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The Power of Stories/Stories about Power: Why Therapists and Clients Should Read Stories About the Parental Alienation Syndrome

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Reading others' stories has been found to have therapeutic benefits for a range of populations. This paper outlines the rationale for why reading true and fictional accounts of parental alienation syndrome may be beneficial for parents targeted for PAS. Four true stories are reviewed in detail and several crosscutting themes are identified.

The use of narrative has a long tradition in the healing arts, including reading, writing, and listening to one's own as well as others' stories. Narrative stories have been used in the context of outpatient psychotherapy (Burns, 2001), inpatient psychiatric care (Giannini, 2001), parents helping children overcome fear (Brett, 1986), and general child psychology (Bettleheim, 1975). The value of expressive writing has also been the focus of some theory and research. For example, Pennebaker, Colder, and Sharp (1990) found that college students who wrote about going away to college fared better on subsequent mood and grade point average than students not randomly selected to receive the writing assignments. They concluded that translating stressful and traumatic experiences into language is an effective way to organize and understand those events; "Forming a narrative is critical and is a function of good mental and physical health" (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

This theory seems to be generally endorsed by mental health professionals who have been found in surveys to recommend self-help books as well as movies and poetry to their clients (Lampropoulos, Kazantzis, & Deane, 2004; LeLievre, 1998). The use of reading autobiographies in particular has been explored by Clifford, Norcross, and Sommer (1999) who found that the vast majority of therapists they surveyed recommended them

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to their clients and believed it was a beneficial tool in the therapeutic process. The authors concluded that reading autobiographies of individuals who have had similar experiences as the clients can facilitate the six clinical goals of individual psychology described by Riordan, Mullis, and Nuchow (1996): education, encouragement, empowerment, enlightenment, engagement, and enhancement.

This paper focuses on the use of narrative stories for a specific subset of the clinical population: adults dealing with parental alienation syndrome (PAS). PAS, as defined by forensic psychiatrist Richard Gardner (1998), is a “disorder that arises primarily in the context of child custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child’s campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It is caused by a combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrinations and the child’s own contributions to the vilification of the targeted parent.” The result of PAS can be mild, moderate, or severe. In severe cases, the relationship between the targeted parent and the child is dramatically compromised if not completely destroyed. Even in mild and moderate cases, the targeted parent experiences chronic difficulty in managing visitation and parenting time as well as unwarranted interference and hostility from the parent perpetrating the alienation. Not only can PAS have negative long-term consequences for the child (Baker, 2005a) but it also introduces persistent stress, frustration, loss, and grief into the lives of the targeted parent (Baker & Darnall, in press; Gardner, 1998). In this way, the alienating parent uses and abuses his/her power to manipulate and control the child and to hurt the targeted parent.

Unfortunately, there is scant scientific and clinical attention to the population of parents targeted for PAS, although Warshak’s (2001) and Darnall’s (1998) self-help books are welcome exceptions as is Vassilou and Cartwright’s (2001) brief report. This neglect is at least partly due to the ongoing debate in the field regarding the validity of PAS as a construct (e.g., Gardner, 2002a, 2002b; Johnston & Kelly, 2001). PAS is not universally accepted by therapists, lawyers, judges, or custody evaluators, and the concept has not yet made its way into the mainstream consciousness. There may in fact be some underlying resistance to the notion that an otherwise “good” parent could be so vehemently rejected by his/her child. Perhaps such skeptics hold the belief that a parent must have done *something* to warrant their child’s rejection and/or the other parent’s animosity. This is the double victimization of PAS: the shame and frustration of being misunderstood in addition to the grief and anger associated with being powerless to prevent the alienation in the first place. In this way targeted parents share the secondary victimization experienced by some rape victims interacting with helping professionals (i.e., Campbell, Sefl, Barnes et al., 1999).

Some solace, however, can be found. True, as well as fictional, accounts of PAS abound (although often the term itself is not used) and there are several reasons why therapists and clients might want to read these stories

as part of the therapeutic process. In fact, reading stories about PAS offers the six “E’s” of therapy as described by Riordan et al. (1996) and can begin to help the client/targeted parent regain a sense of power and control.

ENGAGEMENT

Clients who are in the midst of a custody conflict and/or PAS may appreciate the recommended books because no matter how empathic a therapist is, a targeted parent may still feel “alone” in the situation until reading someone else’s story of PAS. The depth, breadth, and specificity offered by a full-length narrative account are unparalleled as a means of providing an opportunity for identification and the satisfaction of a shared experience. Thus, clients gain a sense of engagement with the social world through the process of reading others’ stories. According to Taylor (1996), “We tell and listen to stories to reassure ourselves that we are not home alone. Our fear of isolation is instinctive and profound. Every story is evidence that someone else is out there” (p. 6).

EMPOWERMENT

Reading other’s accounts—many true—can help alleviate the feelings of rage and helplessness that accompany being the victim of an injustice such as PAS. Knowing that others have traveled the same path may lessen the sense of being personally singled out for such suffering. In most of the stories about PAS, the victimization of the targeted parent is unmistakably portrayed (although the targeted parent’s human imperfections are also apparent). There can be no doubt in reading these stories that the targeted parent did not deserve or ask for the rejection and hostility of their children. These stories, thus, can serve as an antidote to the blame and shame targeted parents may feel. Understanding that the targeted parent did not deserve the alienation and that this is part of a larger systemic problem (the adversarial legal system, personality disorder of the alienating parent, vulnerabilities within the child) can be an empowering process.

EDUCATION

Narratives allow for identification with the characters such that the reader has a chance to “try on” a range of attitudes and interactional styles and imagine what they would feel like. This can open the mind to the possibility of thinking, behaving, and feeling differently. In addition, clients may learn specific strategies and techniques for dealing with PAS that they had not considered

before. Seeing how others have handled similar situations broadens the range of options and reveals the consequences of such choices.

ENHANCEMENT

Discussion in therapy about the choices made by the characters in the story can allow the therapist and client to develop an enhanced understanding of the choices the client has made and can illuminate possible new and different options for the future.

ENCOURAGEMENT

Readers might find inspiration and encouragement from the stories because many involve persevering despite tremendous hardships and overwhelming obstacles. Witnessing others' struggles may encourage the reader to continue his/her own journey regardless of the barriers and setbacks encountered. Reading stories in which the targeted parent did not prevail (as painful a prospect as that is) can lend hope and inspiration to the client that it is possible to have a meaningful life in spite of the loss and sadness associated with PAS. As Rook (2001) noted, "As we share stories of endurance and resilience with others, we reinforce the possibility that they too can survive" (p. 210).

ENLIGHTENMENT

In each of the stories, the targeted parents made some mistakes along the way. Some were too passive and assumed that "things would work out in the end," while others might have taken their anger out on the child rather than grasping the degree to which the child had been manipulated by the alienating parent. Through identification with the story's protagonist, the client can gain a clearer understanding of his/her own role in the PAS. No one is perfect and even the most victimized targeted parent can learn from the missteps of others. At the same time, being empathic with the protagonist—despite his/her foibles—may allow the client to metaphorically forgive him/herself.

In sum, by reading others' accounts of PAS, clients are able to "read" their own true story. To the extent that such a book was published is validating, which can offer hope that others will believe the client's story as well. In this way, accepting someone else's story allows for the possibility of having one's own story understood. This is particularly relevant to PAS, because in a sense PAS is a struggle between two opposing stories. The alienating parent is creating/following a narrative in which the targeted parent is a bad person (villain) who is abusive to the child (victim), whom the alienating parent (hero) is protecting. The targeted parent is following a very different

narrative in which s/he is a loving parent (hero and victim) battling an irrational and hostile ex-spouse (villain) to preserve a relationship with his/her child (also a victim). PAS is successful only to the extent that the alienating parent has the power to impose (consciously or unconsciously) his/her story onto the child and to write over the story of the targeted parent. From this perspective, the targeted parent's deepest desire is to have his/her story heard—and believed—by others, especially by the child. Until then, reading other's accounts and bearing witness to their experiences can provide some measure of catharsis and validation.

Thus, there are many potential benefits of clients reading these stories. In order to maximize the impact and utility of these materials, therapists may want to consider the best ways to integrate them into therapy. For example, deciding whether to utilize a reactive or interactive approach (Gladding & Gladding, 1991 as described by Riordan et al., 1996) and whether to incorporate other forms of story telling (such as writing exercises) into the therapeutic work. In addition to offering the reviews in the following sections as a service to clients, these reviews are offered to professionals as well, in the hopes that the stories can enrich and deepen their own understanding of PAS.

BOOK REVIEWS

From the many books written about custody battles and PAS, four true stories have been selected for review. The fact that they are true eliminates the “that couldn't happen in real life” response that would support resistance to PAS. These stories did not have to be made up because they actually happened. In two of the four stories, an independent journalist is the author, lending additional credibility to the accounts. Two are from the perspective of mothers and two from fathers, to avoid any gender bias and to provide greater ability for identification (it may be too much of a stretch for a mother who has lost her children to PAS to read a story about a sympathetic father). These four accounts are just the tip of the iceberg, however. There are literally dozens of such books on the market. They can be found by searching under “child custody” in a local library.

A Family Divided: A True Story. Written by Robert Mendelson.
Published by Prometheus Books, 1998

This is the true account of the divorce and 10-year custody battle between Dr. Michael Nieland and his ex-wife Dr. Nancy Wagner. The book was written by a journalist who admits having a positive orientation towards Michael, which was presumably based on a reaction to the facts of the case rather than on an *a priori* or personal bias. This is a thick book that reads quickly

because the story is engrossing and the writing style is engaging. The book includes reprints of oral and written testimony and other supporting documents, contributing to the “you are there” feeling of the story, which unfolds almost in real time. Because Michael was both well educated and financially advantaged, he was able to allocate considerable time and expense to the litigation regarding custody as well as to the property settlement and child support disputes. Thus, the reader is afforded the opportunity to bear witness to a battle played out to the bitter end. This may stand in stark contrast to real life experiences where litigation can be curtailed due to limited financial resources.

From the perspective of PAS, what is of particular interest is that there are three children involved (not including Nancy’s two older daughters whom Michael adopted but never fully parented). The oldest child, Jennie, was not the focus of the custody evaluations or litigation. She was allowed to determine her visitation schedule without the intervention of the courts. It seems clear (at least to this reader) that Jennie developed PAS shortly after the divorce proceedings began. A once loving child became overtly hostile to her father, resistant to any visitation, and even engaged the younger children in the mother’s alienation campaign. The younger daughter (Ariel, age 3 at the time of the divorce) became almost fully alienated whereas Nathan (age 5 at the time of the divorce) maintained a neutral stance and was able to retain positive regard for both parents despite their ongoing heated conflict. He withstood the pressure to choose between his parents (and may in fact have been subjected to less pressure to do so). Over the course of the book a range of alienating strategies are described (again without use of the term) and the reader can palpably feel the chronic frustration that Michael had to endure as his ex-wife creatively engineered new ways to interfere with his relationship with Ariel. Although the book is ultimately not a “success story” in regards to Ariel, from the standpoint of PAS, it is of particular note that Jennie eventually came to realize that her mother was dishonest and manipulative and, on her own, reestablished a positive relationship with her father. The reader will cheer as the mother unwittingly reveals her true nature to her daughter (forging her signature, claiming to Michael that she is not in possession of certain documents which Jennie then finds at the bottom of her mother’s closet). Of course, this breakthrough occurs after much heartbreak and time lost between father and daughter. Unfortunately, there was no such breakthrough with Ariel. At the age of 13 she was sent away to boarding school shortly after Michael won the right to have increased visitation with her.

The role of two custody evaluators is painstakingly detailed, especially as each crosses the line from evaluator to mediator/advocate. Neither seemed to grasp the manipulations of the mother and both seemed all too willing to take Ariel’s visitation resistance at face value, unwittingly supporting and colluding in the mother’s goal of alienation.

In the end, this book provides emotional satisfaction in its ability to share with the reader an almost moment-by-moment sense of how one such custody battle unfolded (both inside and outside the courtroom). Reading the story can also be a frustrating experience because of the apparent injustice done to Michael and his children. The enormity of the financial loss (hundreds of thousands of dollars) and the emotional loss (years lost) is spelled out in excruciating detail. This book will be of particular interest to men who want the father's perspective on PAS.

They Are My Children, Too: A Mother's Struggle for Her Sons. Written by Catherine Meyer. Published by Public Affairs, 1999

Catherine begins this true story in 1994 on the last day her two sons (then 7 and 9 years of age) lived with her, as she packed them up for what she thought was to be a six-week visit with their father (her ex-husband) who resided in Germany. The reader can sense that Catherine was a warm and loving mother who was consciously trying to support her children's relationship with their father, despite a painful separation and divorce. The story then recounts how Catherine and Hans-Peter first met and then proceeds with a step-by-step description of how Catherine lost her children to a German court system that supported the father's right to raise Constantin and Alexander as Germans, at the exclusion of any contact with their mother, who was not a German citizen nor of German descent. The contribution of the father's family—by emotionally cutting off Catherine, hiding the children in a variety of isolated locations, and influencing the parochial court system is also detailed. This is a "page-turning" book that offers the reader the heartbreak of the insider's story. Catherine faces countless legal obstacles and humiliations as she struggles to maintain a relationship with her children. Particularly compelling are the moments when, after Herculean effort, she is able to spend brief periods of time with them—always under the watchful supervision of Hans-Peter's hostile extended family. Her heartache is compounded by her uncertainty about whether she is doing her children more harm than good by seeing them under such stressful circumstances. This dilemma will be familiar to many targeted parents who wonder whether it is better to keep fighting for contact when the struggle itself brings such conflict and strife into the lives of the children.

Although PAS is not a term used in the book, the children appear to have been manipulated, lied to, and brainwashed to feel resentment and hostility towards their mother. The borrowed scenarios described by Gardner (1998) are particularly prevalent as the children repeat the mantra that they want to be Germans. Despite the "rightness" of her cause and her access to high-level government officials in both England and the United States, Catherine was not able to prevail. She closes her book with an explanation as to why she

felt the need to write her story, “This book is like a bottle tossed into the sea. It will float away and, someday, reach my children. Only then will they finally know the true facts and understand how in spite of the justice and decency in which I naively believed, we are being kept forcibly apart. Only then will they realize how cruelly and unnecessarily we were separated and how this book is the only way I have left to communicate my undying love for them.”

Hilary’s Trial: The Elizabeth Morgan Case: A Child’s Ordeal in America’s Legal System. Written by Jonathon Groner. Published by Simon and Schuster, 1991

This fascinating story is told by a journalist who concluded that primary responsibility for the prolonged and intensely antagonistic custody battle belongs with the mother, Dr. Elizabeth Morgan. He concluded this after extensive examination of the evidence and interviewing most of the major players in the drama. The story follows the seven-year conflict between Eric Foretich and Elizabeth Morgan over custody for their daughter Hilary. One unique facet of this particular account is that Elizabeth was the author of two autobiographies prior to Groner writing “Hilary’s trial” (one about becoming a female surgeon and one about the initial stages of the custody battle), thus Groner was afforded the opportunity to quote extensively from Elizabeth’s own writings. This allows the reader to have more of a first-hand feeling for both parents, something unusual for this genre (which tends to have more information from one side than the other).

The Hilary Foretich case was one of the most celebrated custody battles in this country, perhaps because of the extensive nature of the litigation, revolving primarily around allegations of sexual abuse. As the case unfolds, the gaps in the knowledge about assessing sexual abuse in pediatric cases—in the absence of witnesses and/or DNA evidence—becomes clear as a series of experts are consulted, each with his/her own diagnostic criteria and conclusions. The ability of children to be manipulated becomes apparent as one expert concludes that whether or not sexual abuse occurred, the child (as well as a second child fathered earlier by Eric with another woman) had come to believe that it had. Also adding drama to the story was the fact that Elizabeth was jailed on contempt charges as a result of her refusal to comply with the court-ordered visitation between Hilary and Eric. Elizabeth became a *cause celebre* in the mother’s rights movement and even Congress intervened to release her from jail. While Elizabeth was imprisoned, her extended family abducted Hilary to another country and Eric lost contact with his daughter.

It is hard not to read this story with a macabre fascination at the lengths to which Elizabeth went to document and/or prove that Hilary was sexually abused by Eric. For example, at one point Elizabeth admits to instructing Hilary to put crayons in her vagina so that Elizabeth could photograph her

and produce the pictures as evidence that Hilary was exhibiting sexualized behaviors typical of children who had been sexually abused. In the end, the reader will be left with profound feelings of sadness for the child who seems to have been a victim of her mother's unrelenting efforts to "save her."

Perilous Journey: A Mother's International Quest to Rescue her Children—A True story. Written by Patricia Sutherland. Published by New Horizon Press, 2002

This true story is a breezy read as it is written in the form of a diary and a series of letters from the author to her friends and family. Patricia opens the story in 1989 with descriptions of her excitement as she prepares for an around-the-world adventure. While touring in Asia with a friend, Patricia was unexpectedly wooed by a Malaysian prince and after a whirlwind courtship she converted to Islam and married Mahmood. Her letters and diary notations convey her excitement and awe at being chosen by this older, more experienced, wealthy, and commanding man. She willingly gives up her "old life" to live with her prince on his island resort. After the birth of their two children, Iskander and Mariam, however, Patricia senses a darker side to his character including gun toting violent rages, infidelity, and substance abuse. She becomes frightened by his irrational behavior and attempts to flee with the children. However, Mahmood is alerted to her plans, holds the children captive, and expels Patricia from the island. Upon returning to the United States she became embroiled in a multi-year futile legal battle to regain custody of her children. Mahmood's powerful family and influence seem to offer him unlimited protection from legal recourse. Custody of the children is repeatedly awarded to him and all of Patricia's efforts to visit her children are thwarted by his complicitous extended family.

The remainder of the book is a step-by-step account of her successful effort to kidnap her children and bring them back to the United States with her. She presents a hair-raising suspense-filled account of the daring rescue. From the standpoint of PAS, it is unclear whether Mahmood actively tried to turn the children against their mother. He might have believed he could achieve his goals (total control over them) through physical separation alone. This was fortunate for Patricia. When she returned for the children they were receptive to her—albeit confused and frightened of being punished by their father—and this allowed her to effectuate the rescue. If they had been psychologically turned against her as well as physically separated, she might not have been able to secure their cooperation in her plan.

MAJOR THEMES

From reading these, and many other accounts, several key themes have emerged. The first is that the targeted parents are not familiar with the

concept of PAS and do not seem aware that the other parent could turn a child against them. Thus, they are naïve to the intentions and ability of the alienating parent, who clearly has the upper hand. They seem to operate on the assumption that if they are a good and loving parent, their children will know them for who they are rather than what anyone tells them. But this is not always the case. The story of Hilary Foretich is particularly illustrative in that she seemed to believe that she had been the victim of sexual abuse, whether or not she actually had been. To some extent objective reality did not matter. Likewise Catherine Meyer's two sons were told that their mother had abandoned them. By the time Catherine could see her children again, they seemed at least in part to believe that this was true—despite their prior relationship. It probably did not occur to these boys that their father was lying to them—especially because they were dependent upon him as their only viable parent. Further, the boys had no knowledge of legal battles and court orders. They probably could not generate on their own an alternative explanation for why their mother was not with them.

Another aspect of the naiveté of the targeted parent is that in many of these stories, the two adults decided to marry and have children relatively quickly after meeting. In fact several describe a fairy tale beginning (prince charming, the most perfect person, and so forth). This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, people who fall in love so quickly are not giving themselves a chance to get to know the other person. Perhaps if they had spent more time together they would have realized that the person had a quick temper, was irrational, or narcissistic and, thus, might not make an ideal mate and co-parent (and especially ex-spouse). Second, falling in love so quickly (and it seems that the alienating parent was the driving force behind the whirlwind courtships) can sometimes be a sign of immaturity that also might be associated with subsequent PAS (lack of impulse control, inability to see good and bad in the same person, and inability to share).

A third theme is that Gardner's eight components of PAS are described with a fair degree of consistency across the stories. That is, there is a campaign of denigration of the targeted parent by the alienating parent, the children tend to make frivolous or absurd reasons for their own negative feelings about the targeted parent (when they are old enough to make such statements), there is an apparent lack of ambivalence towards the alienating parent, the children have the impression that they are thinking for themselves (which seems to be allowed as long as what they think is what the alienating parent wants them to think), the children fully support the alienating parent, they seem to experience no shame or guilt at the way they are treating the targeted parent, they use phrases and rationales that mimic the statements and beliefs of the alienating parent, and the children extend their rejection to the family of the targeted parent as well as to the parent him/ herself. This

lends validity to the eight components and to the idea that what is being described in these stories is in fact PAS.

Fourth, the extended families of the alienating parents seemed to play a powerful role in maintaining and supporting the alienation. For example, Catherine's in-laws shielded the children from her; were consistently hostile towards her especially in front of the children, indicating to them that their mother was unworthy of their love and respect; and may have even exerted undue influence with the court on behalf of their son. Likewise, the extended family of Patricia's ex-husband played a key role in keeping the children from her. Similarly, it was Hilary's maternal grandparents who absconded with her to New Zealand in order to prevent contact between Hilary and her father. This suggests that alienating parents are able to draw their families into the alienation and/or that they have families of origin that are likely to become engaged in hostile conflicts.

Fifth, the lawyers, judges, court evaluators, and therapists who are described in these stories do not seem familiar with PAS. Not once in any story is the term PAS or the concept of children being manipulated to turn against one parent used to explain the children's or parent's behavior. In fact, the professionals inadvertently colluded with the alienating parent by allowing delays in court decisions that further entrenched the alienation and by accepting at face value the child's resistance to the targeted parent. Needless to say the wasted time, energy, and money allocated to these unsuccessful court battles only added insult to injury; and it is possible that if the professionals had been familiar with PAS, the outcomes would have been different.

And, finally, the alienating parents in these stories seemed to fight the custody battle more out of desire to prevent the other parent from "having" the children rather than from a desire to be with the children themselves. In all four stories, the parents who effectuated the alienation relied excessively on non-parental childcare. Thus, Michael's ex-wife had a constant stream of babysitters and housekeepers and chose to use these professionals rather than have Michael spend time with the children (even when they were married). Mahhmood, once he gained total control over the children, relegated their care to his first ex-wife rather than take care of them himself. He was also abusive both physically and verbally to them. Elizabeth Morgan placed Hilary in daycare from a very early age for a minimum of 60 hours a week, despite the fact that Eric was available to help take care of her. Catherine's ex-husband, as well, left the day-to-day childcare responsibilities to his mother. Thus, the alienating parents were to some degree or another rejecting of the very children over whom they were engaged in a heated battle. This lends further support to the notion that PAS may be motivated by revenge as much as by desire for the children (Gardner, 1998) and is consistent with accounts by some "adult children of PAS" that the alienating parents were physically, verbally, and/or sexually abusive (Baker, 2005b).

SUMMARY

The ongoing debate among professionals regarding the existence of PAS can contribute to the victimization of targeted parents who are not receiving the support from the legal and mental health communities that they desperately need. One tool for alleviating this double victimization can be found in fictional and true narratives, in which accounts of alienated children, vicious custody battles, and PAS abound. Therapists may want to read these stories in order to gain a deeper insight into the experience of PAS and clients may gain a sense of satisfaction in not being alone with such a traumatic and heartbreaking experience. Four stories are reviewed but there are many others to choose from as well. It is hoped that one day no new PAS stories will need to be told. In the meantime, clients and therapists have much to gain from reading the stories that have already been written.

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