators should have education and training that includes: “Parent-child contact problems and resist–refuse dynamics, including possible underlying causes such as parental alienating behaviors, compromised parenting, child maltreatment, and exposure to intimate partner violence, among other causes” (p. 10).

Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice

The Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (AFT), a U.K.-based organization, dedicated an entire issue of their journal *Context* to the topic of PA. In the editorial introducing this special issue, Chimera (2018) emphasized the complexity and challenges of PA, stating that it “encompasses a number of elements and, as with all social constructs, there is both a degree of subjectivity in its identification and some controversy about what to do about it” (p. 1). Chimera believes that PA is a systemic issue that requires a multifaceted approach, and this special issue aimed to provide a platform for different perspectives to address this growing concern. By bringing together experts from various fields, the journal examined a range of therapeutic approaches for rebuilding fractured relationships and mitigating harm, while also emphasizing the crucial role of parent education, programs designed to reduce conflict, and resources that empower families to understand and address the dynamics of alienation.

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) is a public service group funded by England's Ministry of Justice. It focuses solely on family court cases, operating independently from child protection services. Family court advisers assist the court by assessing children and families and making recommendations that are in the children's best interests. Cafcass provides several guides for its staff and also educational material for children and families. For example, the Cafcass document, *Children's Resistance or Refusal to Spending Time with a Parent: A Structured Guide* (2019), appropriately describes multiple causes of parent-child contact problems. The reasons for child refusal/resistance can be categorized as the four A's: "appropriate justified rejection, alignment/affinity, attachment, or alienating behaviours" (p. 3). The *Guide* provides examples of ABs, such as "Has made allegations against the other parent which the court has found to be false" and "Is not motivated to seek help to restore the child's relationship with the other parent" (p. 10).

Government of Canada, Department of Justice

The Department of Justice of Canada recognizes PA as a serious issue that can have a significant impact on children and families. The Department has published reports that specifically address PA. These publications reflect the Government of Canada's commitment to raising awareness of PA and providing support to affected families.

Managing Contact Difficulties: A Child-Centred Approach discusses parental ABs in the context of managing contact difficulties between children and their parents after separation or divorce. The authors (Freeman & Freeman, 2003/2022) wrote, "An in-depth assessment is required to determine whether a child is alienated, to understand the process of alienation and to develop an intervention plan" (Section 4.2.5). The publication also notes that ABs can have a serious impact on children, including emotional and psychological harm.

A second document, *Making Appropriate Parenting Arrangements in Family Violence Cases: Applying the Literature to Identify Promising Practices, 2023*, discusses the tension between allegations of ABs and allegations of family violence. The authors (Jaffe, Bala, Medhekar, & Scott, 2023) said:

An increasing number of high-conflict cases in Canadian family courts involve claims of parental alienation, claims by one parent that the other is manipulating or influencing a child to reject the other parent. . . . Although it is important not to minimize the seriousness of genuine alienation, there are some who argue that many parents, especially mothers, who raise concerns about family violence are making false or exaggerated claims of abuse to allow them to alienate their children and exclude the other parent from their children's lives. There are challenging issues related to proof of claims of both alienation and family violence. (p. 27)

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) and AFCC jointly recognized the importance of collaboration among professionals in addressing PA. The *AFCC and NCJFCJ Joint Statement on Parent-Child Contact Problems* (2022) emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to addressing parent-child contact problems, including PA. The *Joint Statement* encouraged family law practitioners to receive “regular and ongoing training on the various factors related to parent-child contact problems including . . . intimate partner violence, substance misuse, high conflict, denigration, parental alienating behaviors, and healthy parenting.”

Bonus Information

On many occasions, critics of PA theory have incorrectly stated that the concept of PA has not been accepted by mental health and legal professional organizations, so it should not be introduced in court testimony. However, the information in the chapter will help attorneys who need to establish that PA theory meets *Daubert* or *Frye* criteria for testimony by expert witnesses. For example, the general premise in *Frye v. United States* (1923) was that an expert opinion is admissible if the scientific technique on which the opinion is based is “generally accepted” as reliable in the relevant scientific community. In *Daubert v. Merrell Dow* (1993), the U.S. Supreme Court itemized several criteria for courts to consider when vetting proposed expert testimony, one of which was “whether the technique or theory has been generally accepted in the scientific community.” It is clear that since the 1990s, PA theory has been accepted by numerous professional organizations in the U.S. and

other countries, including the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Psychological Association, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. This chapter should help attorneys demonstrate that proposed expert testimony regarding PA meets *Daubert* and *Frye* criteria in the U.S.

Chapter 17

INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS OF PARENTAL ALIENATION

The goal of this chapter is to explain that in many countries, parental alienation (PA) is considered one of several explanations for children's contact refusal. Also, to underline the importance of learning to recognize alienating behaviors (ABs) in order to avoid violating the child's best interests. In most countries, 10%–30% of children are estimated to have lost contact with a parent (Lohse, Hertsberg, Grundt, Kolmonen, & Hilmansson, 2024). The reasons for this loss can be a lack of parental responsibility or competence, abuse, neglect, or violence. In recent decades, an increasing number of children have lost contact with a parent due to PA, something that must be taken seriously.

Global Snapshots

Sweden. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, www.unicef.org) promotes the rights and well-being of children in nearly 200 countries. It was pointed out by UNICEF in 2016 that there was no evaluation of the many children in Sweden who were separated from their own families and taken into forced custody. Since then, the number of children in compulsory care has grown. Now, forced custody is also used in complex custody cases where social services sympathize with one parent and dislike the other parent. In this way, the authorities help in alienating children. There is still no evaluation of these children.

India. A judgment from the Supreme Court of India in 2017 in the case of *Vivek Singh v. Romani Singh* (Appeal No. 3962 of 2016) was historic as it referred to PA. It was followed by a petition from a non-government organization called Child Rights Foundation (CRF)

before the Court, which urged PA to be declared as child abuse and in violation of Article 213 of the Constitution of India.

United States. On September 21, 2019, Ty Tesoriero, 10 years old, was killed by his father in Lone Tree, Colorado. Then, the father, who was about to lose custody of his son, shot himself with the same gun. According to local television news (Kovaleski, 2019), Ty's mother, Jing Tesoriero, said, "There were so many agencies that were involved, so many, I begged, talked to, tried to convince everybody to do something." The mother's attorney said, "The judge had communicated that she did want to take the matter under advisement. She did anticipate an order being issued over the weekend for Ty to be removed, but within eight hours Ty was murdered." The father, Anthony Tesoriero, reportedly had a history of bullying the case workers and manipulating the legal system. Subsequently, Ty's mother started to fight for a law to make coercive control seen as a part of domestic violence.

Argentina. In November 2024, the First International and Interdisciplinary Conference on Parental Alienation and Domestic Abuse was held at the University of Buenos Aires Law School. The conference was chaired by Mauricio Luis Mizrahi, Doctor of Law and Social Sciences, former judge of the National Court of Civil Appeals.

These glimpses demonstrate that PA is real and a worldwide problem.

International Feminism

Socioeconomic improvements and democratic political advances benefitted the working classes and the women's liberation movement as well. The women's rights movement gained legitimate political power but has gone from a marginalized position to an institutionalized position with hegemonic control over what were, and still are, considered valid narratives in modern societies. Domestic violence is thus still seen primarily as a problem of violent men abusing women and children, although both mothers and fathers can abuse each other and the children.

As with every liberating movement in society, it was prone to authoritarian exaggeration. It came along with efforts of social engineering and the idea that family authority could be substituted by public services. Compulsory child rehoming with scant justification and child custody decisions on random grounds have been evident manifestations of what we might call "illiberal liberalism" or "symbolic liberalism" in the Western world (Hanafi, 2023). In many Western countries, research

and public surveys asking the children (Danish Children's Committee, 2016) or analyzing public health data (Gender Equality Ministry, 2021) show that domestic violence and violence against children include men and women equally. Some data indicate that more women than men use psychological violence against children in today's society. For four decades, an ideological gender war has been going on. There is a need for a bridge over the troubled water—for the sake of promoting each child's best interests.

Role of the United Nations

If a child expresses that they do not wish to meet with their formerly loved parent, this may be the result of the child's being turned against the rejected parent. The reality of children all over the world being forced—through one parent's ABs—to choose between the parents violates some of the child's most essential human rights, according to the U.N. Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), an important, legally binding agreement signed by 196 countries (as of July 2022). It is also a violation of “the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society that is entitled to protection by society and the State,” as is stated in Section 3 of Article 16 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948.

The child's best interests are a unifying concept and goal in nearly all family laws in the Western world. They can be generally defined in accordance with the UNCRC. It is well known through many international studies that children benefit post-separation from sharing everyday life with both parents. The best interests of the child can thus be seen as a synthesis of the child's fundamental needs and their fundamental human and legal rights. This synthesis constitutes a general—and also an objective interdisciplinary—definition of the best interests of the child:

- To be well enough taken care of with love and acceptance by both parents or those who are there for the child as parents (Article 3)
- To not be abused physically or mentally or emotionally (Article 19)
- To know and be cared for by their parents (Article 7)
- To keep their personal identity (Article 8)
- To grow up in close contact with both parents and their family networks (Article 9)

- To freely express the child's own opinions on matters concerning them (Article 12), without being pressured to choose between the parents

An objective definition of a good enough parent's responsibilities can be derived from the principles promoting the child's best interests respecting their rights: A good enough parent gives the child unconditional love, that is, allows the child to also love the other parent; gives the child good enough care; does not expose the child to violence; encourages the child; and allows the child to express their own meaning without any pressure to reject the other parent.

A child who has had a previously loved parent transformed to someone foreign and even dangerous—through isolation, indoctrination, and other ABs—needs direct contact with that parent, regular and repeated contact in as many everyday situations as possible, to be able to understand that the excluded/erased parent is not bad and stupid as the child has learnt.

Role of the European Court of Human Rights

Several verdicts from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) concern violations of the child's right to family life. The unwarranted separation of a child from a parent in child custody cases and separating a child from one or both parents in forced custody cases are similar processes, as is demonstrated through case studies. They both require judicial consideration of the child's need for relationships and how those family relationships meet the child's relational and developmental needs. Children who lose their primary caretakers without justification when taken into compulsory care suffer a deficit in their needs and rights (Hellblom Sjögren, 2006). Sweden and, in the latest decade, Norway have been sentenced for violating the child's right to family life in many forced custody cases. Here are a few examples:

- *Olsson v. Sweden* (1), Verdict March 24, 1988, Application No. 00010464/83 and *Olsson v. Sweden* (2), Verdict November 27, 1992, Application No. 00013441. Only the eldest son was allowed to come home; the two younger brothers were kept in two separate foster homes.

- *Andersson v. Sweden*, Verdict January 25, 1992, Application No. 000112963187. Mother and son had not been allowed to meet at all for two months.
- *Lobben and others v. Norway*, Verdict September 10, 2019, Application No. 37283/13. The case concerned the domestic authorities' decision to remove a mother's parental authority and let foster parents adopt her son.

During 2018–2023, Norway was sentenced for violating the right to family life in 23 cases, mostly due to restrictions regarding the child's visitation time. Researchers investigated whether the Supreme Court has changed its practice since Norway was first sentenced by ECtHR (*Jansen vs. Norway*). Tellesbø, Meland, and Jullum (2024) concluded that the contact time for children with a cut-off parent is less than before. It is a result opposed to what was expected, that the respect for the child's right to family life should have been strengthened.

The ECtHR has addressed the violation of the child's right to family life in custody cases from additional countries, sometimes referring to PA:

- *Görgülü vs. Germany*, Verdict February 26, 2004, Application No. 74969/01. The Court's verdict: "The Court recalled that the possibilities of reunification would diminish over time and eventually be destroyed altogether if a biological father and child were not allowed to meet each other at all, or only so rarely that no natural bond would be likely to be formed between them. The Court, therefore, found a violation of Article 8."
- *Zavrel v. The Czech Republic*, Verdict April 18, 2007, Application No. 144044/05. PA is mentioned in connection with the documentation of the violation of visitation rights.
- *A.V. v. Slovenia*, Verdict April 9, 2019, Application No. 878/13. The children were not offered any help or advice overcoming the alienation stemming from not having any contact with their father for two years.
- *Pisica v. Republic Moldova*, Verdict October 29, 2019, Application No. 23641/17. The Court found that the state had not acted urgently and correctly for the children being alienated.
- *L.D. v. Poland*, Verdict February 13, 2025, Application No. 12119/14. Due to the father's actions, the child gradually lost emotional ties

with the mother, eventually refusing all contact. Poland did not take action to prevent the child's alienation from the mother.

Implacable Hostility and Mental Kidnapping

A Danish judge 20 years ago compared family laws in English-speaking countries (Danielsen, 2004). He stated that implacable hostility within a family when a hateful parent wishes to exclude the other parent from their child's life is as serious as other forms of abuse—and thus a reason, in severe cases, to change custody and parental responsibility to the parent being excluded.

To understand the strength of a child's being mentally kidnapped and incorporated into a parent's hostility toward the other parent (Richardson, 2006), we can compare it with cult members. As in cults, alienating parents can be said to carry out impermissible experiments, that is, experiments without informed consent. Stages in the thought reforming process, summarized by a cult researcher and psychologist (Thaler-Singer, 2003), are comparable to what a child experiences, being separated without a rational cause from a formerly loved parent, including: keep the person unaware that there is an agenda to control or change the person; control time and physical environment (contacts, information); create a sense of powerlessness, fear and dependency; etc. The stages to mind control can be compared with ABs that can result in an alienated child.

United Kingdom

The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) in the U.K. launched a pilot scheme in November 2017 to address PA. This program required the alienating parent to attend a specialized parenting program designed to help them understand the impact of their actions on the child. If unsuccessful, cases could involve expert psychologists, and parents who persisted in ABs risked losing custody or having restricted contact. Severe cases even resulted in permanent bans on contact. The pilot ran for three months with 50 challenging cases and was followed by the implementation of the "High Conflict Practice Pathway" in the spring of 2018. These guidelines aim to help practitioners identify and address alienating behaviors more effectively, emphasizing child welfare.

U.K. judges have also recognized the seriousness of PA. For instance, in the 2014 case, *Re H (Children)*, Mrs. Justice Parker described parental manipulation as “exceptionally harmful” and ordered a transfer of residence to re-establish the relationship between the child and the alienated parent. Unfortunately, Cafcass may now be drifting slightly backward, as PA and alienating behaviors are increasingly seen as off-limits both within social work and the courts.

Israel

Recently, an attempt to bridge the gap between those who are gender driven and argue from an ideological basis and those who try to focus on the child’s best interest in custody disputes was made in Israel (Marcus & Bar On, 2025). They write about the importance of approaching cases involving parent-child contact problems on the basis of the facts of the case and the behaviors of the parents. They stress that this has to be done without preconceived notions based on the use of ambiguous or poorly defined terminology or on gender-driven presumptions. Such work will enable proper identification of child psychological maltreatment in the form of ABs. Identification of ABs and treatment of their effects require an integrative systemic approach with inputs from forensic psychology, law, and psychosocial therapy. Reframing in this way, they point out, will, in turn, aid in prevention, reduce litigation, and enable prompt identification of situations in which relationships in the family might lead to adverse effects on the child. It may also offer appropriate educational and therapeutic interventions for the child and the parents.

International “Barnahus” Program and Psychological Expertise

An unbiased diagnostic approach that involves psychological expertise ought to be a professional standard. Recently the Swedish Queen Silvia, born in Germany and brought up in Brazil, inaugurated a new section of “Barnahus” in Berlin. The name Barnahus (“a house for children”) originates from Iceland where the first Barnahus was founded in 1998. Since then, many more Barnahus programs have been set up, mainly in Nordic countries.

The almost universal ratification of the UNCRC has contributed to an emerging convergence of child welfare policies and practices in

Europe. The Barnahus program might be viewed as an attempt to “operationalize” children’s rights to receive adequate support and protection and to have access to child-friendly justice. Mentally kidnapped—that is, severely alienated—children are victims of coercion into false beliefs. They have been cut off from everyday experiences with one of their parents without justification and have been exposed to the other parent’s totalitarian views without having been able to correct these views through their own experiences. All child victims ought to have a right to a psychological evaluation, including those who have become victims of false beliefs.

Legislation Regarding Parental Alienation

It is important, of course, to pass legislation that supports the children’s best interests. Jenkins (1998) wrote, “Identifying the root causes of a problem is difficult, as is undertaking the substantial changes in law or social policy necessary to make a real difference” (p. 236).

United States. In Arizona, an equal parenting law was introduced in 2013. The basis for the law was research showing that equal parenting time can contribute to the emotional security of the child and thus have a positive effect on public health (Fabricius, 2019). Subsequently, similar laws were introduced in several states—Kentucky, West Virginia, Missouri, Arkansas, and Florida—where equal parenting time is the presumption (National Parents Organization, n.d.). The expectation is that more states will follow in the years to come.

Malta. During recent years, Happy Parenting–Malta (For Happier Children) has created awareness of PA, including arranging for several presentations in Parliament. A family court reform is on its way involving the Prime Minister, the Minister for Justice and Reform, and the Minister for Social Policy and Children’s Rights. In January 2023, the Working Group on Family Court Reform identified several aspects of family court where reforms should be considered, such as: establishment of a specialized Family Court with its own legal code that consolidates all family laws; new timeframes for the mediation process to ensure that it does not unnecessarily prolong proceedings; equal rights and responsibilities for parents, co-parenting, and making decisions in the best interests of the child; and other topics. After the conclusion of the public consultation period, the government will finalize and submit the final draft.

Denmark. The Parliament in Denmark has decided that PA shall be considered in all family court decisions starting in January 2025 (Danish Parliament, 2024). The Parliament has thereby emphasized that PA is a reality and is not allowed. In most cases, immediate contact shall be secured for the child within four weeks; if this is not possible, all parental examinations shall be done and a decision made within a maximum of four months. This new law builds on harassment and PA legislation in place since 2015 and 2019. In 2019 a new system was initiated. A special unit interviews the children and provides a contact person for children in family court processes. The parents are offered mediation. Multi-disciplinary teams collaborate, and case workers will be educated about PA in the years 2025–2027.

Brazil. Brazil was the first country to criminalize ABs, which occurred in 2010. ABs were recognized as a form of child abuse; causing PA in a child was recognized as a criminal act. Brazil defined ABs as moral abuse against the child as they violate the fundamental rights of the child to have relationships with both parents (Brazilian Law No 21 218, 2010).

Romania. PA is a significant issue in Romania, especially in the context of parental separation or divorce (Florian, 2024). Legally, Romania has been addressing this issue through Law No. 272/2004 on child protection, which provides mechanisms to prevent and address situations of parental alienation. Recently, Law No. 123/2024 introduced additional measures to combat PA, emphasizing the importance of protecting the child's best interests and maintaining personal ties with both parents.

Australia. In 2024, Family Law was reformed, which ended the presumption that parents must have equal shared parental responsibility—that is, shared decision-making power and a requirement to inform, consult, and reach agreement about major decisions such as medical treatment, education, and religion. These reforms also extend changes in 2011 to prioritize safety and protection over parental and family involvement. It has been observed that after the reform in 2024, parents cannot expect their children to spend time with them, let alone equal time. Furthermore, it became rare for an assessment to adequately consider ABs and, even if they do, to make the appropriate recommendations. This type of reform is misguided and oppressive because it imposes ideas about the role of family that are incongruent with the social expectations of people who may engage with it.

Conclusions

PA theory and practice play out in various ways in different countries. Legislation and legal case precedents sometimes support PA theory and sometimes undermine it. For example, a presumption of shared parenting may act as a PA prevention strategy; that approach was encouraged in Denmark but was rejected in Australia. In Europe, the ECtHR has repeatedly criticized member states for failing to recognize and intervene appropriately in cases of PA; but those states have sometimes ignored the guidance from the ECtHR. We expect to see many more changes in national and international law and human rights cases (*Lohse v. Denmark*, 2024) in the years to come, and governments will be encouraged not to violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UNCRC.

Chapter 18

SOCIOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVES REGARDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

From Psychosocial to Sociopolitical Perspectives

This chapter explains an important new feature to the broad topic of parental alienation (PA) theory. For 40 years, PA has been described in terms of individual psychological issues within family members, relational issues between family members, and dynamics within the family as a whole. It is time to expand our horizons and consider how PA theory fits into larger social and political fields of study. The field of PA is relatively new to social considerations and related policy and political implications.

Alienation in Family Settings

PA may be observed in the psychosocial presentations described in clinical literature of children exposed to parental alienating behaviors (ABs). These behaviors and their adverse effects are the focus of clinical and legal attention. Parental ABs represent in the family the harmful structural conditions of social alienation in the broader setting for families in society. Alienation in the family or family alienation refers to PA as a form of social alienation, a structural condition in family relationships. PA is a social condition in the family associated with harmful changes to shared values, family norms, and culture. It results in adverse clinical outcomes for family members. Parental ABs normalize previously unacceptable social, relational, and parenting behaviors (Kalekin-Fishman & Langman, 2015).

Parental Alienation as a Dimension of Social Alienation

PA may be a form of social alienation (Korosi, 2024; Korosi, Bernet, Graham, & Ross, 2023). Social alienation results in adverse structural changes in social settings and family relationships that cause long-term social and psychological consequences for family members, especially children, and socio-economic burdens for society (Haines, Matthewson, & Turnbull, 2020). Social alienation is a well-known structural and political condition in sociology. It describes individuals' or social groups' experience of separation and disconnection from their community, society, or social setting and the disconnection between social aspirations and the means of fulfilling them (Kalekin-Fishman & Langman, 2015).

Alienating social conditions in the family setting may result in unwarranted disconnection between family members and children. These social conditions may disempower family members, marginalize and stigmatize them, and prevent them from fulfilling their social roles as parents and extended family (Korosi, 2024). For example, the term targeted/alienated parent reflects affected family members' marginalized status with their family.

Alienation links structural conditions in social settings with observed individual psychological states and political systems (Seeman, 1959; Twining, 1980). Alienation has a political dimension through Marxist constructions of political processes of reification and separation of individuals from their humanity and natural activities, culture, and work (Marx, 1891/ 2007). The association between social alienation at broader societal levels with the changing nature of families and PA suggests a disconnection between social expectancy about parental roles and the means of fulfilling them (Kalekin-Fishman & Langman, 2015).

Seeman (1959) observed individual responses to alienating social conditions as social and psychological frustration of social expectancies. These responses occur in measurable states of powerlessness, meaninglessness, anomie (normlessness and social deviancy), isolation, and estrangement. Social deviancy is particularly relevant to PA because parents use socially unacceptable behaviors such as parental ABs (Adler & Adler, 2016; Korosi et al., 2023).

Social Changes as Foundations of the Alienated Family

That alienation in families is now a social and sociological consideration reflects the influence of profound changes in family relationships and configuration, especially from the 1980s. These influences arise from economic and social transformation throughout the Western world observed in the twentieth century (Heard & Arunachalam, 2014). Social commentators observe a shift from historical monocultural assumptions about families toward many diverse family types and configurations. New family narratives are replacing the nuclear family and changing the meaning and definitions of relationships and kinship in families in Western democracies (Churchill, 2018; Featherstone & Smaal, 2013; Heard & Arunachalam, 2014).

Social commentators such as Jacques (1998) and Stacey (1996) observed the contemporary family shift from a historical institutional structure to a voluntary discourse. Family narratives organize the family relationship in a reconfigurable network. PA is a discursive condition in a family, established through behaviors communicated in narratives (Scharp & Hall, 2017). Parental ABs present social and narrative practices familiar across alienating and alienated families. Parental ABs may be considered a form of discursive abuse.

Social Factors of Parental Alienation

Studies propose that stigma consciousness is a response to devalued parent identities resulting from parental ABs, also linked with normlessness and isolation dimensions of social alienation (Goffman, 2009; Korosi, 2024; Pinel, 1999). This linkage reflects how narratives communicate parental ABs and establish cultural and behavioral norms that dominate and marginalize family members. The significant linkage between stigma consciousness observed in family members and dimensions of social alienation may provide structural indicators of alienating narratives in the family. Further research is required to demonstrate causation, although the results are strongly indicative. Family members confronting a novel situation where ABs may delete their parental or extended family identity may find that conventional means of asserting their parenting roles do not work or worsen the problem (Korosi, 2024). Family members may also experience institutional support for unacceptable ABs.

Social Deviancy and Extreme Parental Alienation

Pilot research proposes PA as a violent, discursive process where parental ABs may lead to suicidal and homicidal intentions in extreme cases (Korosi et al., 2023). Extreme PA refers to circumstances where family members kill themselves and/or another family member. Examples of extreme PA include an alienated child killing their targeted/alienated parent and an alienating parent killing the child and themselves. Parental ABs may induce alienated children to kill their targeted/rejected parent when they normalize extreme hatred (*The UK Parental Alienation Study*, 2020).

Parental ABs may also induce suicidality and result in an alienated child or alienated parent killing themselves or an increased likelihood of depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Baker, 2005a; Verhaar, Matthewson, & Bentley, 2022). Targeted/alienated parents, especially fathers, are also prone to suicide (Lee-Maturana, Matthewson, & Dwan, 2020; Poustie, Matthewson, & Balmer, 2018; Sher, 2015).

ABs that normalize violent, homicidal, or suicidal ideation within family relationships may demonstrate an extreme degree of social deviance and a low moral threshold for choosing socially unacceptable behaviors to fulfill motivations. Risk analysis for children's welfare, policy and legal settings should be extended to include potential precursors to violent action, such as parental vilification adopted by the child, stigmatization of a parent or family members, justification of socially unacceptable behavior, violent narratives and induction into violent action, and parental ABs that show little moral regard for the child's or the targeted/rejected parent's welfare (Korosi et al., 2023).

Policy Considerations Responding to Parental Alienation

Social determinants of health and psychosocial factors—such as socio-economic status, education and literacy, and employment—have traditionally informed social and public health policy (Hankivsky, 2012). However, the prevalence of parental ABs and their adverse effects are not significantly associated with the typical social determinants that social and public health policies attempt to address (Hine, Harman, Leder-Elder, & Bates, in press; Korosi & Green, 2024). For example, the prevalence of parental ABs is more or less equal across

male and female gender groups (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2019). Social and public health initiatives that address family violence and coercive control must also address PA presentations with policies that recognize that they are independent of social determinants such as gender. Such policies should address PA presentations as discursive abuse through abuses of power in relationships, consider social factors that enable or limit their spread, and facilitate healthy outcomes for families and children (Hankivsky, 2012; Korosi et al., 2024; Lathouras, O'Connor, & Frawley, 2023).

Policy development should also address children's best interests by meeting their social needs for family relationships and providing for the responsibility of parents, family members, and the State to support them. Family and family violence laws should reflect the central role of families and family relationships in meeting children's social and developmental needs. These jurisdictions should consider how addressing children's family relational needs also fulfills their right to their identify and to the relationships with family members.

The Politics of Alienation

Anti-family ideologies no longer center the family in society, but they support eliminating the family as a social structure (Lewis, 2022; Millett, 1970). Such ideology excludes the presumption that the parent-child relationship is central to children's development, suggesting instead that family relationships are socially replaceable. These ideas may have led some jurisdictions to remove shared parenting presumptions in certain circumstances. Misinformation and disinformation about the theory and practice of PA and such ideologies may also be associated. These practices may support behaviors and psycho-legal outcomes that are harmful to children and family members and lead to unsustainable claims that PA and parental ABs are "a junk science" and "a pseudoconcept" (Harman, Giancarlo, Lorandos, & Ludmer, 2023; Kruk & Harman, 2024).

For example, misinformation and disinformation may lead to attributing adult-like minds to children by misappropriating the concept of children as mature minors. This concept was initially conceived as an emergency medical exception to minority status (Barina & Bishop, 2013). Family law jurisdictions implicitly relying on this concept may misattribute a capacity for children to have an independent voice

without considering how parental ABs exploit the fact that adolescents and teenagers have yet to develop their capacity for critical thinking and decision-making on an adult scale.

Conclusions

Alienation theory is central to a structural understanding of how PA and parental ABs reflect attitudes and social behaviors commensurate with alienating social conditions in family relationships. PA can be understood as a social phenomenon in families that mirrors an alienating discourse in broader society, thus reinforcing ABs. Parents and other family members may be motivated to use ABs to fulfill their social aspirations using socially unacceptable means. Family members affected by parental ABs may be confronted with the apparent success of parental ABs when misinformation and disinformation result in institutional support for unconscionable and socially deviant behavior.

Dangerous and potentially fatal socially deviant parental ABs present as a public health issue both within a family and across families. Political ideologies hostile to the family as a social entity may not support children's best interests when they influence family law and family violence policies to no longer place family relationships at the center of their needs. Removing rebuttable presumptions of equal shared parental care suggests political and ideological appropriation of relational power to eliminate families and family relationships despite compelling evidence that they are essential to children's social and developmental needs. Social and public health policies and the law should also address alienating discourse, such as misinformation and disinformation about PA, as a form of institutional abuse.

Chapter 19

PARENTAL ALIENATION, DSM, AND ICD

This chapter discusses the proposals for parental alienation (PA) to be included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) and the *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD). The DSM is published and updated by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), with the current version being the 5th edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR, 2022). The ICD, published and updated by the World Health Organization (WHO), is currently in its 11th edition (ICD-11, adopted in 2019).⁸

Inclusion of PA in diagnostic manuals such as the DSM and the ICD is important for several reasons:

- **Validation:** Inclusion validates the experiences of alienated families and the professionals who assist them, fostering awareness of this complex issue.
- **Common language:** Formal recognition establishes a common language and framework for understanding PA, enhancing communication and collaboration among practitioners.
- **Standardization:** Consistent terminology paves the way for creating standardized assessment tools and evidence-based interventions, ultimately improving outcomes for affected families.

Parental Alienation and DSM-5-TR

Although the *actual words* “parental alienation” do not appear in the DSM, it is clear that the *concept* of PA is reflected in several diagnoses that are included in the manual. These include two novel diagnoses—child

8. This chapter is based partly on Bernet (2013).

affected by parental relationship distress and child psychological abuse—that were introduced in the DSM-5 (2013). (For a discussion of DSM-5-TR diagnoses that incorporate the concept of PA, see Chapter 2.)

Between 2008 and 2023, there were five formal proposals to include the words “parental alienation” in the DSM. The initial proposals in 2008 and 2010 were complex and recommended major additions to the text of the DSM-5; the most recent proposal in 2023 recommended changing only *one word* in the entire 1,050-page DSM-5-TR. Although each iteration of the proposal regarding PA became more and more simplified, all of them were rejected by the DSM-5 Task Force (the component of the APA that developed the DSM-5) or the DSM-5 Steering Committee (the continuing component of the APA that considers new proposals for modifying the text of the DSM).

Nevertheless, the leadership of the Task Force and the Steering Committee repeatedly made it clear that PA is real, and it should be considered one of the relational problems included in the DSM-5-TR chapter, “Other Conditions That May be a Focus of Clinical Attention.” The sequence of proposals by PA scholars and the rejections by APA leadership is interesting to consider.

Publication of DSM-IV, 1994

Although the term “parental alienation syndrome” (PAS) had previously been introduced by Gardner (1985), no proposal regarding PA was submitted for DSM-IV.

Proposals for “Parental Alienation Disorder” in DSM-5, 2008–2010

As DSM-5 was being developed, William Bernet learned that no proposal regarding PAS or PA had been submitted for the revision process. The chairman of the Childhood and Adolescent Disorders Work Group (CADWG), Daniel Pine, invited Bernet to submit a proposal for that purpose, which was done a few weeks later (Bernet, 2008). The initial reaction of Pine and the CADWG was that there was not enough published research regarding validity and reliability for PA to be considered a mental disorder.

In response, Bernet and his colleagues developed a much more elaborate and detailed proposal, which was published as a journal article

(Bernet, Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010) and a book (Bernet, 2010). These publications explained three recommendations: “[T]hat PA should be included in DSM-5 as a mental disorder *or* PA should be discussed in the section of DSM-5 pertaining to relational problems *or* PA should be included as a proposed diagnosis in the appendix of DSM-5, ‘Criteria Sets for Further Study’” (emphasis in original, Bernet, 2013, pp. 494–495).

The DSM-5 Task Force invited input from the public pertaining to possible changes for DSM-5, and they received a large number of comments regarding the parental alienation disorder (PAD) proposal—both pro and con—from individuals and organizations. Although the proposal was rejected, the leadership of the Task Force repeatedly stated that PA should be considered a relational problem (a condition located between two individuals), not a mental disorder (“an internal condition residing with an individual” [D. Regier, personal communication, January 24, 2012]). Thus, DSM leadership left the door open for future proposals along those lines.

Proposal for “Parental Alienation Relational Problem” in DSM-5-TR, 2022

Since the leadership of APA stated that PA should be considered a relational problem, not a mental disorder, Bernet and Amy J. L. Baker developed a new proposal that specifically made the case for the diagnosis, “parental alienation relational problem” (PARP). This proposal was posted online (www.parp-dsm.info/) and was endorsed by almost 3,000 mental health and legal practitioners, PA researchers, alienated parents and grandparents, advocacy groups, and professional organizations. This proposal was rejected by the Steering Committee, with the comment:

A category already exists in the Other Conditions chapter that encompasses the kind of situations described in the proposal, Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress. There may, of course, be multiple reasons for such impact on a child, and the reason in a specific case can be specified in the clinical notes. But it would be impossible and counterproductive to create separate categories for every potential cause. (L. Yousif, personal communication, April 24, 2023)

Proposal to Change Four Words in the Definition of PCRP, May 2023

Since the leadership of the Steering Committee continued to say that PA should be considered a relational problem, Bernet, Baker, William E. Narrow, and Marianne Z. Wamboldt submitted a new proposal explaining how the definition of parent–child relational problem (PCRCP) should be modified to accurately reflect its inclusion of PA. That is, it recommended changing four words in the definition of PCRCP: “unwarranted feelings of estrangement” to “a child’s unwarranted rejection of a parent, e.g., parental alienation.” The proposal emphasized that “alienation,” not “estrangement,” is the appropriate word to use in the definition of PCRCP. When this proposal regarding PCRCP was rejected, the leadership of the Steering Committee said the change was not necessary because “the description of parent/child relational problems already encompasses the kind of interactions often designated as ‘parental alienation’” (L. Yousif, personal communication, July 27, 2023).

Proposal to Change One Word in the Definition of PCRCP, September 2023

Finally, the same four authors—Bernet, Baker, Narrow, and Wamboldt—proposed the most minimal edit to the definition of PCRCP, i.e., changing “estrangement” to “alienation.” The revised definition for PCRCP would thus include the sentence: “Cognitive problems may include negative attributions of the other’s intentions, hostility toward or scapegoating of the other, and unwarranted feelings of alienation.” Once again, this slight change was rejected. The leadership of the Steering Committee—Lamyaa Yousif and Paul S. Appelbaum—reiterated the change was not necessary because the current definition of PCRCP already includes the concept of PA.

These determinations by the DSM-5-TR Steering Committee—that PA is already subsumed in the definitions of CAPRD and PCRCP—have important implications for mental health practitioners. That is, when psychiatrists and psychologists recognize a child or family member as experiencing PA, it is appropriate to classify them with a DSM diagnosis, child affected by parental relationship distress or parent–child relational problem.

Parental Alienation and ICD-11

Development of ICD-11

A different series of events occurred with regard to the revision of ICD-10 to become ICD-11. As ICD-11 was being developed, several proponents of PA theory submitted a formal proposal that PA be included in this new edition. Although ICD personnel did not include PA as a separate diagnosis, the terms “parental alienation” and “parental estrangement” were indexed and linked to the ICD diagnosis, caregiver–child relationship problem. (The ICD term caregiver–child relationship problem is analogous to the DSM term parent–child relational problem). When the final version of ICD-11 was adopted and posted on their website in June 2018, it was appropriate to say, “PA is in the index of ICD-11” and “PA is considered another name for caregiver–child relationship problem.”

Controversy and Reversal

However, after the index and the rest of ICD-11 had been finalized, deniers of PA and detractors of PA theory continued to submit comments and concerns on the ICD website. Initially, the Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee (MSAC) stood by their earlier decision; in September 2019, the MSAC recommended that ICD-11 “retain the index term . . . ‘parental alienation,’ as it is an issue that may be recorded in a clinical context.” However, the opponents and detractors of PA theory continued to object and in September 2019 posted an influential document, “Collective Memo of Concern to: World Health Organization” that expressed the concern that PA is misused in court to minimize allegations made by protective parents (usually mothers) that rejected parents (usually fathers) had abused their children (Neilson et al., 2019).

Apparently, the authors of the “Collective Memo” continued to lobby and influence higher levels of authority at the WHO, which led to the unexpected reversal of the previously finalized text of the ICD-11. In February 2020, the MSAC issued a new statement which concluded, “Therefore, the index term [‘parental alienation’] is removed, as is the parallel index term ‘parental estrangement.’” Despite these various decisions and reversals, the website of the WHO says that the ICD-11

diagnosis, caregiver–child relationship problem, can be used to identify children with PA. WHO (n.d.) states: “In situations in which an individual labeled with [parental alienation] presents for health care, other ICD-11 content is sufficient to guide coding. Users may classify cases to ‘caregiver–child relationship problem.’”

Opposition to the Recognition of Parental Alienation Diagnosis

The primary reasons to include PA as a recognized diagnosis in the DSM and other systems of nomenclature are that such recognition will lead to improved communication among practitioners, standardized methods for assessment and treatment, and increased public awareness.

There are several arguments against the inclusion of PA in the DSM, which have been raised by PA critics:

- **Misuse in legal contexts:** There is a risk that a diagnosis of PA could be misused in custody disputes, leading to overdiagnosis or misinterpretation of complex family dynamics.
- **Complex family dynamics:** In some cases, PA can be challenging to differentiate from other family issues, such as estrangement or justifiable rejection of a parent due to abuse or neglect.
- **Debate about the core concept:** Some critics contest the core concept of PA, arguing that it lacks empirical support or that it pathologizes children’s normal reactions to parental separation.

Take-Home Messages

PA is not a free-standing diagnosis in either DSM-5-TR or ICD-11. However, these two diagnostic systems are consistent in that both of them allow for the coding of cases involving PA. In the DSM-5-TR, PA may be classified as child affected by parental relationship distress (CAPRD) (Z62.898) or as parent–child relational problem (PCRP) (Z62.820). Also, the following DSM-5-TR diagnoses may be appropriate, depending on the aspect of the case that is being considered: child psychological abuse, delusional symptoms in the context of relationship with an individual with prominent delusions, factitious disorder imposed on another, and identity disturbance due to prolonged and

intense coercive persuasion. In the ICD-11, PA may be classified as caregiver–child relationship problem (QE52.0).

When it occurs, the explicit recognition of PA in the DSM-5 and the ICD-11 will be a significant milestone in addressing this complex issue. The journey toward the recognition of PA in these manuals signifies more than just a diagnostic label; it represents a profound shift in understanding and addressing this complex phenomenon. Formal recognition will promote greater understanding, facilitate research, and support the development of effective interventions. The potential benefits are far-reaching, impacting individuals, families, and the legal systems tasked with resolving these challenging cases. The pursuit of formal recognition necessitates a continued commitment to research, advocacy, and collaboration. By strengthening the empirical foundation of PA, refining diagnostic criteria, and fostering consensus within the professional community, proponents of PA theory can pave the way for its inclusion in future revisions of diagnostic manuals.

Chapter 20

MISINFORMATION REGARDING PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY

This chapter reviews misinformation about parental alienation (PA) and PA theory. Unfortunately, misinformation and disinformation regarding PA theory are widespread. In response, there have been many journal articles and book chapters that identified and contradicted false statements that were published, so this chapter is only an outline and a summary of those publications. Regarding definitions, *misinformation* refers to false information that is stated or published, regardless of the author's intent to mislead the reader; it is a generic term for any kind of false or mistaken information. *Disinformation*, on the other hand, refers to material that is deliberately misleading or biased. Thus, disinformation is spreading misinformation in a knowing or purposeful manner. In studying this problem, we almost never know the underlying and unspoken motives of the author—i.e., whether the false information is expressed knowingly and purposefully—so we usually refer to these incorrect statements as misinformation, not disinformation.

Misinformation Landscape

Bernet (2023) introduced this topic: “We live in an era of misinformation. Misleading statements, sloppy scholarship, and outright fraud have occurred in the literature of medicine (‘COVID is a hoax.’), psychology (‘Facilitated communication is a treatment for autism.’), and science (‘The Apollo moon landings never occurred, but were staged by NASA.’)” (p. 334). The prevalence and apparent popularity of misinformation have been encouraged by digital technology, especially social media sites on the internet, since there is no editor or gatekeeper and

every user is allowed to say whatever they want. It has been predicted that misinformation will flourish even more with the free-wheeling use of artificial intelligence (AI). The leadership of the American Psychological Association (APA) has weighed in regarding misinformation in peer-reviewed journals. That is, the APA Council Policy Manual (2024) now states: “Be it resolved that the American Psychological Association calls on stakeholders to collaborate with psychologists and other experts to develop and implement strategies that promote accurate health information, science literacy, and counteract misinformation.”

This chapter explains four ways to study and counteract PA misinformation: (1) journal articles and book chapters that provide an overview of this broad topic; (2) articles and books that analyze and critique specific publications containing misinformation; (3) videos and other AI techniques; and (4) research involving citation analysis, which graphically demonstrates the transfer of misinformation from one author to another to another over many years.

Reviews of Misinformation Literature

Book Chapter by Demosthenes Lorandos. A classic book in the history of PA theory was *The International Handbook of Parental Alienation Syndrome* (Gardner, Sauber, & Lorandos, 2006). Lorandos (2006) contributed a chapter to that book, in which he wrote, “This lack of scientific understanding creates a vacuum in which the PAS detractors, and the purveyors of advocacy disguised as science, do their mischief” (p. 397). After discussing the general problem of scientific illiteracy among legal professionals, Lorandos criticized in detail three early writers who misunderstood and misrepresented PA theory in the following journal articles: “The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Dangerous Aura of Reliability” (Wood, 1994); “Child Maltreatment and Endangerment in the Context of Divorce” (Faller, 1995); and “Parental Alienation Syndrome and Parental Alienation: Getting it Wrong in Child Custody Cases” (Bruch, 2001). Those articles contain statements that are incorrect and misleading. Lorandos summarized his commentary, saying, “Taken together, the writings of these detractors reveal that debate over PAS is not so much about science as the politics of science, and the influence of ideology” (p. 400).

Journal Article by Deidre C. Rand. Rand (2011) published a scholarly article, “Parental Alienation Critics and the Politics of Science.”

She made an important observation: “Today, there are two main groups of critics who oppose use of the term PAS, and the concept of parental alienation (PA) generally” (p. 49). Rand said that the first group of PA critics were primarily mental health professionals and others who work in family law, who seemed to be most concerned about Richard Gardner’s emphasis on the causal role of the alienating parent and the seemingly radical interventions, such as changing custody from the favored parent to the rejected parent. Rand said that the second group of PA critics identified themselves as advocates for abused women and children. This group of “feminists and child advocates” (p. 49) were concerned that courts were too quick to dismiss allegations of sexual abuse by the father and penalize protective mothers by giving the father custody—due to allegations that the mother caused PA in the child and generated false allegations of abuse. Even today, these two groups of PA critics are sometimes referred to as “soft critics” and “hard critics.”

Journal Article by Edward Kruk and Jennifer J. Harman. This recent article by Kruk and Harman (2024) is a useful overview of 14 different arguments that critics have promoted against PA theory. For example, two of the common anti-PA memes have been:

- “Due to lack of credible peer-reviewed research, PA is a pseudo-concept lacking in empirical validity, and as a result, PA theory may be dismissed as pseudoscience” (p. 3).
- “[C]ourts dismiss men’s histories of family violence and mother’s evidence of intimate partner violence and child abuse when parental alienation is alleged by fathers” (p. 6).

Both of those statements are false, although they have been repeated many times over many years in articles and book chapters by PA critics. Kruk and Harman refute those false statements and other examples of misinformation in their article.

Published Misinformation Followed by Rebuttal

On several occasions, specific misinformation published in a journal article was refuted and corrected by a follow-up article published in the same issue or a subsequent issue of the same journal.

Refutations by Richard A. Gardner. During his lifetime, many false statements were published repeatedly regarding Gardner and his

work. Shortly before his death, Gardner (2002) published “Misinformation Versus Facts About the Contributions of Richard A. Gardner, M.D.” Gardner systematically refuted 38 examples of published misinformation, such as: “PAS does not exist because it’s not in DSM-IV,” “The PAS has not been recognized in courts of law,” “The PAS is a discredited theory,” “Dr. Gardner believes that pedophilia is a good thing for society,” and “Dr. Gardner’s publications are not peer reviewed.”

Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law. Several child psychiatrists and an attorney (Houchin, Ranseen, Hash, & Bartnicki, 2012) published an article in which they made the rather insulting comment, “As with any heated controversy, one must examine the possible financial motivations that may influence the positions of those engaged in debate. Unfortunately, to get a good sense of PAS’s support, one has only to follow the money trail” (p. 129). After the Houchin et al. article was published, the editors of *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* invited Bernet and Baker (2013) to submit a response and commentary. Bernet and Baker said, “[Proponents of PA theory] are advocating for the truth . . . , that the mental condition of PA . . . really exists” (p. 103). “Second, we feel strongly that, whenever possible, children should grow up with healthy relationships with both parents” (p. 103).

Judges’ Journal. A social psychologist and a law professor (Thomas & Richardson, 2015) wrote an article that contains much incorrect and misleading information, such as, “[PAS] has not gained general acceptance in the scientific field. . .” (p. 22). The editors of *The Judges’ Journal* invited Bernet (2015) to contribute a complementary article with correct information about PA theory. The two articles were published back-to-back in the same issue of *The Judges’ Journal*.

Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development. Jean Mercer, a psychologist and longtime critic of PA theory, wrote an article that disparaged PA theory and especially the research of Bernet, Gregory, Rohner, and Reay (2020) regarding the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire. For example, Mercer (2021) wrongly said, “A child’s rejection of one parent is inferred [by PA proponents] to mean that the preferred parent has acted to alienate the child, and this assumption is made without evidence that such actions occurred except possibly for statements offered by the rejected parent” (p. 202). The editor of the *Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody & Child Development* contacted Bernet et al. and invited them to write a response to

the article by Mercer. In the end, the critique by Mercer (2021) and the response by Bernet, Rohner, and Reay (2021) were published in the same issue of the journal.

Videos and Artificial Intelligence

The general public—especially young adults—do not read scholarly articles, but they do watch videos on multiple platforms. It is ironic that AI can be used to create misinformation, and it can also be used to combat misinformation. For example, it is possible to write a script regarding some aspect of PA misinformation (perhaps with the help of an AI program) and then ask an AI video generator to create a short video to accompany the script. Anyone who tries this approach should scrupulously check the accuracy of both the script and the video, since the current generation of AI-created material sometimes contains factual errors.

Citation Analysis Demonstrates Misinformation Epidemic

A novel, scientific approach to the study of misinformation involves identifying a specific statement of misinformation and tracking its occurrence in journal articles over a period of time. Then, the bibliometric technique of citation analysis is used to show how the same misinformation flows from one author to another to another. This recent research tracks the following misinformation regarding PA theory over 30 years:

PA theory assumes that the favored parent has caused parental alienation in the child simply because the child refuses to have a relationship with the rejected parent, without identifying or proving alienating behaviors by the favored parent.

This recurrent misinformation is a serious false representation of PA theory. No PA scholar has stated in a journal article or book chapter that all children who manifest contact refusal were indoctrinated to fear and avoid the rejected parent by the favored parent. Instead, PA scholars routinely explain that some children of high-conflict parents manifest contact refusal, which may have several possible causes. Of course, PA is only one of the possible causes of contact refusal or parent-child

formation from earlier to later publications. The illustration is chronological, proceeding from left (1994) to right (2022). The size of each node size indicates the number of times a publication is cited by subsequent publications. It is obvious that a single instance of misinformation in a law review article (Wood, 1994) spread to more than 100 journal articles and book chapters.

This type of research—citation analysis—illustrates the serious nature of PA misinformation, i.e., how quickly and deeply it spreads through mental health and legal literature. There are several reasons for this proliferation of misinformation, but the primary reason seems to be the “echo chamber” phenomenon. That is, a group of scholars—who already know each other and frequently collaborate with each other—tend to quote each other in their articles and presentations. In that context, it is easy for misinformation to be perpetuated for many years.

Consequences of Parental Alienation Misinformation

The examples of misinformation cited in this chapter were found in journal articles, book chapters, presentations at professional meetings, and a few legal briefs. The literature review did not reach into the world of judicial opinions as reported by trial courts and appellate courts. However, we are concerned that the misinformation described here has influenced judicial conclusions in the United States and elsewhere. It is a worrisome prospect—that these false statements have contaminated precedent-setting opinions—since that is likely to injure children and families in the future through faulty judicial decisions.

Chapter 21

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

There are “soft critics” and “hard critics” of parental alienation (PA) and PA theory. *Soft critics* are mental health and legal professionals working in family law, who disagree regarding one or more specific aspects of PA theory. They may completely agree the phenomenon occurs—that is, that Parent A can indoctrinate the child to fear and avoid Parent B without a good reason—but these soft critics insist there are no generally accepted criteria for the identification or diagnosis of PA. Or they may say that typical interventions for severe PA—such as removing the child from Parent A and placing the child with Parent B—have not been subjected to adequate empirical research and should not be recommended in expert testimony in family court. *Hard critics*, on the other hand, have much stronger opinions and concerns about PA theory. They might say the concept of PA was a hoax invented by Richard Gardner to protect abusive fathers from loss of parenting time and even from criminal prosecution. Or, that no professional organization in the U.S. has acknowledged the reality of PA. Or, that expert witnesses should not be allowed to testify regarding PA in any legal proceeding. (See Chapter 20, “Misinformation Regarding Parental Alienation Theory.”)

Scope of Parental Alienation Theory and Practice

The readers of this book understand that PA theory is a broad topic and contains many components, such as: the reliable identification of PA; the prevention of PA; interventions for mild, moderate, and severe levels of PA; research regarding causation of PA, prevalence,

and short-term and long-term consequences; the education of mental health and legal professionals; advocacy with legislatures and government agencies; and counteracting misinformation regarding PA. The authors of this book have recently added one more element of PA theory and practice, that is, communication and collaboration with critics and deniers of PA.

Engaging in Legitimate Discussion

It is well known that scholars and writers with an interest in PA may have a variety of perspectives, which are sometimes conflicted and contradictory. Although we welcome different perspectives, practitioners of family law have observed that these ideological skirmishes may be harmful. Conflict interferes with the prompt resolution of individual legal disputes, and on a larger scale they compromise research and confound progressive legislation regarding family law. In recent years there have been several major efforts to encourage dialogue among these parties rather than endless debates and recriminations.

AFCC Think Tanks

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) has been at the forefront of promoting dialogue rather than debate among family court professionals. Starting in the early 2000s, “AFCC decided to emphasize opportunities to address critical issues in family law” (Salem, 2019, p. 232). The organization created several “think tanks,” which were elaborate discussions that addressed difficult and controversial topics. These meetings endeavored to sort out and resolve issues such as: the gap between family law teaching and family law practice; conflict between domestic violence advocates and family mediators; and the debate regarding shared parenting, especially with regard to overnight visitation for infants and toddlers. Of course, these think tanks did not totally resolve intransigent opinions, since there were inevitable objections after each think tank published their report.

AFCC and NCJFCJ Joint Statement

An important example of inter-agency collaboration was the “Joint Statement on Parent–Child Contact Problems,” a shared project of

AFCC and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) (2022). Representatives of both organizations met several times and eventually published the “Joint Statement.” They concluded, “Family law practitioners should receive regular and ongoing training on the various factors related to parent–child contact problems (PCCPs) including, but not limited to, intimate partner violence, substance misuse, high conflict, denigration, parental alienating behaviors, and healthy parenting.” In other words, we can infer both organizations acknowledged the importance of understanding parental alienating behaviors, an important component of PA theory.

AFCC Peace Talks

In 2023, the leadership of AFCC launched a new project called “Peace Talks,” with the mission of encouraging dialogue regarding the topic of PCCPs. After it got off the ground, the AFCC Peace Talks started to consider topics that concern soft critics of PA theory, such as criteria for the identification of PA and interventions for cases of severe PA. The Peace Talk participants reported on their progress at AFCC conferences in June and November 2024. The participants included individuals with diverse opinions regarding PCCPs and PA: William Bernet, M.D., April Harris-Britt, Ph.D., Peter Jaffe, Ph.D., Hon. Denise McColley (Ret.), Stacey E. Platt, J.D., and Michael Saini, Ph.D. It is anticipated that additional members of AFCC will be added to this project. Hopefully, the Peace Talks will eventually produce a publishable document that summarizes their efforts to reduce conflict among practitioners regarding PCCPs, a common source of conflict in family court.

Note that this type of dialogue and collaboration involves proponents of PA theory and colleagues who might be described as soft critics of PA. The participants in the Peace Talks expressed a willingness to listen to each other, consider a variety of perspectives, and perhaps modify some aspects of their own opinions. It seems unlikely that hard critics of PA theory will be interested in joining in collaborative discussions such as these, but that remains to be seen. Perhaps they will.

Benefits of Collaboration

There are several reasons why proponents of PA theory might want to collaborate with soft critics, such as the following:

Collaboration involving repeated discussions in a variety of settings increases the number of individuals who understand PA theory and also enables the PA community to understand the critics' voices. Part of the mission of PA-related organizations and advocacy groups is to spread the word regarding PA theory and practice. That can be accomplished by bringing up the topic at leadership discussions, committee meetings, relevant task forces, professional conferences, and in mental health and legal journal articles.

When committee and conference participants listen to each other and hear one another, that process should reduce misunderstandings, misinformation, and disinformation. Many of the false statements published regarding PA theory are outright disinformation (e.g., "Richard Gardner was a proponent of pedophilia."). However, many false statements are simply misunderstandings that have been repeated over several decades (e.g., "Richard Gardner thought that every instance of contact refusal was caused by indoctrination of the child by an alienating parent."). Repeated conversations among individuals with different perspectives should clear up many misunderstandings.

The purpose of collaboration with critics is not simply to induce scholars with different opinions to change their minds. When misunderstandings occur and misinformation is brought to our awareness, it should prompt us to explain PA theory more clearly. The benefits of dialogue among individuals with different perspectives occur on a two-way street.

Proponents of PA theory should acknowledge that PA research and scholarship are not complete and not necessarily correct in all respects. Communication and collaboration with critics help us identify weak areas in this field of study, which may require more research. For example, we should incorporate other voices, such as those of the domestic violence community, who represent other aspects of PA.

Finally, collaboration provides opportunities to make new friends and meet interesting people. We all need to get out of our respective silos and echo chambers and share data and insights with colleagues with different perspectives.

Adversarial Collaboration

Of course, the concept of scholarly collaboration extends far beyond the narrow topic of PA theory. Daniel Kahneman, Ph.D., an Israeli-Amer-

ican psychologist, received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002, primarily for creating and developing the concept of behavioral economics. Among many interests, Kahneman and his colleagues studied cognitive biases, such as anchoring and confirmation bias (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982). Kahneman published an interesting and influential book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2012).

Also, he promoted the idea that scholars with different perspectives and opinions should talk to each other and listen to each other. He called this activity an “adversarial collaboration,” when people who disagree work together to test a hypothesis, trying not to win but to figure out what’s true. When he received the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2002, Daniel Kahneman prepared an autobiography as part of the required paperwork (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/2002/kahneman/biographical/>). He explained how his personal feelings about interpersonal conflict related to his notion of “adversarial collaboration.” Kahneman wrote:

One line of work that I hope may become influential is the development of a procedure of *adversarial collaboration*, which I have championed as a substitute for the format of critique-reply-rejoinder in which debates are currently conducted in the social sciences. Both as a participant and as a reader I have been appalled by the absurdly adversarial nature of these exchanges, in which hardly anyone ever admits an error or acknowledges learning anything from the other. Adversarial collaboration involves a good-faith effort to conduct debates by carrying out joint research—in some cases there may be a need for an agreed arbiter to lead the project and collect the data.

We hope that this book—*Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis*—becomes a platform through which writers and scholars with different opinions regarding PA theory can work out their differences. Kahneman’s approach of adversarial collaboration is a good model toward which family court professionals can aspire, for the benefit of the families and children we serve.

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AFFILIATED ORGANIZATIONS

The following individuals, professional organizations, and advocacy groups have endorsed *Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis*. That does not necessarily mean that they agree with every phrase and sentence of this document, but that they endorse the goal of the authors to create definitions, terminology, and general principles regarding parental alienation theory that are generally accepted by the community of mental health and legal professionals.

These individuals, organizations, and groups are members of the Consortium for Parental Alienation Research and Advocacy (COPARA), an umbrella organization that works with member groups to prepare documents regarding parental alienation topics.

Individuals and groups who want to be added to this list of Affiliated Organizations may contact Robert Samery, the chairperson of the Outreach and Collaboration Committee of Parental Alienation Study Group. He may be contacted at rsamery@gmail.com.

Professional Organizations

Instituto Brasileiro de Direito de Família (IBDFAM) is a nonprofit, non-governmental legal institution that aims to develop and disseminate knowledge about Family Law, in addition to acting as a representative force of society with regard to its socio-family relationships and aspirations. www.ibdfam.org.br/conheca-o-ibdfam

Sociedad Paraguaya de Psiquiatria (SPP) is a group of professionals committed to the development of psychiatry. www.psiquiatriaparaguaya.org

Individuals and Group Practices

Gene C. Colman Family Law Centre is a legal firm specializing in parental alienation and high-conflict divorce cases in Canada. www.complexfamilylaw.com

JMB Consulting is a professional consultant specializing in parental alienation and high-conflict divorce cases. www.jmichaelbone.com

Edward A. Kruk, MSW, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus at the University of British Columbia School of Social Work. edward.kruk@ubc.ca

Law Center (CPTSD Foundation) offers a variety of resources and support for trauma survivors, including legal resources. www.thelaw-center.net

Ludmer Law is a legal firm specializing in parental alienation and high-conflict divorce cases in the USA, Canada, and many other Western nations, including Ireland and the U.K. www.brianludmer.ca

Advocacy Groups

1000 Pelotas para Ti por los Derechos de los Niños defends the rights of children and adolescents caught in the legal process of their parents' divorce by developing a culture of respect and commitment to the best interests of the child. www.milpelotasparati.org

Agrupación Argentina de Familias por los Niños (AAFANI) is a nongovernmental organization of families fighting for children who are unable to contact their parents, grandparents, and their entire family. www.instagram.com/aafani_arg/?hl=es-la

Alienadores e Alienados is a group of Brazilian associations dedicated to conducting awareness campaigns against parental alienation and encouraging shared guardianship and care. www.instagram.com/alienadores_e_alienados/?hl=es-la

Alienated Children First (ACF) is an organization in Ireland dedicated to protecting children from parental alienation abuse. www.alienated.ie

Asociación de Padres de Familia Separados (APFS) was the first association created in Spain to defend the rights of separated and divorced parents, as well as their extended families. www.apfs.es

Asociación de Padres que Luchan por sus Hijos (APALUHI) is an association of parents fighting for their children. www.linktr.ee/apaluhiar

Asociación Familia Parentalidad y Crianza (AFAPAC) celebrates diversity and promotes inclusivity in families and society. www.afapac.org

Asociación Mexicana de Padres de Familia Separados (AMPSF) defends the rights and best interests of children from separated families to achieve a healthy and loving relationship with both parents. www.ampfs.com.mx

Asociación Nacional de Ayuda a Víctimas de Violencia Doméstica (ANAVID) is a nonprofit association created to promote nonsexist equality laws and foster mutual respect among people, which are the two main factors in preventing domestic violence and achieving real change in this area. www.anavid.es

Associação Brasileira Criança Feliz (ABCF) defends the rights of parental equality, established in the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil and in other legal provisions, when there is prejudice or discrimination practiced by people or institutions. www.criancafeliz.org

Associação Henry Borel is a national nonprofit civil organization in Brazil that promotes the human rights of children and adolescents in situations of social vulnerability. www.henryborel.com.br

Associação Nacional em Defesa dos Filhos Pela Igualdade Parental (ANFIPA) fights for parental equality in defense of children's rights, supporting mothers, fathers, and all family members who suffer from parental alienation in Brazil. www.anfipa.com.br

Associação Portuguesa para a Igualdade Parental e Direitos dos Filhos (APIPDF) is a Portuguese organization dedicated to promoting parental equality and the rights of children. www.igualdadeparental.org

Avos Afastados dos Netos is an international group of grandparents who have been unfairly prevented from contacting and spending time with their grandchildren. www.instagram.com/avosafastadosdosnetos

Best Foot Forward, LLC, is a specialized health management resource firm that partners with healthcare organizations, primarily government insurance Managed Care Organizations (MCOs). www.bestfootforwardllc.com

Centro de Estudios en Alienación Parental (CEAP) is dedicated to interdisciplinary research, dissemination, and promotion of policies related to the phenomenon of parental alienation. www.alienacionparental.com.ar

Colectivo Nacional de Mujeres por la Igualdad is an organization of antifeminist, prolife women who defend the principles of equality, human rights, and children's rights. www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100087995030313

Colorado Resilience, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, is dedicated to strengthening family resilience by replacing systemic practices that foster parental conflict and victim mentalities with programs that promote parental cooperation and hero mindsets. www.coloradoresilience.org

ComCausa, Cultura de Direitos is a civil society movement in Rio de Janeiro that works to promote and defend human rights, value life, and prevent any type of violence. www.comcausa.org.br

Comissão de Alienação Parental da OAB Niterói assists lawyers in their professional practice in complex cases, such as those involving parental alienation. www.oabniteroi.org/comissao-de-alienacao-parental-da-oab-niteroi-lanca-manual-para-auxiliar-os-advogados-que-atuam-na-area-de-familia

Confraria Alienação Parental engages in debate and study on the topic of parental alienation. www.instagram.com/confrariadaalienacao

Crianças com Direitos is a program to raise awareness about parental alienation. www.instagram.com/criancascomdireitos/?hl-es-la

Dialogue in Growth works to keep children in focus, especially when they are affected by alienation. www.dialogueingrowth.com.au

Domestic Abuse and Violence International Alliance (DAVIA) is a global human rights organization established in 2021. DAVIA addresses the interrelated issues of domestic abuse, domestic violence, false allegations, parental alienation, and shared parenting, particularly focusing on how these issues affect men and families. www.endtodv.org/davia

Društvo Očetov Slovenije is a Slovenian organization dedicated to supporting fathers who are facing challenges related to parental alienation, custody disputes, and other family issues. www.octje.si

Eeny Meeny Miney Mo Foundation (EMMM), an organization in Australia, has the vision for children to be free to love both parents and live without abuse or manipulation. Their mission focuses on reducing parental alienation, raising awareness, providing resources, and preventing its impact. Guided by empathy, integrity, and collaboration, we create inclusive support for affected families. www.emmm.org.au

EX HIJOS A.C. is an association that seeks to restore the rights of children and adolescents in Mexico and around the world. www.facebook.com/exhijosac

Figli per sempre Nazionale is an Italian organization dedicated to promoting shared parenting and the well-being of children in separated families. www.figlipersempre.com

Filho Não é Móbilis are a group of mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, stepmothers, and stepfathers. They are professionals in many areas, but especially judges, lawyers, psychologists, and social workers.

They campaign to raise awareness and combat parental alienation. www.filhonaemobilia.blogspot.com

Foundation for Post-Traumatic Healing and Complex Trauma Research (CPTSD Foundation) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting survivors of complex trauma. www.cptsdfoundation.org

Fundación Crianza Compartida Chile offers emotional support and legal advice to parents who have separated. www.fundacioncrianzacompartidachile.cl

Fundación Padres por Justicia is an organization in Ecuador that promotes equality in parenting, justice for all, and the defense of children's rights. They strengthen families by building a community where equity and love prevail. www.padresporjusticia.org

Fundación Padres por Siempre works to protect the rights of children in separated families, offering specialized legal and psychological services to parents with the aim of achieving a more harmonious outcome. www.padresporsiempre.com

Fundación Venezolana de Niños Sustraídos, Retenidos y Desaparecidos (FUNVENIDES), a nonprofit organization, helps locate Venezuelan children outside of Venezuela who are victims of parental kidnapping. www.tiktok.com/@funvenides

Funpalante is a nonprofit foundation that seeks the well-being of children and adolescents who have been victims of unjust parental removal, resulting in irreversible damage to their personalities. www.academiafunpalante.org

Global Action for Research Integrity in Parental Alienation (GARI-PA) is a nonprofit and nongovernment organization that promotes transparency and integrity of scientific research on parental alienation, child abuse, and human rights. www.garipa.org

Historia de Sophia is the first virtual child created to share a real story and raise awareness about parental alienation and the importance of shared custody through an international trilingual campaign in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. www.youtube.com/@alienadores_e_alienados

Infancia Compartida are mothers, fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, and relatives unjustly blocked from contact and relationships with our most cherished loved ones. <https://infanciacompartida.org>

Instituto Proteger promotes the right to full protection for children, adolescents, and elderly people exposed to family conflicts. www.instagram.com/institutoproteger/?hl=es

International Council on Shared Parenting (ICSP) is an international nonprofit organization that promotes and disseminates scientific research on the needs and rights of children whose parents do not live together. www.twohomes.org

International Support Network of Alienated Families (ISNAF) is a support network for individuals suffering the pain and bewilderment of losing a child due to the dynamics of parental alienation. www.ISNAF.info

Kids Need Both, Inc., is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing education and support to families experiencing child custody conflicts. www.kidsneedboth.org

LaVida Bella promotes the search for one's own identity. When this is absent, people surrender their power and emotional deficiencies arise, since today we are not taught to know who we are. www.facebook.com/laal.6369

Movimiento Internacional de Mujeres por la Verdad are an international organization that brings together all types of women directly and indirectly affected by the practice of parental alienation in their families. www.instagram.com/mov.int.mujeresporlaverdad/?hl=es

National Parents Organization (NPO) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable and educational organization that promotes shared parenting. www.sharedparenting.org

Niños con MaPa is an association that seeks to reunite children with their parents and defends children's rights. www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064826229475

No Más Hijos Rehenes is a national and international association in Mexico that strengthens and provides families with information and knowledge about the importance of a healthy and loving relationship with both parents and safeguards the child's rights above any other interests. www.nomashijosrehenes.org

Nucleo de Estudios en Alienacion Parental para el Servicio Social (NEAPSS), in collaboration with Simón Bolívar University, offers an annual diploma program that addresses parental alienation from different perspectives, delving into its relationship with emotional abuse, psychological violence, and the violation of children's and adolescents' rights. www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUBRZM9Rg4o

Observatório da Guarda Compartilhada (OGC) trains fathers and mothers to exercise responsible parenting after separation and divorce, thus ensuring the true and integral well-being of their children. www.sites.google.com/view/obgcbrasil/obgcbrasil?authuser=0

Observatório de Alienação Parental (OAPAR) is a professional group of lawyers, psychologists, and psychoanalysts with an interest in the phenomenon of parental alienation. www.linktr.ee/oapar2020

Oyako no Kizuna for Japan (Parent-Child Bond for Japan) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving the natural interaction between parents and children, especially in the context of Japan's system of sole custody after divorce. www.parent-child-bond.com

Oye Papá Oye Mamá Peru is a therapeutic care center for children, adolescents, adults, couples, and families. www.facebook.com/OyePapáOyeMamá

PA Consortium unites family court and community stakeholders to address the impact of parental conflict on children. It aims to develop best practices, support at-risk families, mitigate domestic violence exposure, and reform systemic incentives to reduce conflict while promoting collaboration and accountability. www.paconsortium.org

Padres de Rio Negro y Neuquen brings together fathers, mothers, and relatives of children who are unable to bond and parents who have been falsely accused. They are currently in partnership with more than 160 associations around the world. www.facebook.com/Padresderione-groyneuquen/?locale=es_LA

Padres por Siempre Paraguay are parents, grandparents, uncles, cousins, and siblings of defenseless child victims of parental alienation. www.facebook.com/PadresPorSiempre.Py/?locale=es_LA

Padres sin Gloria Perú was created out of the need to protect and vindicate the rights of our children. www.instagram.com/padressingloria

Papas en Lucha is a group that supports and guides parents who are unable to see their children. Approximately 100 families participate, including many women who support their partners so they can be reunited with their children. www.instagram.com/papasenlucha.ok/?hl=es

Parental Alienation Awareness says its core aims are to raise awareness, educate key players, and campaign against parental alienation as a form of child abuse. www.paawareness.co.uk

Parental Alienation Resource, navigating through parental alienation, offers many resource sites. www.parentalalienationresource.com

Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) is a nonprofit international organization of mental health professionals, legal professionals, targeted parents and grandparents, and child and family advocates who are interested in the study of parental alienation. www.pasg.info

Parental Alienation Support & Intervention (PASI) is a global non-profit organization committed to eliminating parental child psychological abuse. We support families affected by abuse and equip professionals to address alienation and relational trauma. www.pas-intervention.org

Parents Beyond Breakup (PBB) is an Australian suicide prevention charity that focuses on supporting separating mothers, fathers, and grandparents. www.parentsbeyondbreakup.com/home

Preserving Family Ties Media, LLC (PFTM), is a multimedia educational platform dedicated to supporting families in transition. www.preservingfamilytiesmedia.com

Primero Infancia Veeduría ensures that the rights of children and parents are respected, without any discrimination, in the judicial processes of the various institutions. www.instagram.com/primerolainfancia.veeduría/?hl=es

Red Internacional no Más Hijos Rehenes is an international network present on six continents of the planet, which brings together channels of dissemination and awareness in the fight against the practice of parental alienation and the defense of equal coexistence. www.nomashijosrehenes.ar

Rohner Center for the Study of Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection works with researchers, clinical practitioners, and other professionals to study and apply Interpersonal Acceptance–Rejection Theory (IPARTheory) in parent–child relationships, intimate adult relationships, peer and sibling relationships, and others. www.csiar.uconn.edu

Stop Abuso Uruguay advocates for human rights in Uruguay on behalf of children, parents, and families. www.facebook.com/people/Stop-Abuso-Uruguay/100066819458601

TAR Anon™, a program of **STAR Network**, a 501(c)(3), empowers individuals to heal from toxic relationships through support, awareness, and transformation. As a Recovery & Resiliency Peer-to-Peer Fellowship,

it addresses trauma, PTSD, and CPTSD with a community-driven approach. www.starnetwork.org and www.taranon.org

Tenencia Compartida Perú (TCP) seeks to unite separated parents from Peru and the Americas to fight for our rights and those of our children. <https://es-la.facebook.com/tenenciacompartidaperu/>

Unión LATAM La Infancia Primero is a nongovernmental organization present in 53 countries and collaborating with 350 organizations. It says: No More Children Held Hostage on the Planet. No More Parental Obstruction. No More Industry of Pain for Children, Parents, and Families. www.apfs.es/union-latam-la-infancia-primero

Veeduría Infancia Primero Colombia ensures that the rights of children and parents are respected, without any discrimination, in the judicial processes of the various institutions. www.instagram.com/primeroelainfancia.veeduria/?hl=es

INDEX

Abbreviations used in Index:

- AB = alienating behavior
- DSM = *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*
- ICD = *International Classification of Diseases*
- PA = parental alienation
- PASG = Parental Alienation Study Group
- PCCP = parent-child contact problem

A

- Abbreviations, xxii
- Absence of abuse, 10
- Absence of guilt, 11
- Abuse (*see* maltreatment)
- Adler, P., 120
- Adler, R., 37
- Adult alienated children, 56–57
- Adversarial collaboration, 142–143
- Advocacy groups, xiv, 57, 142, 168
- Affiliated organizations, 167–177
- Agllias, K., 55
- Alienated child, 13, 31, 40–43, 50–53, 76–77
 - Definition, 6–7
 - Factor Five, 11–12
 - Kelly and Johnston, 7, 16
- Alienated grandparents, 55–57
- Alienated Grandparents Anonymous (AGA), 57
- Alienated parent, 10, 27, 41, 51, 54–55, 60, 63, 89, 120–122
 - Definition, 6
- Alienating behaviors (ABs), 30, 34, 42–43, 78, 85–87, 90, 102–104, 106, 117, 119–124
 - Definition, 5
 - Factor Four, 10–11
 - Levels of severity, 28
 - Prevalence, 32–33
 - Research, 74–75, 81–82
- Alienating parent, 13–14, 27–28, 41–43, 47–53, 59, 61, 69, 95
 - Definition, 6
- Alienation (*see* parental alienation)
- Allowing child to choose, 11
- Alsalem, R., 98–100
- Alvarez, M., 23
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), 99, 102
- American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML), 99, 102–103
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), 99, 103
- American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (AAPL), 135
- American Bar Association (ABA), 70
- American Journal of Psychiatry*, 69
- American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC), 60, 103–104
- American Psychiatric Association (APA), 12, 125
- American Psychological Association (APA), 79, 104, 133
- Anti-Alienation Project (AAP), 57

- Appelbaum, P., 128
 Argentina, ix, 110
 Artificial intelligence, 133, 136
 Asking child to keep secrets, 11
 Asking child to spy, 11
 Assessment of PA, 15–22
 Association Contre L'aliénation Parentale (ACALPA), 57, 71
 Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (AFT), 105
 Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), xiv, 99, 105, 107, 140–141
 Attachment, 10, 36–37, 59–60
 Attorneys, 11, 19, 39, 41, 44, 58, 69–70, 93, 96, 107, 133
 Australia, xi, 71, 117
 Avieli, H., 56
- B**
- Badmouthing, 10, 23–24, 75
 Baker, A.J.L., xv, 6, 9, 10, 12, 21, 35–37, 56, 70–71, 73–75, 78, 80–83, 127–128
 Baker Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ), 21, 83
 Baker Five-Factor Model, 9–12, 80–81, 84, 87–88
 Definition, 6, 9
 Exceptions to, 14
 Factor 4 research, 81–82
 Factor 5 research, 82–83
 Baker, K.A., xv
 Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ), 10, 81
 Barina, R., 123
 Barnahus program, 115–116
 Ben-Ami, N., 78
 Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test (BAFRT), 21
 Benedek, E., 7, 68
 Bentley, C., 78
 Bernet, W., viii, xv, 7, 9, 13, 23, 27, 33, 49, 62, 67, 70–72, 78, 83, 125–128, 135–137, 141
 Blotcky, A.D., xv, 40–42, 47–48
 Boch-Galhau, W.v., xvi, 71, 77–78
 Bone, J.M., xvi
 Borrowed scenarios, 12
 Bounds, O., 55
 Bowen, M., 61, 68
 Bowlby, J., 36, 59
 Brazil, 78, 117
 Bricklin, B., 7, 21, 70
 Bricklin Perceptual Scales, 21
 Broca, R., 71
 Bruch, C.S., 133
- C**
- Campaign of denigration, 11
 Campbell, T.W., 32
 Canada, 32–34, 76, 106
 Caregiver–child relationship problem, 129–130
 Castañeda Orosco, P.E., 78
 Cavedon, A., 16
 Ceci, S.J., 62
 Changing child's name, 11
 Chapman, G., 36
 Child affected by parental relationship distress (CAPTA), 7, 13, 127–128
 Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), 21
 Child protection, 10, 20, 49, 76, 88, 106, 117
 Child psychological abuse, 13
 Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), 106, 114–115
Children Held Hostage, 32, 70
 Chimera, C., 105
 Chow, V., 96
 Churchill, B., 121
 Cialdini, R.B., 62
 Citation analysis, 136–138
 Clawar, S.S., 32, 42–43, 70, 73
 Coercion, 29, 87, 116
 Cognitive dissonance, 25–26, 62
 Confiding in child, 11
 Consensus among professionals, 7, 131

- Consequences of PA, 77–79, 95, 105, 120
- Consortium for Parental Alienation Research and Advocacy (CO-PARA), 167
- Contact refusal, 9, 44, 72, 104, 136
 Assessment of, 15–22
 Combination of causes, 21–22
 Differential diagnosis, 15–20, 88
- Contributors, xv
- Conventional therapy, 46–53
 Limitations, 46–47
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 111–112
- Co-parenting, 37–38
- Cracknell, M., 71
- Creating impression of danger, 11
- Critics of PA theory, 69, 71, 93–94, 99, 107, 130, 134, 139
- D**
- Danielsen, S., 114
- Darnall, D.C., 28, 31, 48, 52, 70
- Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals, 65, 107, 165
- Death, J., 76
- Definitions, 5–8
 Confusion of, 31
- Delusional symptoms, 13–14, 18, 20, 51–52, 130
- Denigration, 24–25, 107, 141
- Denmark, x, 71, 114, 117
- Depression, 17, 51, 54–56, 78, 95, 122
- Despert, L., 68
- Diagnosis of PA, 9–14
 Alternative terms, 13–15, 130–131
 Baker Five-Factor Model, 9–12
 DSM, 125–128
 ICD, 129–131
 Ownership of the word, 12
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), 12–13, 125–128, 130–131
 Task Force and Steering Committee, 126
- Differential diagnosis, 9, 15–20
- Different perspectives, 49, 105, 119, 139–143
- Dijkstra, S., 76
- Divorce Poison*, 70
- Domestic violence, 76, 85–91, 94, 98, 110, 140, 142
 ABs and, 85–87
 Legal cases, 90–91
- Dose-response, 29
- Dreikurs, R., 37
- Dreyfus, H., 95
- Drozd, L.M., 16, 73
- Dunne, J., 70, 73
- E**
- Eddy, B., v, 38
- Eeny Meeny Miney Mo Foundation, 57, 71
- Einstein, A., 68
- Emery, R.E., 25
- Emotional abuse (*see* psychological abuse)
- Estrangement, 7, 13, 21–22
 Definition, 6
 Distinguish from PA, 18, 33, 49, 88–89
- European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), 111
- European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), 99, 112–114
- Extreme PA, 24, 26–27, 122
- F**
- Fabricius, W.V., 116
- Factitious disorder, 14
- Faller, K.C., 133
- False claims of PA, 87–88, 98
- False memory, 62
- Family Bridges, 44, 71, 95–96
- Family court, 39, 41, 92–100, 106, 116–117, 140–141

- Family Reflections, 44, 70
 Family systems, 61, 68
 Feminism, 110–111
 Ferreria da Rocha, K., 78
 Featherstone, L., 121
 Festinger, L., 25, 62
 Fidler, B.J., 42, 50, 52, 83
 Fine, P., 35–38, 71
 Five-Factor Model (*see* Baker Five-Factor Model)
Folie à deux (*see* delusional symptoms)
 Forcing child to reject parent, 11
 Foreword, xiii
 Freeman, B.W., 15–16
 Freeman, R., 106
 Frey v. United States, 65, 107, 165
 Friedlander, S., 22, 44
 Frivolous rationalizations, 11
- G**
- Game, S., xi
 Garber, B., 16, 50–51, 88
 Gardner, R.A., 7, 11, 67, 69–70, 72, 77, 80, 82, 126, 133–135, 139, 142
 Gender issues, 111, 115, 123
 Germany, 71, 74, 77–78, 113
 Global Action for Research Integrity in Parental Alienation (GARI-PA), 98–99, 172
 Goffman, E., 121
 Gottman, J., 36
 Grandparents, 55–57
 Guardian ad litem, 88
- H**
- Haines, J., 31, 70, 120
 Hanafi, S., 110
 Hands, A.J., 82
 Hankivsky, O., 122–123
 Happy Parenting Malta, 71
 Harman, J.J., xvi, 10, 24, 30, 32, 44, 54, 60, 70, 76, 83, 86, 92, 99–100, 127, 134
 Harris-Britt, A., 141
 Hart, B., xvi
 Heard, G.M., 121
 Hellblom Sjögren, L., xvi, 71, 112
 Hendrix, P., xvi
 Hine, B., xvii, 30, 32–33, 86, 122
 History, 6, 10, 14
 Domestic violence, 89–90, 98
 PA theory, 7, 67–72
 PASG, 70–71
 Holbrook, H.M., 94
 Houchin, T.M., 135
 Hoult, J., 71
 Hybrid case, 22, 89
 Definition, 7
- I**
- Identity disturbance, 14
 Implacable hostility, 114
 Independent-thinker phenomenon, 11
 India, 78, 109
 Indoctrination, 6, 14, 18, 22, 112, 142
 Influence, 6, 18, 30–31, 53, 62–63, 74, 95
 Interfering with communication, 10
 International aspects of PA, xv, 57, 70–71, 109–118
International Classification of Diseases (ICD), 12, 129–130
International Handbook of Parental Alienation Syndrome, 70, 133
 International Support Network of Alienated Families (ISNAF), 57, 71
 Interpersonal acceptance–rejection theory (IPART), 62–63
 Interventions for PA, 5, 9, 23, 40–45, 67, 70, 88, 125
 Inappropriate, 47–48, 51
 Mild PA, 42
 Moderate PA, 42–43
 Severe PA, 43, 94–95
 Intimate partner distress, 85
 Intimate partner violence, 14, 85, 105, 107, 134, 141

Introduction, xxi
 Isailă, O.M., 61
 Israel, 78, 115
 Italy, 70, 77–78

J

Jaffe, P.G., 86, 106, 141
 Jappens, M., 55
 Johnson, M.P., 87
 Johnston, J.R., 6–7, 16, 28, 32–33, 68,
 77, 82
 Joshi, A., xvii, 71, 78, 85, 93, 96–97
*Journal of Family Trauma, Child Custody &
 Child Development*, 135–136
*Journal of the American Academy of Child &
 Adolescent Psychiatry*, 99
*Journal of the American Academy of Psychia-
 try and the Law*, 68, 135
 Judges, 19, 39, 41, 88, 92, 96–98, 115
Judges' Journal, 135

K

Kaganas, F., 56
 Kahneman, D., 142–143
 Kalekin-Fishman, D., 119–120
 Kayden's Law, 94
 Kelly, J.B., 6–7, 16, 28, 68, 77, 82, 95
 Klosinski, G., 26
 Kloth-Zanard, J., 71
 Kolko, D.J., 89
 Kopetski, L.M., 68
 Koppejan-Luitze, H.S., 77
 Korosi, S., xvii, 26, 71, 120–123
 Kovaleski, J., 110
 Kruk, E.A., 13, 61, 71, 76, 78, 123, 134

L

Lack of ambivalence, 11
 Lathouras, A., 122
 Laughrea, K., 82
 Lavadera, A.L., 77
 Lawyers (*see* attorneys)

Lee-Maturana, S., 122
 Legal cases, 67, 90–93, 112–114, 118
 Legislation, 58, 71–72, 94–96, 116–118,
 140
 Leonetti, C., 93–94
 Levels of severity, 23–29, 42, 67
 ABs, 28
 PA, 25–26
 Levitt, H.M., 79
 Levy, A.M., 68
 Levy, D.M., 68
 Lewis, S., 123

M

Malta, 71, 116
 Maltreatment, 10, 13, 18, 49, 60–61, 78,
 81, 88–89, 104–105
 Marcus, P., 71, 78, 115
 Marques, T.M., 83
 Marx, K., 120
 Matthewson, M.L., xvii, 10, 57, 71
 Mazzoni, A., 77
 McCarten, D., 31
 McColley, D., 141
 Mediation, 39, 116–117
 Meier, J., 71, 87
 Mendoza-Amaro, A., xix
 Mental health professionals, 9, 19, 39,
 58, 77, 80, 83, 103, 134
 Mercer, J., 135–136
 Mild PA, 23–26, 33, 42, 46, 94
 Miller, S.G., 39, 42, 50, 53
 Millett, K., 123
 Minnesota Multiphasic Personality
 Inventory (MMPI), 21
 Minuchin, S., 61, 68, 73
 Miralles, P., 78
 Misinformation, xiv, 71, 87, 93, 98–100,
 123–124, 132–138, 142
 Disinformation, 123–124, 132
 Mizrahi, M.L., ix, 110
 Moderate PA, 23–24, 26, 33, 42–44,
 46–47
 Morrison, S.J., 16

- Multi-Modal Family Intervention (MMFI), 44–45
- N**
- Napp-Peters, A., 74
- Narrow, W.E., 7, 13, 78, 128
- National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ), 96, 99, 107–108, 140–141
- Neilson, L.C., 129
- Nelsen, J., 37
- Netherlands, 76–77
- Normal family, 24, 27
- Normal preferences, 16, 19
- Norway, 112–113
- O**
- Overcoming Barriers, 44
- P**
- Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ), 21, 27, 49, 62–63, 83, 135
- Parental alienating behaviors (*see* alienating behaviors)
- Parental alienation (PA),
Admissibility in court, 13, 92–93, 107–108
Definition, 5
Factor Five, 11–12
Levels of severity, 25–27
Misinformation, 132–138
- Prevalence, 7, 33–34
- Research, 82–83
- Parental Alienation Advocates (PA-A), 57
- Parental Alienation Awareness Organization (PAAO), 57
- Parental Alienation Database, xxi, 93, 100
- Parental alienation disorder (PAD), 7, 126–127
- Parental alienation relational problem (PARP), 127
- Parental Alienation – Science and Law*, 12, 93
- Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG), 57, 70, 98
Author of this book, xiii, xv, xxi
History, 70–71
Membership, xxii
- Parental Alienation Support & Intervention (PASI), 71
- Parental alienation syndrome (PAS), 70, 104, 126, 133–135
Definition, 69
History, 67, 71
The Parental Alienation Syndrome and the Differentiation Between Fabricated and Genuine Child Sexual Abuse, 69
- Parental alienation theory, xxi, 67–72, 80–81, 124, 139–140
Definition, 5
Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis, xv, xxi, 70, 104, 143
- Parental conflict, 11, 24, 32, 75–76
- Parent–child contact problem (PCCP), xiii, 15
Definition, 6
- Parent–child relational problem (PCRPR), 9, 13, 44, 46, 88, 97, 104, 107, 128, 140–141
Definition, 6
- Parenting plan, 35, 38–39, 105
- Parent loss, 60
- Park, E.H., 55
- Peace Talks, 141
- Pérez Agüero, M.C., 76
- Personality disorders, 48–49, 96
- Physical abuse, 14, 63, 85
- Piqui’s Law, 96
- Pine, D., 126
- Pinel, E.C., 121
- Platt, S., 141
- Polak, S., 77
- Polarization, ix, xiv
- Poustie, C., 75, 122

- Prevalence, 7, 30–34, 92, 122
 ABs, 32–33
 PA, 33–34
 Prevention of PA, 5, 35–39, 67, 71, 118
 Prior positive relationship, 10
 Psychoeducation, 40
 Psychological abuse, 13, 48, 61, 78,
 85–87, 126
 Psychological phenomena, 59–63
 Psychological testing, 21
 Psychosocial assessment of contact
 refusal, 15–22
 Psychotherapy,
 Usefulness in mild and moderate
 PA, 46
 Lack of effectiveness with severe
 PA, 46–47
 Public policy, 30, 119, 122–123
- R**
- Rand, D., 133–134
 Reay, K., xvii, 44, 47, 50, 52, 70, 94
 Recognition of PA by professional orga-
 nizations, 101–108
 References, 145–164
 Referring to parent by first name, 11
 Referring to stepparent as Mom, Dad,
 11
 Reflexive support of favored parent, 11
 Regier, D., 127
 Rejection of extended family, 12
 Research regarding PA,
 Court decisions, 92–93
 Qualitative, 73–79
 Quantitative, 80–84
 Review of literature, 83–84
 Resistance,
 To PA theory, 71–72
 To therapy, 52
 Resist/refuse dynamic, 6, 9, 15, 88, 97,
 102, 104–106
 Resnick, P.J., 68
 Reunification, 43–44, 77, 94–96, 113
 Richardson, P., 114
 Rivlin, R.V., 32, 42, 70, 73
 Rogers, H.S., v
 Rohner, R.P., vi, 27, 49, 63
 Romania, 117
 Rowen, J., 25
 Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale
 (RPAS), 21, 49
 Rowlands, G.A., 31, 49
- S**
- Saini, M.A., 83–84, 141
 Salem, P., 140
 Samery, R., xix, 167
 Sandelowski, M., 73
 Sargent, J., vi
 Sauber, S.R., 49, 52
 Scharp, K.M., 121
 Schetky, D., 7, 68
 Schneiderman, M., 89
 Seeman, M., 120
 Separation anxiety, 17, 20, 22, 69
 Severe PA, 14, 18, 29, 33, 26, 43, 46,
 52–53, 78, 90, 94, 114, 141
 Sexual abuse, 69, 85, 134
 Shared delusional disorder (*see* delusion-
 al symptoms)
 Silva, D.M.Pd., 78
 Slep, A.M.S., 61
 Slobogin, C., vi
 Social alienation, 119–120
 Sociopolitical perspectives regarding PA,
 119–124
 Splitting, 26–28, 47, 62, 75, 83
 Stephens, R.K., 67
 Stone, L., 67
 Stubborn child, 17
 Sullivan, M.J., xiv, xx, 97
 Support Fathers' Rights, 57
 Sweden, 71, 109, 112
- T**
- Talk therapy (*see* conventional therapy)
 Targeted parent, 6

- Tellesbø, O., 113
 Telling child parent does not love them, 11
 Templer, K., 40, 70, 78
 Terminology, 5–8, 14, 85, 125
 Thaler-Singer, M., 114
 Theory, PA, xxi, 7, 59, 62–63, 80–81, 93, 107, 118–119, 129, 139–142
 Definition of, 5
 History of, 67–72
 Misinformation regarding, 132–138
 Therapy (*see* interventions)
 Third-party alienation, 49–50
Thinking, Fast and Slow, 143
 Thomas, M.P., xxii, xx
 Torrance, H., 73
 Torun, E., 77
 Translations, xxii
 Tucker, L.S., 14, 69
 Twining, J.E., 120
 Turning Points for Families, 44, 70
- U**
- Undermining authority of parent, 11
 United Kingdom, 71, 77, 114–115, 122
 United Nations, 98–100, 111–112
 Children's Fund (UNICEF), 109
 Human Rights Council, 98
 United States, 33, 68, 71, 76–77, 100, 110, 116
- V**
- Verhaar, S., 56, 78, 87, 122
- Viljoen, M., 76
 Verrocchio, M.C., 78, 82, 86
- W**
- Wallerstein, J.S., 7, 68
 Walters, M.G., 22, 44
 Wamboldt, M.Z., 7, 13, 78, 128
 Warshak, R.A., vii, 7, 33, 41–44, 47, 50, 70–71, 73, 78, 89, 94–97
 Welcomes, viii
 Westman, J.C., 68
 Withholding approval of child, 11
 Withholding medical, school information, 11
 Wood, C.L., 71, 133
 Woodall, K., 75, 77–78
 World Health Organization, 12, 125, 129
 Wright, D.C., 67
- X**
- Xu, S., 71, 137
- Y**
- Yousif, L., 127–128
- Z**
- Zupancic, M., 94

Bridging the Divide: A Unified Approach to Parental Alienation

Family law is fraught with conflict, and few issues spark more debate among mental health and legal professionals than parental alienation. When a child aligns strongly with one parent while rejecting the other—often due to indoctrination rather than legitimate reasons—the consequences can be devastating for families. Yet, professionals remain deeply divided on how to define, diagnose, and address this issue, creating further polarization in both policy and practice.

Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis is a bold step toward consensus. This concise text brings together a group of experts who have developed a shared framework on definitions, terminology, diagnosis, prevention, and intervention. Designed as a foundation for ongoing dialogue, this work invites contributions from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to refine and expand upon its principles in future editions.

By fostering collaboration and standardizing approaches, this book seeks to bridge professional divides and offer families a clearer path to resolution.



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