



Differentiating between parental alienation syndrome and bona fide abuse-neglect

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DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME AND BONA FIDE ABUSE-NEGLECT

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In recent years, with increasing familiarity and recognition of parental alienation syndrome (PAS), 1 parent has accused the other parent of inducing PAS in the children. In response, the responding parent accuses the other parent of abusing and neglecting the children. In short, the children's alienation is considered by 1 parent to be the result of PAS indoctrinations and the other to be the result of bona fide abuse-neglect. The purpose of this article is to provide criteria for differentiating between these 2 situations, a differentiation that is obviously crucial if courts are to deal properly with children exposed to and embroiled in these 2 very different situations.

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS, Gardner, 1985, 1986, 1987a, 1987b, 1989, 1992, 1998) is a disorder that arises almost exclusively in the context of child-custody disputes. In this disorder, one parent (the alienator, the alienating parent, the PAS-inducing parent) induces a program of denigration against the other parent (the alienated parent, the victim, the denigrated parent). However, this is not simply a matter of "brainwashing" or "programming" in that the children contribute their own elements into the campaign of denigration. It is this combination of factors that justifiably warrants the designation PAS. When bona fide abuse-neglect is present, then the PAS diagnosis is not applicable. In recent years, with increasing recognition of PAS, abusive-neglectful parents have been claiming that the PAS designation is improper and that the children's animosity has nothing to do with abuse-neglect but is a manifestation of programming of the children by the alienating parent. In response, the

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other parent might claim that there has been no such indoctrinations and that the children's acrimony is in direct response to the abuse–neglect to which they have been subjected.

There is no doubt that some abusive–neglectful parents are using the PAS explanation to explain the children's campaign of alienation as a coverup and diversionary maneuver from exposure of their abuse–neglect. However, there is no question, also, that some PAS-inducing parents are using the argument that it is the other parent's abuse–neglect that is causing the children's campaign of denigration and there has been no programming whatsoever. Obviously, this differentiation is an important one if courts are to deal properly with families embroiled in such disputes. Presented here are criteria that should prove useful for differentiating between PAS and bona fide abuse–neglect.

DIFFERENTIATING CRITERIA

Criteria for Differentiating Between PAS and Bona Fide Abuse–Neglect in Children

Inducing a PAS in a child is a form of abuse. After all, it can result in the attenuation and even permanent destruction of the psychological bond between loving parents and their children. It is a form of emotional abuse, however, that is different from physical abuse, neglect, and sexual abuse. Here the term *abuse* will generally refer to physical abuse and, to a lesser degree, sexual abuse. Included also in such abuse would be such behaviors as frequent menacing, threatening, hovering, and other forms of child intimidation. These often serve as precursors to physical and sometimes sexual abuse. All these abuses, and neglect as well, will be encompassed under the terms *abuse–neglect*. This group will be compared to PAS, which is basically a form of emotional abuse. This is the distinction that will serve the purposes of this article.

When attempting to differentiate between PAS and bona fide abuse, examiners would do well to refer first to the eight basic PAS symptoms as guidelines. In general, PAS children are likely to exhibit these symptoms, whereas children who have been genuinely abused–neglected are not likely to. Listed below are the eight primary manifestations of PAS.

- Campaign of denigration
- Weak, frivolous, or absurd rationalizations for the deprecation
- Lack of ambivalence
- The “independent thinker” phenomenon
- Reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict
- Absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the alienated parent
- Presence of borrowed scenarios
- Spread of the animosity to the friends and/or extended family of the alienated parent

Listed below are the primary symptoms seen in post-traumatic stress disorder (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM–IV]*; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Many abused children (but certainly not all) will exhibit such symptoms. This is especially the case if the abuse has been chronic. PAS children rarely exhibit these symptoms. Accordingly, reference to these symptoms, as well as the aforementioned primary manifestations of PAS, can be useful for differentiating between bona fide abuse–neglect and the PAS in children.

- Preoccupation with the trauma
- Episodic reliving and flashbacks
- Dissociation
- Depersonalization
- Derealization and psychic numbing
- Recreational desensitization and fantasy play
- Trauma-specific dreams
- Fear of people who resemble the alleged abuser
- Hypervigilance and/or frequent startle reactions
- Running away from home or the site of the abuse
- Pessimism about the future

Criteria for Differentiating Between PAS and Bona Fide Abuse–Neglect in Parents

First, behaviors seen in the parents of PAS children—that is, PAS-inducing parents—will be compared with behaviors seen in abusive–neglectful parents. Then, behaviors exhibited by abusive–neglectful parents will be compared with those of PAS parents.

Relative Cooperation of the Two Parents with the Examiner

PAS Parents who are inducing PAS are typically uncooperative with examiners who might appreciate the manipulative tactics so often used in the process of inculcating the campaign of denigration in their children. They typically resist the targeted parent’s attempts to bring in an impartial examiner; rather, they seek a mental health professional who is naive enough to be taken in by their often-deceitful maneuvers. Frequently, they will select an examiner who is injudicious enough to evaluate only them and their children and not even make attempts to evaluate the deprecated parent. It is the alienated parent who is more likely to be willing to make the financial sacrifices to bring in competent mental health examiners to do assessments, especially neutral assessments. The programmers typically resist this.

Bona fide abuse–neglect Parents who are abusive and/or neglectful are usually quite reluctant to seek the services of an impartial examiner and will resist strongly the appointment of such. They recognize that the examination might reveal their significant parenting deficiencies. The accusing

parent, who recognizes the children's victimization and may be a victim him- or herself, is far more likely to seek the services of an impartial examiner and suffer the financial privations often associated with such an appointment.

The parent who induces PAS is the one (of the two parents) who is less likely to be cooperative with the examiner, and the parent who is a bona fide abuser–neglector also is the one (of the two parents) who is less likely to be cooperative. In contrast, the parent who is a victim of PAS indoctrinations is likely to be the more cooperative one, and the parent who is a victim of bona fide abuse also is more likely to be cooperative. In short, the parent who is guilty of the accusation (whether it be of PAS inducer or abuser–neglector) is more likely to be uncooperative, and the parent who is the victim (whether it be of PAS indoctrinations or abuse) is more likely to be cooperative. Accordingly, this is a strong differentiating indicator when applied to a single couple, where there is one accuser and one denier. It is not a strong differentiating indicator when one compares abusers–neglecters in general with PAS inducers in general, because individuals in both of these categories share the common trait of uncooperation.

Relative Credibility of the Two Parents

PAS Parents who inculcate PAS in their children often do so with conscious fabrications, which sometimes develop into delusions. Sometimes they will promulgate, and even believe, the most absurd and preposterous allegations, especially when a sex abuse accusation becomes incorporated into a PAS. In contrast, the targeted parent of the children's PAS is far more likely to be credible and far less likely to reveal deceptions in the course of the evaluation.

Bona fide abuse–neglect Abusive–neglectful parents are far more likely to lie, especially in the realm of their abuse–neglect. Predictably, they deny to others and even deny to themselves. In fact, denial is one of their central defense mechanisms. Their credibility is compromised in association with this defect. In contrast, the parent who is trying to protect the children from abuse–neglect is far less likely to reveal deceptions in the course of the evaluation. Furthermore, the nonabusing parent's complaints and denials are usually credible.

In short, parents who are inducing PAS are likely to exhibit deceptions, and parents who are abusers–neglecters also are likely to manifest deceptions. The spouses of the parents who exhibit each of these parenting deficiencies are likely to be far more credible and are far less likely to reveal deceptions in other aspects of the evaluation. As was true of the cooperation indicator, this can be a strong differentiating criterion when applied to a single couple. In general, however, when one compares groups of abusers–neglecters with groups of PAS inducers, it is a weak differentiating criterion, because deceitfulness is significantly present in both categories of perpetrator.

Programming the Child's Campaign of Denigration

PAS The programming process may be active and deliberate, or it may be passive and subtle. When active, the child is deliberately programmed to profess denigratory complaints about the targeted parent, and the programming parent fully recognizes that the inculcated material is false. The same goal can be accomplished with subtle maneuvers, such as encouraging the child to criticize the victimized parent and accepting as valid every absurd criticism the children have of the disparaged parent, no matter how preposterous.

Consistent with the programming process, *PAS*-inducing parents often support the child's contributions to the campaign of denigration, both in the realm of material that they program as well as material derived from the child's own contributions. Probably the most compelling manifestations of programming are the borrowed-scenario elements typically seen in *PAS* children. In the joint interviews, in the course of the evaluation, one may see manifestations of the programming process.

Bona fide abuse–neglect Parents of children who are genuinely abused–neglected are not usually obsessed with seizing opportunities to talk about the abuses with the child. In joint interviews, the children do not make side glances to the nonabusing parent in order to be reminded about what occurred. The children know well what happened and do not need any input, reminders, or coaching from the nonabusing parent. This does not mean that a genuinely abused child might not occasionally ask an accusing parent in a joint interview to help the child remember some minor details. No one's memory is perfect, and children are less capable of recalling details of events than adults are. The genuinely abused child, however, is easily reminded and does not have the same degree of dependency for recall that the *PAS* child has. After one word or phrase from the nonabusing–non-neglectful parent, the whole incident will come to the child's mind and then be recalled with a reasonable degree of accuracy. In contrast, programmed children, having no actual experiences to relate, will need much more input from the programming parent if they are to "get the story straight."

Genuinely abused children do not usually need "refresher courses" from older siblings in order to remember what happened to them. The scenarios of abused siblings are generally credible, and each child in the family will independently relate similar events. They do not need to get input from their siblings, especially older siblings. This is in contrast to programmed children, whose scenarios are sometimes incredible. Furthermore, each child in the family will often (but certainly not always) provide a somewhat different rendition when seen separately. When *PAS* children are seen together, they can be observed glancing at each other in order to "get the story straight," especially from an older sibling who has served as an assistant programmer.

Overprotectiveness and Exclusionary Maneuvers

PAS Mothers who program *PAS* in a child are often overprotective. Their exclusion of the child from the father often extends to other realms. Often, the exclusionary measures antedate the separation and may not only go back to the earliest days of the child's life, but may even involve the father's exclusion from the delivery room.

Bona fide abuse–neglect Parents who justifiably accuse a spouse of abuse may very well be protective of the children with regard to exposure to the abuser, but they are not typically protective or exclusionary in other areas that are unrelated to the abuser. Rather, their protectiveness is focused on the children's relationship with the abusing parent. In fact, they may even encourage involvement with the abuser in situations where the abuse is not likely to occur, for example, public places.

Appreciation of the Role of the Other Parent in the Children's Upbringing

PAS Parents who induce *PAS* in their children are often oblivious to the psychologically detrimental effects of the progressive attenuation of the child's bond with the target parent. In extreme cases it appears that the alienating parent would be pleased if the alienated parent were to evaporate from the face of the earth—making sure, beforehand, to bequeath an annuity for the remaining family. Such alienators basically believe that absolutely nothing would be lost to the children under such circumstances.

Bona fide abuse–neglect Accusing parents in bona fide abuse–neglect situations are often still appreciative of the importance of the child's involvement with the abuser–neglecter. Most often they do everything in their power to reduce the abuse–neglect and hope that the situation can be salvaged so that the children may yet enjoy a more benevolent relationship with the abusive–neglectful parent. Accordingly, this is an important differentiating criterion between *PAS* and bona fide abuse–neglect.

When there is genuine abuse–neglect, the nonabusing parent may remove the children for protection from real dangers. Such removal may present a dilemma for the evaluator when using this differentiating criterion. Take, for example, the situation in which the mother takes the children to a shelter. Mothers of children who are genuinely abused actually need such shelters for their own and the children's protection. But in the same shelter there are likely to be *PAS* mothers, with nonabused children, who are there as a conscious and deliberate *PAS* maneuver. There may also be mothers in the same shelter whose children are not being abused, who are operating on the delusion that abuse has taken place when it has not. Accordingly, it behooves the examiner to conduct a detailed inquiry regarding the events that resulted in the mother's going to a shelter and to try to ascertain whether there were justifiable dangers or whether these were fabricated or even delusional. These qualifications and complications

notwithstanding, this general principle still holds: PAS-inducing parents are typically unappreciative of the importance of the child's bonding with the other parent, whereas parents of children who are actually being abused are still hopeful that the relationship can be salvaged because of recognition of the importance of a healthy psychological bond between a parent and a child.

At this point I focus on some of the more common behavioral patterns seen in abusing parents and compare them with parents who induce PAS.

Psychopathic Behavior

Bona fide abuse–neglect Abusive and neglectful parents are often psychopathic. They may have little guilt over the victimization of others, even children, who are often safe targets for their hostility. They cannot project themselves into the children whom they victimize. They use any deceitful maneuver they can to shift blame away from themselves. They do not give consideration to the future consequences of their behavior on their children; for example, ongoing misery, formidable grief, relentless fear, and severe psychopathology. Such abusers are likely to have a history of psychopathic behavior in other realms of their lives. The nonabusing spouse is far less likely to exhibit psychopathic behavior, although such spouses usually have psychological problems of their own, considering the fact that they have married or involved themselves with an abusive person.

It is probable that among severe PAS inducers, there may be a higher percentage of psychopathic people than in the general population. It is probably also the case that psychopaths are overrepresented in those who abuse and/or neglect their children. In general, therefore, this is not a good differentiating criterion—when one compares groups of PAS inducers with groups of abusers–neglecters. However, it is a good differentiating criterion for assessing a single couple, because the presence of this trait in one of the parents can be useful in substantiating whether that parent is a PAS indoctrinator or whether he or she is an abuser–neglecter.

PAS Whereas some parents who induce a PAS are not fully appreciative of what they are doing, others are consciously and deliberately inducing the alienation. The latter will often profess innocence when confronted with their manipulations and are completely aware of the fact that they are lying. Many PAS inducers are psychopathic in association with the PAS programming but generally are not psychopathic in other realms of their lives. Furthermore, they are less likely to have been psychopathic prior to the onset of the child-custody dispute. When psychopathy is seen in a PAS programmer, it is more likely to be seen in the severe type, as is the case with paranoia. Psychopathy in other realms of life, outside of the family, is an important discriminator between the psychopathy seen in the PAS inducer and the psychopathy of the bona fide abusive–neglectful parent. Furthermore, the victim of the PAS inducer's indoctrinations, like

the nonabusing spouse of the bona fide abuser, is not particularly likely to exhibit psychopathic tendencies.

Comparison of Family Members Who Are Victimized

Bona fide abuse–neglect Fathers who abuse their children generally abuse their wives as well. Although some are selective in this regard, most are generally abusive to all family members. Most often, the wife is abused even before the birth of the children, and then the pattern expands after their arrival. The mother who flees to a shelter generally does so not only for herself but also for her children. Some of these mothers are justifiably considered “battered women.”

PAS According to the PAS programmer, the children’s campaign of denigration against the targeted parent is justifiable, allegedly because of his or her ongoing abuse–neglect of them. The programming parent generally focuses on the targeted parent’s abuse–neglect of the children with far fewer complaints about the denigrated parent’s abuse–neglect of the accusing alienator her- or himself. Certainly the programmer has a long list of complaints about the targeted spouse; otherwise she or he would not be involved in separation or divorce proceedings. However, PAS programmers usually focus primarily on the abuses to which the children have allegedly been subjected by the victimized parent because such emphasis enhances the likelihood of prevailing in the child-custody dispute.

Although this is not a strong differentiating criterion, it is useful nonetheless, especially in the bona fide abuse situations where there is good documentation, especially medical, that the accusing spouse has been physically abused.

Time of Onset of the Alleged Abuse

Bona fide abuse–neglect In genuine abuse, the abuses are generally described by the complaining spouse to have existed long before the separation. In fact, they may have existed from the time the children were born, and the accusing spouse may describe abuses of her- or himself prior to the children’s birth. In many cases of bona fide abuse, the primary reason for the separation may be that the abused parent can no longer tolerate the abuses to which he or she and the children have been subjected.

PAS Although the children, and even the mother, in a PAS situation may describe lifelong abuse and neglect, there usually is compelling evidence that such was not the case prior to the children’s learning about the child-custody dispute. In the vast majority of cases the campaign begins after separation and after the programmer begins the indoctrination. The children’s becoming aware that a child-custody dispute is in progress triggers the beginning of the phase when they provide their own contributions to the campaign, contributions that complement the programmer’s.

In short, in PAS the campaign of denigration does not antedate the separation; complaints of genuine child abuse date back long before the parents announced that they were going to get divorced.

Family History

Bona fide abuse–neglect Child abuse generally runs in families. Parents who abuse their children often grew up in families in which they themselves were abused, and this may be true of their parents as well. In fact, there are some families in which abuse of wives and children is the *modus vivendi* and dates back as far as anybody knows. It is almost as if such abusers do not know of any other way of relating to their families.

PAS When one looks into the family history of the parent who has been victimized by a PAS campaign of denigration, one generally does not find a family history in which there is a pattern of bona fide abuse, especially abuse that extends back to forebearers. Often, the programming parent will have to admit that she or he knows of no bona fide abuse in the family background of the targeted parent.

Comparative Concern for the Physical and Financial Well-Being of the Family

Bona fide abuse–neglect Typically, abusive–neglectful parents are deficient in their concerns for the physical well-being of their families. They do not strive to be high earners and often will spend their earnings elsewhere; for example, alcohol or gambling. They have little sense of family responsibility with regard to providing the spouse and children with a reasonable level of food, clothing, and shelter. It is not that they have absolutely no interest in such considerations, only that it has lower priority for them than for the healthy, committed breadwinner. Typically, such abusers are justifiably considered to be very self-indulgent.

PAS Typically, parents who have been targeted for PAS victimization are most often committed parents, very much concerned with providing their spouses and children with food, clothing, shelter, and child care. Children in these families want their alienated parent to continue contributing toward their education even though they want absolutely nothing to do with him or her. Such a demand usually derives from past experiences in which the parent has proven reliable for providing in this realm. Typically, these targeted parents are not justifiably considered to be self-indulgent, even though this accusation may be considered part of the campaign of denigration.

Impulsivity

Bona fide abuse–neglect Parents who abuse their children are typically impulsive. They act out their impulses without consideration for future

consequences. Such impulsivity may be seen in other realms of their lives, especially in their relationships with others. They are quick to fight and take action. They are often viewed as rumbling volcanos, ready to erupt at any point. A history of job loss is common because of their inability to get along with coworkers and supervisors, especially because of their propensity to deal impulsively with conflicts by using physical force. Assaulting people is only one aspect of a broader pattern of impulsive physical acting out, which may include smashing furniture, throwing objects, breaking windows, and putting fists through walls.

PAS Targeted parents in PAS are not likely to have a history of impulsivity. Typically, they do not act out, and their self-restraint exhibits itself in the family and in other realms of life. Such parents generally have a good job history and are unlikely to have been repeatedly discharged from their positions because of difficulty in their relationship with peers and supervisors. Thinking about the future consequences of their behavior also is typically part of the reviled parent's personality pattern.

Hostile Personality Pattern

Bona fide abuse–neglect Abusive parents are usually very angry people. The children are often safe targets for releasing their rage. They are a captive audience and cannot meaningfully protect themselves and certainly cannot effectively fight back. The examiner is likely to observe such anger in the course of his or her evaluation. This is the rage that fuels the aforementioned destruction of property. Usually, inquiry into the background history of such abusive parents reveals a longstanding pattern of acting-out of anger, a pattern that probably exhibited itself in childhood, and often there is a family history of similar acting-out of anger.

PAS A parent who has been targeted for PAS indoctrinations is not likely to have a hostile personality pattern prior to the children's campaign of deprecation. However, following the onset of their campaign, it is reasonable that such a parent will suffer with ongoing frustration and anger, often with a feeling of impotent rage. In short, the alienated parent's anger typically begins at the time of the indoctrination, prior to which one cannot generally consider that individual to have been an angry person.

Paranoia

Bona fide abuse–neglect Parents who abuse or neglect their children are often very disturbed individuals. As mentioned, people who abuse their children are often very angry individuals, and anger fuels paranoia. Accordingly, it behooves the examiner to assess for the presence of paranoia when conducting an evaluation to differentiate between bona fide abuse–neglect and PAS.

PAS When paranoia fuels PAS, the victim of the paranoid delusional system is often limited to the denigrated spouse—at least, this is the case in the early phases. With ongoing litigation, the paranoia may expand to all the people who provide support to the targeted parent. Typically, the paranoid system becomes illogical and preposterous; for example, that the targeted parent would perpetrate abusive behavior—and even sexual molestation—in front of court-ordered supervisors.

Often the PAS parent and the programmed child jointly entertain the same delusion. This is referred to in psychiatry as a *folie à deux* (folly for two). Typically, a more domineering person with a specific form of psychopathology induces the same psychopathology in a more passive-dependent individual. This is a common occurrence in PAS. In such cases the *DSM-IV* diagnosis of shared psychotic delusion (*folie à deux*) is warranted.

There is probably a higher prevalence of paranoia in severe PAS indoctrinators than in the general population. Also, there is probably a higher prevalence of paranoia in abusive or neglectful parents than in the general population. The presence of paranoia, then, may be a strong indicator when applied to a single set of parents because it helps identify the one who is either an abuser–neglector or a PAS inducer. It is a weak indicator when comparing groups of PAS inducers with groups of abusers–neglecters.

CONCLUSION

Differentiating between PAS and bona fide abuse is becoming increasingly important as the PAS diagnosis becomes appreciated both by mental health professionals and courts of law. A list of relevant publications and citations can be found in the Internet (www.rgardner.com/refs). This list is continually being updated as more such articles and more courts of law are recognizing the syndrome. The purpose of this article has been to provide criteria for making this important differentiation.

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