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## Chapter 6

# INCIDENCE, GENDER, AND FALSE ALLEGATIONS OF CHILD ABUSE: DATA ON 84 PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME CASES

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### OVERVIEW

*This chapter presents descriptive statistics on 84 cases of parental alienation syndrome (PAS), compiled by a custody evaluator in Colorado. Kopetski's work on alienation began in the 1970s and was fully developed by the time she learned of Richard Gardner's work. In 1991, Kopetski presented her work on PAS at the Fifteenth Annual Child Custody Conference in Keystone, Colorado (Kopetski, 1991). She recognized Gardner's contribution in the introduction, and described her astonishment upon learning of his work in 1987. Simultaneously, while unaware of Gardner's work, she had arrived at observations and conclusions that were remarkably similar in many respects. The paper included descriptive statistics on 84 cases, which Kopetski used to test some of Gardner's findings and hypotheses, such as those relating to the disproportionate number of alienating mothers. Kopetski's clinical observations of PAS families were eventually published in *The Colorado Lawyer* (Kopetski, 1998a,b). Her descriptive statistics on 84 cases are published here for the first time. They document a significant increase in PAS cases from 1976 to 1990. The ratio of mothers to fathers alienating was 2 to 1. False allegations of child abuse, defined as physical or sexual abuse, or child neglect, appeared in 54 percent of cases, with child neglect alleged primarily by alienating fathers and sex abuse alleged primarily by alienating mothers.*

For more than 20 years, Kopetski and a psychologist colleague conducted evaluations as a team, developing a team model for custody evaluations which became the standard for their state (Metropolitan Denver Interdisciplinary Committee on Child Custody, 1992). When Kopetski encountered the early alienation cases in the 1970s, terms such as "parental alienation" were not yet in common use. Initially, she thought of these families simply as "disturbed." It would be another decade before Gardner (1985) introduced the name parental alienation syndrome.

As Kopetski encountered more cases, a pattern emerged in which some children had developed a kind of phobic reaction to one parent. The problem was not ameliorated by the traditional recommendations for gradually increased visits with the target parent and therapy for the child. Kopetski noted that children in these scenarios usually lost one parent in the divorce. She found this outcome unacceptable and began searching for new ideas. In the late 1970s, Kopetski

began utilizing John Bowlby's treatment for school phobia as a model for custody and visitation recommendations in the alienation cases she evaluated. She found that orders for enforced visitation, or placement of the child in the primary custody of the target parent, were often effective in interrupting alienation, while therapy as the primary intervention was not (Kopetski, 1991; Rand, Rand and Kopetski, 2005).

Kopetski hoped to get the 1991 paper published and to continue her PAS research, but these plans were put on hold when she developed health problems that forced her to retire. The unpublished manuscript circulated informally and eventually found its way into the hands of Deirdre Rand, who referenced it in her comprehensive literature review titled "The Spectrum of Parental Alienation Syndrome" (Rand, 1997a,b). The articles by Kopetski which were featured in *The Colorado Lawyer* the following year described her clinical observations of PAS families, but not her descriptive statistics on 84 cases. Kopetski was

too ill by then to write up this important data, and no longer motivated. The professional community had shown little interest in the facts and figures she had compiled on the frequency of PAS, sex of the alienating parent, and justifications given for alienation.

In August 2000, Deirdre and Randy Rand traveled to Kopetski's home in Montana, where the three of them met for the first time. The purpose of the visit was to begin work on a PAS follow-up study, utilizing Kopetski's cases. Kopetski passed away several weeks before the preliminary findings of the project were presented in 2003 at the Nineteenth Annual Symposium of the American College of Forensic Psychology (Kopetski, Rand and Rand, 2003). The study was subsequently published in the *American Journal of Forensic Psychology* (Rand, Rand and Kopetski, 2005). As part of this collaborative effort, Deirdre and Randy Rand obtained Kopetski's permission to develop her descriptive statistics on 84 PAS cases into a chapter for this book.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

The present study of incidence, gender, and false allegations of child abuse in PAS is based on a sample of 84 alienation cases, drawn from Kopetski's practice as a custody evaluator in Colorado. The cases comprised 20 percent of 413 families she evaluated from 1976 to 1990. The families were from diverse social economic backgrounds. The sample contained 49 alienating mothers, 31 alienating fathers, and four cases in which a relative or stepparent appeared to be the primary alienator. The diagnosis of PAS was based on Kopetski's criteria (Kopetski, 1991, 1998a,b).

Of the 84 cases, Kopetski reported that there were 49 in which alienation appeared to be interrupted, 15 in which alienation was completed, 8 in which there was ongoing litigation and risk of completed alienation, and 12 with outcome unknown (Kopetski, 1991). Taken together, there were 28 cases which involved repeated litigation, continuing for a period of two to ten years. The longest litigation was in cases where the alienating parent had custody, but refused to stop litigating until the target parent's access was completely terminated. Kopetski's interpretation of this finding was that the alienating parent's behavior was motivated by a desire to prevent or sever the child's existing attachment to the other parent, rather than an effort to protect a normal attachment between the child and alienating parent, as Gardner had suggested.

Of the 49 cases in which alienation seemed to be interrupted, 31 settled by stipulated agreement and 18 were settled by court order.

### *Incidence of PAS and Gender of the Alienating Parent*

Kopetski's 1991 paper included data on the frequency of PAS for each year from 1976 to 1990, and the gender of the alienating parent or relative in each case. For the handbook, this data was clustered into three five-year time frames. A bar graph for each time frame provides a breakdown for the number of mothers and fathers found to be alienating (*see* Fig. 6.1 on p. 67).

### *False Allegations of Child Abuse*

In the 1991 paper, Kopetski listed the primary justification for alienation in each case. She identified 19 different justifications, including separation anxiety, child fearful of the other parent, child doesn't need father, child abuse, spousal abuse, and child is older and has a right to refuse visits. Some cases involved allegations of child abuse, along with other kinds of justifications, such as mother alleged separation anxiety and sex abuse, or father alleged mother was emotionally unstable and neglected the children. There were several cases in which more than one type of child abuse was alleged. Kopetski noted a significant shift in the kinds of justifications given over the years, as different social causes became the focus of attention. The data presented in Table 6.1 (p. 68) are for the three main types of child abuse, including sex abuse, physical abuse, and child neglect.

### *Type of Abuse Alleged and Gender of the Alienating Parent*

For each case, Kopetski noted the justification given for alienation and gender of the alienating parent. This made it possible to examine the relationship between gender of the alienating parent and type of child abuse alleged, as shown in Table 6.1 (p. 68). The majority of false allegations were for sex abuse or child neglect. False allegations of sex abuse were made primarily by alienating mothers (*see* Fig. 6.2 on p. 69). False allegations of child neglect were made primarily by alienating fathers (*see* Fig. 6.3 on p. 69).

### *Limitations of the Study*

Kopetski's sample was comprised of divorced families in Colorado, evaluated during the time period

1976 to 1990. Her cases may not be representative of other geographic locations, or of PAS developments since 1990. Kopetski's team model for evaluations became the standard for Colorado, but may not be the norm in other states. Her team approach involved a series of steps designed to control for bias. Potentially, this could make her findings more reliable and valid than those of a single evaluator, whose protocol may be less demanding.

By the late 1970s, Kopetski had rejected primary parent theory as the basis for her custody recommendations. In her view, evaluators who continued to rely on primary parent theory, especially feminist evaluators, usually recommended custody to the mother, which may have made them more popular with women. Kopetski's services may have been more sought after by fathers, because of her emphasis on children's need for relationships with both parents, and on making custody recommendations based on which parent was more likely to support the child's relationship with the other parent.

The descriptive statistics Kopetski compiled on false allegations of child abuse were for her PAS cases only. She did not collect this information for the other 329 cases (80%) she evaluated, in which PAS was not a significant issue. The data for the incidence study

presented here is on parents and adult issues. Little information about the children is provided, such as children's age, gender, and adjustment, and how many children the 84 families had between them. The follow-up study by Rand, Rand and Kopetski, 2005, focuses more on the children.

## RESULTS

### *Incidence of PAS*

Kopetski documented a significant increase in PAS from 1976 to 1990, as shown in Figure 6.1. The rate at which PAS increased seems to have accelerated during the time frame from 1986 to 1990, with the number of cases in that five-year period equaling the number of cases during the ten years from 1976 to 1985. In the 1991 paper, Kopetski reported that the proportion of alienation families in her practice also increased, going from 16 percent in the 1970s to 50 percent in 1990. Her data provide empirical support for Gardner's assertion that the frequency of children becoming obsessed with denigration of one parent had been increasing for six or seven years, such that a special name was warranted (Gardner, 1985).

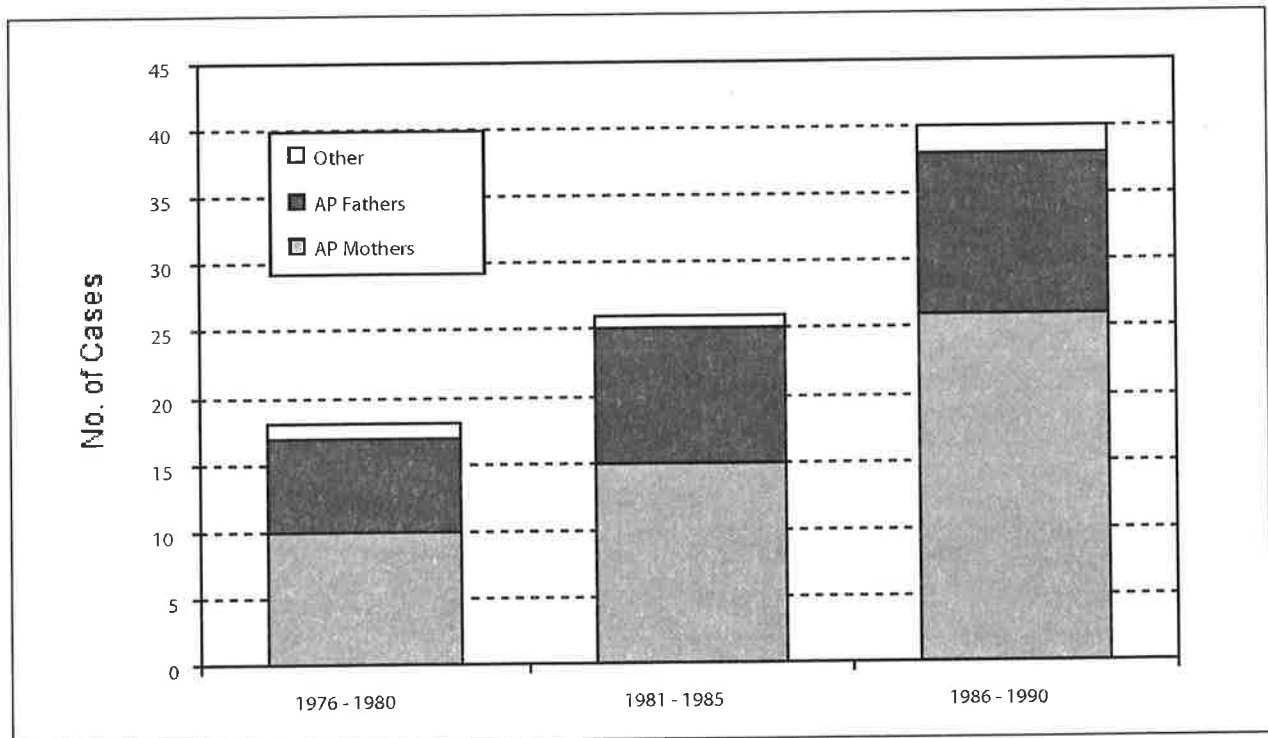


Figure 6.1. Incidence of PAS and gender of the alienating parent (AP).

Kopetski's findings with respect to the incidence of PAS are comparable to those of other researchers, despite differences in geographic location and time frame. Kopetski found significant PAS in 84 of the 413 families she evaluated between 1976 and 1990 (20%). A survey of 21 custody evaluators by a psychologist in California estimated that PAS was found in 33 percent of the families evaluated (Nicholas, 1997). A study of divorce judgments from 1995 to 2000 in Brisbane, Australia, found PAS was present in 29 percent (Berns, 2001).

### ***Proportion of Alienating Mothers to Alienating Fathers***

As shown in Figure 6.1, the proportion of alienating mothers to alienating fathers was 2 to 1, not just in the early years, but in all three time frames. However, the number of alienating fathers did increase, as Gardner and others have observed in recent years. It has been generally assumed that the increase in alienating fathers means that fathers are now as likely to alienate as mothers, but according to Kopetski's data, alienating mothers continued to outnumber alienating fathers by a ratio of 2 to 1. As the number of alienating fathers increased, so did the number of alienating mothers, paralleling the increase in PAS cases.

Kopetski's findings regarding the higher proportion of alienating mothers are similar to those of other researchers (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Clawar and Rivlin, 1991; Dunne and Hedrick, 1994; Gardner, 2001; Burrill, 2001). Given the consistency of these studies, it is unlikely that her findings are due to gender bias. Kopetski (1991) concluded that PAS is not a gender-determined disorder, and that the personality characteristics and the behavior of alienating parents are the same, regardless of whether the parent is male or female.

Kopetski believed that cultural attitudes and social climate were responsible for most of the gender differences found in PAS. The focus on the plight of women and children in recent years means that more social causes have been available for exploitation by alienating mothers. Several fathers in Kopetski's sample had been physically attacked by their ex-wives and had documented injuries, but allegations of domestic violence were made only by mothers. Alienating fathers sought to capitalize on the moral outrage engendered by the idea of a mother who neglects her children for the sake of her own self-centered interests. In the past, when cultural mores dictated that the wife and children were the property of the father, alienating

fathers were more common. In Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* (1965), Anna lost the right to see her children when she left her husband for another man, reflecting the culture of the day.

### ***False Allegations of Child Abuse***

Prior to the evaluation, child abuse allegations had typically been investigated one or more times, with findings of "unsubstantiated." Kopetski did an investigation of her own, as part of the evaluation, in all cases with allegations of child abuse or domestic violence. Whether bona fide abuse was involved, or an allegation was unfounded, understanding the history surrounding the allegations had important clinical ramifications for her findings and recommendations.

Kopetski found false allegations of child abuse in 45 of the 84 cases. Due to multiple allegations in two cases, the total number of false allegations came to 48, as shown in Table 6.1. The breakdown for type of abuse alleged was 29 percent sex abuse, 15 percent physical abuse, and 56 percent child neglect. False allegations of sex abuse were made primarily by alienating mothers. False allegations of neglect were frequently made by alienating fathers.

TABLE 6.1. False allegations of child abuse and gender of the alienating parent

	Mother	Father	Other
Sex Abuse	11	2	1
Physical	5	1	1
Neglect	3	21	3

### ***Type of Abuse Alleged and Gender of the Alienating Parent***

In cases involving false allegations of sex abuse, the mother was the accusing parent in 79 percent. In cases with false allegations of child neglect, the father was the accusing parent in 76 percent (see Figures 6.2 and 6.3, next page).

Many of the unfounded claims of sexual abuse involved young children whose mothers inferred sexual meaning to affectionate behavior and the child's normal attempts to engage and get close to the father after an abnormally exclusive relationship with the mother. An accusation of sex abuse by the mother was more likely to be taken seriously by child protection authorities, resulting in restrictions on the father's

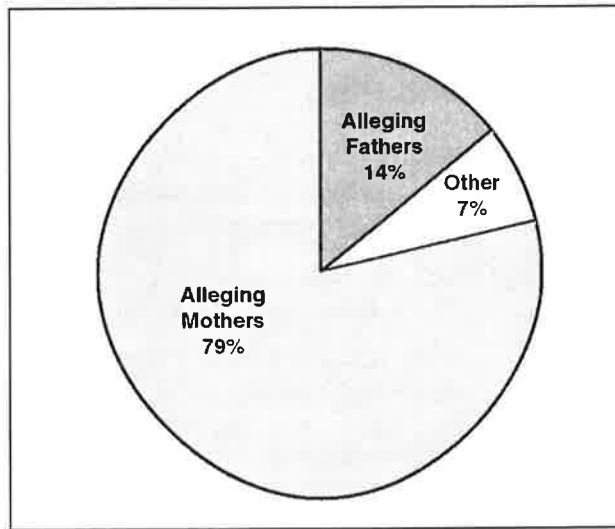


Figure 6.2. False allegations of sex abuse and gender of the alienating parent.

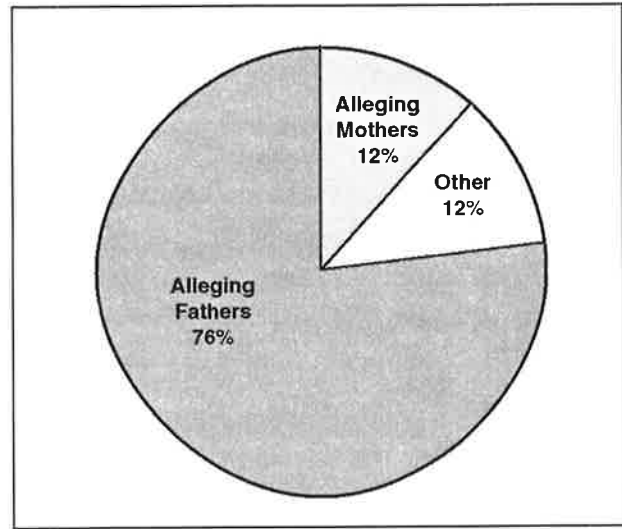


Figure 6.3. False allegations of child neglect and gender of the alienating parent.

access. A father could be on supervised visitation for two years, or have no contact with the child for months, before it was determined that abuse was not substantiated. In some cases, allegations of sex abuse were added on, when other justifications for alienation were not enough to eliminate contact with the target parent.

False allegations of child neglect played out differently. For example, both parents may have neglected the child, due to problems with substance abuse during the marriage. At evaluation, mother may have been deemed the healthier of the two parents, having made significant changes after the divorce. However, the father continued to amplify and exploit the allegation of neglect, which had been true at one time. Another example is that of a mother who developed a serious illness that affected her mental state and made it difficult for her to care for the children. In a normal, intact family, the father and other family members would have offered to help until the mother recovered. In an alienation scenario, however, the father would exploit the fact that there was a period of time when mother was incapacitated, portraying her as a neglectful, unfit mother. Some alienating fathers were so relentless that the mother gave up, exhausted.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on what she had learned from working with PAS families, Kopetski wrote:

No human being, adult or child, male or female, accuser or accused, victim or perpetrator, convict or free individual, should be allowed the entitlement of being believed without question. And, no human being, adult or child, male or female, accuser or accused, victim or perpetrator, convict or free individual, should ever be deprived of the right to be heard by a mind open to the possibility that the individual speaking is telling the truth. Important to life as they are, emotions, beliefs and convictions, cannot be substituted for truth or reality. Reality is not a reflection of the internal contents of human beings; the internal mirrors formed by our neurological structures are supposed to *reflect* reality (*italics added*) so that we can become aware of it. Sometimes, those mirrors introduce a distortion. We, in the legal and mental health professions must assiduously guard our right to question and evaluate and to base our conclusions about the people we serve on truth and fact considered in context. Distortions must be accounted for if we are to achieve and help children achieve descriptions which approximate reality. (Kopetski, 1991, p. 29)

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