

What is Parental Alienation Syndrome and How Viable a Concept is it?

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Since the term “Parental Alienation Syndrome” (PAS) was coined in 1985 by child psychiatrist Richard Gardner, it has been the target of considerable controversy and debate. Gardner developed the PAS to describe a complex set of behaviours and responses of a child and parent (the “alienating” parent, most often the mother) against the non-custodial parent (“alienated” parent, most often the father) in high-conflict divorce and custody cases. PAS was originally related to false sexual abuse allegations, but has been extended to a wide range of cases in which the child does not want to visit the non-custodial parent (Bruch, 2001).

In Gardner’s numerous publications on the topic (e.g., Gardner, 1987, 1991, 1992, 1995, 1999a,b, 2002, 2003, 2004), he explains that in PAS, the alienated child demonstrates affinity for the “alienating” parent and animosity (often extreme) toward the “alienated” parent. The “alienating” parent who engages in direct and subtle programming, or “brainwashing” of the child initiates this process. The child then generates further trivial, highly exaggerated or false allegations (often sexual abuse) against the “alienated” parent, due to theorized complex psychodynamic processes (e.g., reaction formation – deep love for the “alienated” parent disguised as hatred) occurring within the child. Therefore, PAS is a result of the active participation of both the “alienating” parent and the child; the behaviour of the “alienated” parent has nothing to do with the child’s allegations or negative feelings. Gardner emphasizes that the focus in these cases should be on whether the “alienating” parent and child are lying, not if the “alienated” parent has acted inappropriately; PAS only applies to false allegations where the “alienated” parent has done nothing wrong.

Gardner (2003) described a number of characteristics of PAS, including a campaign of denigration in which the “alienated” parent is the target of ongoing animosity and interpersonal attacks from both the “alienating” parent and the child. The campaign of denigration is inadequately justified, usually resulting in a weak and frivolous rationale for the hatred towards the “alienated” parent. The animosity toward the “alienated” parent spreads to other people associated with the “alienated” parent (e.g., grandparents, extended family). The child has an absence of ambivalent feelings, viewing the “alienated” parent as “all bad” and aligns unconditionally with the “alienating” parent. The child also displays an absence of guilt regarding the antagonistic behaviour toward the “alienated” parent, ignoring the feelings of the “alienated” parent and disregarding all affection, gifts and support provided by the parent. The explanations provided by the child to explain the animosity toward the “alienated” parent are “photocopies” or extremely similar to the explanations provided by the “alienating” parent. Even though the attacks made by the child are replicas of attacks made by the “alienating” parent, the “alienating” parent is steadfast in emphasizing that the child’s antagonism is entirely due to the child’s “independent judgement”. Gardner’s proposed treatment for PAS involves transferring custody of the child to the “alienated” parent for “deprogramming” and, in extreme cases, preventing any contact with the custodial parent, who initiated the alienation.

Stemming from his theory on PAS, Gardner made a number of assumptions and claims, almost all of which were unjustified by any peer-reviewed, empirically-based studies. Gardner highly overestimated the frequency of cases in which false allegations are made; he claimed that

PAS and false allegations of sexual abuse were present in 90% of custody litigation cases (Gardner, 1992), but provided no research to support this claim (Faller, 1998; Bruch, 2001). However, in a study of 9000 custody disputes, only 1.9% involved sexual abuse allegations, only half of which were deemed likely (Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990). Gardner (1991) also claimed that the vast majority of allegations of sexual abuse in contested divorce cases were false and that 90% of false allegations in divorces were made by mothers against fathers. Again, research studies have found that only 20-30% of allegations of sexual abuse in contested divorces were likely (Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990; Faller & DeVoe, 1995) and less than half of sexual abuse allegations were made by mothers against fathers (Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990).

Gardner's unsupported claims about the prevalence of PAS has the negative effect of putting legitimate allegations of sexual abuse in question, thus placing children at risk of further abuse (Bruch, 2001). Gardner claimed (again, without supporting evidence) that in severe cases of PAS, the relationship of the child and the "alienated" parent is at risk of permanent damage unless the child is removed from the "alienating" parent and placed in the custody of the "alienated" parent; this claim is contradicted by longitudinal research findings (Bruch, 2001). Additionally, PAS shifts attention away from the behaviour of the potentially abusive parent to the custodial parent, who is viewed as lying and brainwashing the child; any steps taken by the custodial parent to get help for the child (e.g., counselling) are perceived as evidence of an alienation process (Faller, 1998; Bruch, 2001). PAS has been criticized because it lacks parsimony; it requires elaborate explanations and complex, difficult-to-test dynamics on the part of the child and "alienating" parent (Faller, 1998). Every symptom is open to alternative, more likely explanations for the behaviour of the child and the custodial parent (e.g., misinterpretation of the parent's behaviour; genuine conflict between child and parent) (Bruch, 2001).

Critics of PAS point to its basis in theoretical assumptions and lack of foundation in any supporting scientific and empirical research. There are no reliable or valid measures of PAS, which restrict its utility as a diagnostic syndrome (Johnston & Kelly, 2001; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Lee & Olesen, 2001). PAS fails to meet even minimum scientific standards and Gardner contravenes accepted scientific practice by assuming his hypotheses are true until disproved (Bruch, 2001; Emory, 2005). There has been no objective, independent or public replication of PAS research and it is based entirely on clinical experience and case studies (Johnston & Kelly, 2001). While these are valuable for generating hypotheses, they have limited value for confirming hypotheses (Emory, 2005). Gardner counters these criticisms by claiming that PAS is the basis of a large and growing body of empirical, peer-reviewed research and cites his website as a resource for these articles (Gardner, 2002, 2003, 2004). However, the vast majority of the articles he refers to are not data-based, nor peer-reviewed and consist largely of his own writings (Faller, 1998). Gardner's own writings have been the source of considerable criticism as well. Much of his work is self-published by his own publishing company, Creative Therapeutics, which publishes only his writings. Since his work is self-published, it does not have to be critically evaluated or peer-reviewed (Faller, 1998) and he primarily sites his work in many of his articles. Therefore, much of the published literature on PAS is published by Gardner, based on his own articles, many of which were never peer-reviewed and none of which are empirically-based.

The questions about the scientific validity of PAS have also led to concerns about its applicability in legal settings. In legal contexts where the validity of PAS has been questioned, most US courts have agreed that it has not been generally accepted by professionals and does not meet standards for scientific reliability (Bruch, 2001). However, the vast majority of cases mentioning PAS have not questioned if the theory is well founded or leads to appropriate recommendations, thereby perpetuating a false sense of scientific foundation (Bruch, 2001). Others have argued that PAS is a nondiagnostic syndrome, only explaining child and parental behaviour in cases of known abuse; PAS has no legal value for determining the presence or absence of abuse (Faller, 1998). This has led to recent challenges about the admissibility of PAS testimony in both Canadian (Williams, 2001) and US courts (Zirogiannis, 2001).

In summary, although PAS has been the subject of numerous articles and publications, the current state of scientific research and knowledge in the field is significantly limited, and based primarily on clinical impressions, not systematic research. There is no well-documented, empirically based evidence to support either the clinical or legal utility of PAS as a diagnostic entity.

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