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A Construct Study of the Eight Symptoms of Severe Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Survey of Parental Experiences

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ABSTRACT. A survey study was conducted of adults who self-reported having children who were severely alienated from them. The primary research questions addressed were: (1) To what extent were the eight symptoms of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)—as identified by the construct’s originator, Dr. Richard Gardner—reported to be manifested by the alienated children? And (2) holding severity constant, to what degree did the frequency of symptoms vary? Sixty-eight parents reported that the relationship with their children was severely damaged due to the attitudes and actions of the other parent. One question was asked about each of Gardner’s eight symptoms (campaign of denigration, frivolous, weak or absurd rationale for the alienation, lack of ambivalence towards the alienating, lack of guilt or remorse about the alienation, borrowed scenarios, independent thinker phenomenon, taking the alienating parent’s side in the conflict, and spread of alienation to the extended family of the targeted parent). Additional questions were surveyed to determine

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whether despite the severity of the alienation, were there moments in which the child was less than completely rejecting and committed to the alienation. Results revealed general support for the presence of the eight symptoms of PAS as well as insight into windows of opportunity when even the most severely alienated child demonstrates some “cracks in the armor,” raising hope for clinical intervention and eventual reunification. doi:10.1300/J087v47n01_04 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

Richard Gardner (1998) defined-parental alienation syndrome (PAS) as 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 results from a combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrinations and the child’s own contributions to the vilification of the targeted parent” (p. 77). Gardner’s criteria for defining the syndrome focused on the child’s behavior after the child has been successfully alienated from the targeted parent.

According to Gardner (1998), children may manifest from four to eight behaviors depending on the severity of the alienation, which together comprise the syndrome of parental alienation.

The first manifestation is a campaign of denigration against the targeted parent. Parents who were once loved and valued seemingly overnight become hated and feared. (It is important to note that when there is legitimate reason for the child’s fear and hostility towards the targeted parent, such as founded abuse or neglect, the negative reaction to the parent is not considered (PAS) by Gardner.)

Second is reliance on weak, frivolous, and absurd rationalizations for the depreciation of the targeted parent. The objections made in the campaign of denigration are often not of the magnitude that would lead a child to hate a parent, such as slurping soup or serving spicy food.

The third manifestation is a lack of ambivalence towards both parents. The child is unable to admit any flaws in the alienating parent.

Support for that parent is automatic, reflexive, and idealized, while the child sees no good in the rejected parent.

Fourth, the child strongly asserts that the decision to reject the other parent is his or her own. The child may without any hesitations exclaim that his or her opinions are not those of the alienating parent. This is what Gardner called the “Independent Thinker” phenomenon.

A fifth manifestation is absence of guilt about the treatment of the targeted parent. The child will argue that mistreatment of the rejected parent is justified with no qualm about how the rejected parent may feel. Gratitude for gifts, favors, or financial support provided by the targeted parent is nonexistent.

Sixth is reflexive support for the alienating parent in parental conflicts. There is no willingness or attempt to be impartial or to consider the targeted parent’s point of view.

Seventh, is the presence of borrowed scenarios. PAS children often make accusations towards the targeted parent that utilize phrases and ideas adopted wholesale from the alienating parent. One clue that a scenario is borrowed from an alienating parent is the child’s use of language and concepts that do not seem to be understood such as making accusations that cannot be supported with detail, using words that are not age appropriate, or recounting early events prior to the child’s ability to remember.

And, finally, the rejection of the targeted parent spreads to his or her extended family and significant other. Formerly beloved grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are suddenly avoided and rejected.

According to Gardner (2003) PAS could be mild, moderate, or severe depending on the number of symptoms identified. He made no attempt at weighting the importance or frequency of specific symptoms. No single cluster of symptoms was seen as more indicative of mild versus severe PAS. However, he did believe that in the severe cases the manifestation of the eight behaviors was “persistent” and “formidable.”

Currently, there is both widespread acceptance as well as heated debate regarding the validity of the construct of PAS (see for example Johnston & Kelly, 2001; Warshak, 2001a). There are (at least) two related questions regarding the validity of the PAS construct; the first is general and the second specific. The general validity question can be phrased in the following way: Is it true that some children become hostile and rejecting towards an otherwise adequate parent largely—if not wholly—due to the actions and attitudes of the other parent? The second validity issue is specific and can be phrased as: What is the actual (as opposed to theoretical) relationship between the eight symptoms

of PAS and the three levels of the syndrome? That is, for example, do all severely alienated children exhibit all eight symptoms in the extreme or are there degrees to which these symptoms are manifested even within the severe level of PAS. The importance in making a distinction between the three levels of alienation may have ramifications for treatment and prognosis. What, exactly, Gardner meant by “present” and “formidable” in regard to the eight symptoms is not known and could allow for the possibility of some variation.

Laying aside the question of terminology for now, this first question can be addressed through an examination of the extant literature on children and divorce as well as parent-child relationships. Such a review reveals that although Gardner coined the term PAS, others have long recognized that children can become alienated from a parent as a result of undue influence of the other parent (as distinct from alienation due to other causes). Wallerstein (1984) for example has been credited with early recognition of this problem in her writing about the Medea Complex. In fact, there is currently a burgeoning literature confirming the existence and problem of children becoming alienated from one parent due primarily to the adverse influence of the other. Some call this phenomenon PAS while others refer to it as the alienated child (Kelly & Johnston, 2001) or simply as programmed children (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991). As noted by Warshak (2001a), the concept of PAS has achieved widespread acceptance as having face validity among some clinicians— notably child custody evaluators and other forensic psychologists. Based on his review of the literature, Warshak concluded that, “The frequency of reports in the clinical literature and the close similarity of reported cases to Gardner’s descriptions, lends support to the validity of PAS.” The work of Kopetski (1998a, b), Clawar and Rivlin (1991), Lund (1995), Waldron and Joanis (1996) and Price and Pioske (1994) provide examples of face validity of the general notion of PAS. Even detractors of the concept acknowledge that some children become pathologically estranged from one parent as a result of undue influence by the other parent (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Baker (2005a, b, c; 2006) has also provided some construct validity as a result of interviews with adults who believe that when they were children they were manipulated by one parent to reject the other parent. There are now several books and articles on the PAS which are theoretical, descriptive, or proscriptive. The work of Rand (1997a, b), Waldron and Joanis (1996), Walsh and Bone (1997) and Warshak (2001b) are examples of such theoretical efforts in the field to define or describe PAS. Darnall (1998) as well as Baker and

Darnall (2006) have provided detailed elaboration on the strategies that parents use to turn a child against the other parent.

Despite the general consensus in the field that children can become pathologically alienated (as opposed to estranged due to other factors that can explain parent-child conflict like failure to bond, abuse, punitive parenting or other behaviors damaging the relationship), there is no reliable and valid measure of PAS *per se*. In fact, a recent survey of child custody evaluators revealed that despite widespread endorsement of the general concept of PAS, many admitted to using global assessments and, perhaps consequently, lacking confidence in the reliability of their assessments (Baker, in press). In addition, Baker found wide variation in the proportion of cases in which an evaluator concluded that PAS had occurred, ranging from 0% to over 50% of their sample.

One reason for the current state of affairs pertains to the second validity question, that is, lack of clarity as to the relationship between the eight symptoms identified by Gardner (1998) and the overall construct of PAS. Two possible relationships exist between the categorization of PAS (mild, moderate, or severe) and the eight symptoms. The first is that they are interdependent. That is, only youth who exhibit all eight symptoms are considered severely alienated. Youth who demonstrate anything less would be coded as moderately or mildly alienated. A problem with this scenario, however, is that it would probably result in many youth being classified as moderately alienated when they were in fact severely alienated. As an example, how would a clinician judge the severity of the following case: A 17-year-old girl moved out of her mother's home to live with her alienating father. The child who once had a positive, warm, and loving relationship with her mother has decided that all they ever did was fight. She has cut her mother off from almost all contact, refusing to sleep at her home, denigrates the mother to anyone who will listen, and refuses to so much as have a meal with her. And yet, this same child did spend time with her mother and her mother's extended family during Thanksgiving and Christmas. She also answers her mother's phone calls semi-regularly and will participate in a brief conversation, although her affect is usually flat or hostile. She sees her mother at Sunday school and will passively allow her mother to hug and kiss her. By most accounts this child would be considered severely alienated: There is virtually no relationship left between mother and daughter, the only contact is mother-initiated. This case extends far beyond Gardner's (1998) definition of moderate alienation in which there is some difficulty and struggle around visitation but eventually the child does visit and does have a positive interaction with the targeted

parent. And yet, if one ascribes to the condition that only those children manifesting all eight symptoms all of the time can be defined as severely alienated, this child would not meet the definition as she does not ALWAYS reject the extended family and does allow for SOME positive interactions with the mother.

An alternative approach is to categorize as mild, moderate, or severely alienated based on Gardner's general descriptions—regardless of the presence/absence or strength of the eight symptoms. Such an approach assumes that severely alienated children can still exhibit some variation in their behavior and recognizes that in light of Gardner having only identified three categories of PAS (mild, moderate, and severe), that in all likelihood, there is some variation within the categories. That is, among a group of children—all of whom are severely alienated—there is some variation in style and degree of presentation of the eight symptoms defined by Gardner.

The aim of the study was to empirically examine the relationship between PAS and the eight symptoms. The primary hypothesis was that children who were severely alienated (defined as exhibiting extreme unwarranted negativity toward the other parent due to the actions and attitudes of the other parent in such a manner as to severely limit the relationship) would not uniformly and consistently exhibit extreme scores on the eight symptoms as defined by Gardner. Thus, it was expected that there would be some variation on the eight symptoms in a sample of cases that met Gardner's definition of severe PAS. If the data bear out this hypothesis, then the conclusion can be made that the categorization of PAS is not tautologically related to the eight symptoms and that there is some variation within a group of severely alienated children. Such data can be used to lay the groundwork for the development of a standardized assessment tool for measuring PAS, stimulate additional research validating the symptoms, and explore the ramifications for treatment. The reliability and validity of such a tool could be tested and subsequently used in legal as well as mental health settings for purposes of identification, intervention, and treatment.

METHODS

A survey study was conducted in March-April of 2006. Subjects were recruited through the second author's posting of an invitation on his website which directed interested individuals to the first author's (A.J.L.B.) e-mail address. In response to these queries the first author

sent a copy of the survey and followed up to ensure an adequate response rate. The survey contained further clarification as to inclusion criteria. It was explained that to meet the study's criteria the child must profess to want nothing to do with the parent and the parent's access to the child was minimal at best. The parent must believe that the other parent has seriously interfered with and deliberately influenced the child's behavior towards them. This statement captures the essence of severe PAS without using the term and without referencing the eight symptoms. It was also explained that the survey was not for step-parents and that the child had to be 18 years of age or younger.

Informed consent was obtained through completion of the survey. The first section of the survey stated the purpose of the survey (to understand the behaviors of these children) and described the voluntary nature of the study and the ways in which confidentiality would be assured. Only those parents who agreed to these terms proceeded to complete the survey. In all, 144 parents responded to the posting within the specified time frame and received a copy of the survey. Of the 144 surveys sent out, 19 people responded that the survey did not apply to them (either their child was over 18 years of age or the degree of alienation was not consistent with the description provided), reducing the total to 125, 92 of which were completed. Thus, the response rate was 73.6%. The reasons why the 33 parents did not respond can only be hypothesized. It was quite likely that some portion of the 33 people did not receive the survey or they did not feel that the survey applied to them. In fact of the 33, only 11 confirmed receipt and then did not complete the survey.

Two methodological limitations need to be addressed at this point. It is important to note that no independent verification that discriminated between severe and moderate degrees of alienation was possible. As a result, the variation noted in the results could be due to the inclusion of less than severe cases in the sample. Attempts were made to discriminate and exclude moderate cases by including only cases in which the parent reported having had no or only minimum contact with their child because of the child's alienation. As defined by Gardner, in severe alienation cases there is no visitation (due to the refusal of the child) or visitation is marked by destructive and provocative behaviors. Any respondent whose survey suggested the possibility of moderate—as opposed to severe—alienation was removed from the final sample ($n = 8$). In this way, only the most extreme cases were included in the sample, ensuring greater confidence that the variation in the child's behavior

was exhibited among the severe cases as opposed to reflecting inclusion of moderate cases in the sample.

A second methodological concern was that there was no way to ascertain whether these cases reflect PAS or whether the estrangement between parent and child was a result of other familial dynamics such as the child's preference for the "better parent," punitive parenting, or even abusive behavior. Estranged parents could find their way to the survey either through a conscious desire to pose as a targeted parent or through denial of their own role in the estrangement. If in fact estranged children behave differently than PAS children, the results of the survey could be compromised. The only way to know for sure whether these cases are actually PAS cases as opposed to estrangement would be to have custody evaluators or other forensic/clinical psychologists independently evaluate the selected cases. In the absence of this option, the material was carefully reviewed by the first author to ensure that the cases appeared to be consistent with PAS and that the respondents provided credible and internally consistent examples of their experience with PAS.

Sample

Of the 92 completed surveys, 24 were removed due to the child being over 18 years of age ($n = 16$) or the alienated parent having greater access to the child than is typical of a severely alienated child ($n = 8$). That is, it appeared as if the child was moderately rather than severely alienated. Sixty-eight cases remained in the data set. These 68 survey participants were between 31 and 58 years of age ($M = 44$, $SD = 7.0$); 38 were male and 30 were female. Five had full custody, 25 had either joint, shared, or split custody, 18 were non-custodial parents (with and without supervised visitation), 5 were denied access by the court, and 14 checked "other" category to describe their custody status, usually because it was currently in flux. One parent did not answer this question. The child about whom the survey was completed was between 4 and 18 years of age (Mean = 14.1, $SD = 2.8$) at the time of the survey and had been severely alienated from the parent on average for 3.4 years.

The Survey

The survey was comprised 33 questions, 24 of which are the focus of this paper. The first set of eight questions asked for demographic information including age and gender of the respondent; the date the survey

was completed, the age and gender of the child and the age of the child when the relationship became severely damaged; the current custody status for the target child (1 = Primary custodial parent, 2 = Non custodial parent with visitation or parenting time, 3 = SPLIT custody, 4 = non custodial with supervised visits, 5 = Joint, 6 = Non custodial with unsupervised visits, 7 = Non custodial with supervised visits, 8 = Other) and number of hours per month, if any, the participant spent with the child.

The next section of the survey focused on the behaviors of the child and included 17 questions all of which were coded on either a five-point frequency scale (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always) or a five-point quantity scale (none, a little, somewhat, mostly, completely). For each of the eight symptoms there was one primary question that asked directly about the child's behavior and one or more secondary questions that were designed to explore variations in the child's behavior vis á vis that symptom.

For symptom one the primary question was "Does the child denigrate, belittle you, call you names, and deny having any positive experiences with you?" The secondary questions were "Does the child refuse to spend time with you?" and "How often does the child say positive or complimentary statements towards you?"

For symptom two the primary question was "Are the reasons the child gives for rejecting you weak, frivolous, or absurd?" The secondary question was, "Does the child ever recognize that the reasons are absurd, frivolous or weak?"

The primary question for symptom three was "Does the child lack ambivalence about his or her attitude about the other parent, believing that the parent does nothing wrong and is uniformly good" The secondary question was "Have there been times when the child has been able to admit flaws in the other parent?"

For symptom four the primary question was "Does the child insist or make it a point that to say his or her attitude towards you is not influenced by the other parent?" The secondary question was "Have there been any times when the child has admitted that his or her attitude or behavior towards you is influenced by someone else?"

Symptom five included only the primary question "Does the child express guilt or remorse about his or her attitude or behavior towards you?"

The primary question for symptom six was "When there is a disagreement between you and the other parent, does the child side with the other parent?" The secondary question was "When there is a disagreement

between you and the other parent, has the child shown any indication of siding with you or seeing your perspective?"

For symptom seven the primary question was "When the child is angry or misbehaving towards you, does he or she use language, phrases, or examples that are borrowed/repeated from the other parent?"

For symptom eight the primary question was, "Has the child's behavior toward you spread to your extended family?" Secondary questions included, "Has the child been able to maintain a positive and loving relationship with one or more members of your extended family?" and "Has the child had some positive moments with at least one member of your extended family?"

RESULTS

To address the first question, to what extent were the eight symptoms of PAS—as identified by the construct's originator, Dr. Richard Gardner (1998)—reported to be completely manifested by the severely alienated children, the frequency distribution of the "primary" survey items were calculated. These are presented in Table 1.

Campaign of Denigration

According to Gardner this should be "formidable" in cases of severe PAS. In this study, 59.1% of the targeted parents reported that their child always denigrated, rejected, or belittled them. Another 28.8% reported that this behavior occurred often. Twelve percent reported that it

TABLE 1. Frequency Distribution of PAS Symptoms (n = 68)

Survey Item	0	1	2	3	4
Campaign of denigration	00.0	03.0	09.1	28.8	59.1
Weak, frivolous reasons	00.0	00.0	01.5	13.6	84.8
Lack of ambivalence	00.0	00.0	03.1	20.3	76.6
Insists not influenced by alienating parent	01.6	01.6	01.6	18.0	77.0
Express no guilt or remorse	00.0	00.0	11.1	15.9	73.0
Sides with alienating parent in conflicts	00.0	00.0	00.0	12.1	87.9
Use borrowed phrases	01.6	04.9	14.8	36.1	42.6
Rejects extended family	06.7	05.0	11.7	23.3	53.3

occurred sometimes or rarely and no targeted reported that it never happened. Thus, 87.8% believed that the campaign of denigration was often or always present in their relationship with their alienated child. Examples of this provided by the survey respondents included the following statements, "I ran for the local school board and my son wrote a letter to my opponent telling him what a bad person I was." "My daughter said 'Whatever it takes I am going to destroy you so I can live with dad.'" "They tell me that I am stupid, that I am a liar, and that I have put their father in jail or will put him in jail." "When asked why he no longer wanted to see us, he stated that 'he never had any fun here' and we never listened to him." These—and many similar—statements portray children who are verbally abusive, entitled, angry, and hostilely rejecting towards their parent.

Weak, Frivolous or Absurd Reasons for the Depreciation

More than eight in ten parents (84.8%) expressed the opinion that all of the reasons for the depreciation were weak, frivolous, or absurd. All but one of the remaining survey respondents believed that the reasons for their child's rejection were mostly unfounded and not the kinds of reasons that would account for their child's persistent rejection of them. Examples of the weak, absurd, or frivolous reasons included the following, "He said that he 'doesn't like the orange stripes in my hair' and the way I dress is embarrassing. He 'couldn't believe' I was wearing cowboy boots when I picked him up at school." "You make me eat bad food. You never put me down for my nap on the couch!!" "His mother and/or counselor helped him put together a list of reasons why he does not want to return to my house. He said I locked him out of the house. He said that his youngest stepbrother was 'thrown three-feet in the air onto his bed' as punishment. He added that my stepson sleeps on the top bunk and that it only holds 50 pounds, although he weighs way over 50 pounds."

Lack of Ambivalence About the Alienating Parent

Three fourths (76.6%) of the targeted parents reported that their child completely lacked ambivalence about the alienating parent and another 20.3% felt that this was mostly true. Only two parents felt that this was only true sometimes or rarely and not one parent believed that this was never true. Thus, all but two parents felt that the child mostly or

completely lacked ambivalence about the other parent. Behaviors that exemplified lack of ambivalence included, "I asked him what was one thing he liked about me and he could not come up with a single answer." "My son only now says positive things about his Dad. Even though he knows his father didn't visit him for the first 11 years. There are excuses for why his father didn't visit. Even when his Dad belittles me—my son says he only does so because these things are true."

Independent Thinker Phenomenon

Three fourths of the parents (77.0%) reported that their child always made it a point to insist that his or her attitudes about the targeted parent were his or her own thinking and not a reflection of the influence of someone else. Another 18% said that this was mostly true. Only one parent said that this was only somewhat true and not one parent said that this was never true. "When giving me their laundry list of complaints about me as a person and a parent I asked my daughters what they had heard from their mother and what they had personally witnessed. They said their mother had told them everything, but they had 'made up their own minds' based on their mother's words. But she, in their view, had had no influence on their views." "We rarely speak about the situation as I am trying to build a relationship with my son in the here and now but I do recall a specific incident when I was speaking to him about my current wife. He commented, 'We don't like her and it's not because of mum.'" "He will start out by saying, 'Mom, this is my decision and mine only' and then repeat exactly what his dad has been saying. He challenges me on events that he is not even a witness to, and he is not getting the information from me." "My daughter will frequently say that the things she tells me are her idea and that she has 'free will.' She tells me that when she doesn't call me (court ordered phone contact) that it is her fault and not her dad's."

Lack of Guilt or Remorse

Seventy-three percent reported that their child never showed any remorse or guilt for the rejection and mistreatment of the targeted parent. And another 18% said that the child showed only a little remorse or guilt. Only one parent said that the child sometimes showed remorse or guilt and no parent said that this occurred mostly or completely. One parent reported, "Prior to the time when (son) decided to live exclusively at his father and stepmother's house, he cut back visits to my

house to one weekend a month. On one occasion he called up the day before he was supposed to come over and gave me a list of nonstop social activities that he had chosen to do for that weekend. I told him that my husband and I had planned some things that we wanted to do with him when he came over, and asked him why he hadn't called me earlier in the week to discuss his plans with me. I told him that my husband and I wanted to spend some time with him over the weekend, and that he should choose one activity. He became upset, and told me that he didn't want to come over at all, and that Dad and Step-mom would take him to all the things he wanted to do. He didn't understand that I was hurt because I was only seeing him one weekend a month, and wanted to spend time with him, rather than driving him around and dropping him off at different places. He told me that I was trying to make him feel guilty by telling him I missed him." Another parent shared that, "Josh brashly told the Judge half-truths in my custody trial and walked out of the courtroom smiling and saying, 'I did it!'"

Sides with Alienating Parent in Inter-Parental Conflicts

Close to 90% of the surveyed parents reported that their child completely sided with the other parent in any inter-parental conflict and the remaining 12% said this happened often. No parent said that the child sometimes, rarely, or never sided with the other parent in inter-parental conflicts. The following statements typify this situation, "The mother wouldn't allow his antibiotics or other medications to travel with him to my house, even though the medications traveled back and forth to daycare. She insisted that I buy my OWN antibiotics; however, that meant making an appointment with his doctor and getting a duplicate prescription. This didn't work many times because the doctor would be out of the office on the days I was told I needed medication for the child. I would say in frustration 'I don't see WHY your medicine can't come with you . . . now you can't stay overnight with me, I have to bring you home before your next dose is due!' He would say "It's YOUR fault. You're too stupid to get your own medicine." "The father and I disagreed on whether Late French Immersion (LFI) would be good or not. I made the decision that as he is an intelligent child (all A's at school) he would be in LFI. The child was very positive about the challenge in speaking with me and at school, but his dad continued to disagree. Within a span of two weeks, he no longer wanted to be in LFI and I should never have enrolled him and he wanted to be removed ASAP." "Whatever his father says even if it is absurd my son agrees to

without hesitation.” “When his father stopped allowing me visitation just prior to taking him to California he said his father was just looking out for him. He was covering up his father’s intentions to take him out of the state. He knew they were leaving months before they actually did and didn’t tell me.”

Use of Borrowed Phrases and Ideas

About four in ten parents reported that their child used borrowed phrases and ideas from the alienating parent always and another 36.1% said that this happened often. Fifteen percent of the survey respondents said that sometimes their child used borrowed phrases when interacting with the targeted parent and 11.7% said this happened rarely or never. “My daughter has said she only wants to have good childhood memories. Words her father has used.” “I find that when my son misbehaves or when he is angry, many or most of the arguments are those borrowed from my wife. For example he might conduct arguments involving household finances, driving habits, child advocacy, self-centeredness or selfishness, or home repair as central to his argument with me.” “Two voices answered the phone (when I called my son) my son’s and someone else. I told him who I was and that I was his father, he immediately retorted ‘you’re not my father,’ then went into what seemed to me to be a script. ‘Why did you leave us with no money? Why did you lie to us? I had to leave my school because of you calling the school and causing trouble.’ When I asked him where he got that idea, he exclaimed that he figured it out all by himself. He also said that I left (the family) for money reasons. I then asked to speak with my daughter who was five at the time and her greeting was ‘Hello Daddy’ then all she would say, ‘How come you left us without any money?’” Several parents used the term “script” to describe their child seemingly repeating prepared lines rather than engaging in an actual or spontaneous dialogue.

Rejects Extended Family

Fifty-three percent reported that the alienation had completely spread to the extended family and an additional 23.3% said that this was mostly true. About 12% said that this was true somewhat, and 11.7% said that this was only a little or not at all true. Parent offered such examples as, “She also refuses calls from my sister, and my mother. My mother has taken it the worst. My daughter rejected her so many times that she doesn’t bother to call or write any longer. She made promises to

her about sending copies of her grades and progress reports, and she has NEVER received one in the two years that she has been gone. It's been months since any member of my family have talked to her on the phone." "Years ago, my children had a good relationship with my extended family. However, in the past five years, my wife has systematically denigrated the members of my extended family and my son has adopted or borrowed her arguments and reasoning towards my family. For example, 'Your mother is selfish and self-centered. She is a bad house guest.'" "My daughter refuses to see my family or her godmother with whom she was once very close. She refused to come to the hospital to say goodbye to her grandmother the night before she passed away." Many of the survey respondents spoke of their children missing important family gatherings and holidays with the extended family, including once in a lifetime events such as funerals and weddings.

In sum, between 80 and 98% of the parents described their alienated children as exhibiting the eight symptoms of PAS either always/completely or often/mostly. The next step in the analysis was to compute an average score ranging from 0 (Never or Not at all on all eight items) to 4 (Completely or Always on all items). Scoring for the item regarding guilt was reversed so that high scores indicated less guilt and greater alienation. If a child were coded as the maximum score on all eight items the summary score would be 4.0. Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of this score. As can be seen, two respondents (2.9%) had scores around 2.5, 55 parents (82.1%) had mean scores between 3 and 4, and 10 individuals (14.9%) had average scores of 4.0 (most alienated on all eight items).

The final analysis pertained to an examination of the items that suggested "cracks in the armor" of the alienation, that is, some degree of attachment and affection despite the alienation and rejection. Frequency analysis was conducted on these items and the results are presented in Table 3. As can be seen and consistent with Table 2, most of the

TABLE 2. Frequency of Average Score of Eight Symptoms Score (0-4)

Score	N	%
0.00 to .99	00	00.0
1.00 to 1.99	00	00.0
2.00 to 2.99	02	03.0
3.00 to 3.99	55	82.1
4.00	10	14.9

TABLE 3. Frequency Distribution of Items Indicating Some Attachment

Survey Item	0	1	2	3	4
Say positive things to targeted parent	74.2	21.2	04.5	00.0	00.0
Is loving/amicable to targeted parent	49.3	32.8	17.9	00.0	00.0
Recognizes weaknesses in alienating parent	72.6	09.7	14.5	01.6	01.6
Admit flaws in alienating parent	62.1	22.7	15.2	00.0	00.0
Admits influenced by alienating parent	68.9	19.7	03.3	01.6	06.6
Takes targeted parent's side	83.6	11.5	04.9	00.0	00.0
Positive moments with extended family	40.3	29.0	21.0	03.2	06.5
Loving with one person in extended family	58.7	12.7	19.0	04.8	04.8

children are reported to be rejecting and distancing towards the targeted parent. Nonetheless, there is some indication of attachment/affection even in the context of severe alienation. For example, 4.5% said that the child would sometimes say something positive, 17.9% reported that the child was sometimes loving or amicable towards them, 14.5% reported that the child sometimes recognized that the reasons for the rejection were weak, frivolous, or absurd. Fifteen percent reported that sometimes the children could admit flaws in the alienating parent, close to 10% reported that the child could admit that he or she was being unduly influenced by the alienating parent, close to 5% said that the child sometimes took their side in inter-parental conflict, and almost one fourth reported that the child had maintained a positive relationship with someone in the extended family.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to contribute to the empirical validation of the syndrome of PAS by establishing that for the vast majority of severely alienated cases, the eight symptoms identified by Gardner (1998) were reported to be present in the children by the targeted parents. Average scores on the summary PAS scale (ranging from 0 to 4 in which 4 indicated extreme scores on all eight symptoms) revealed that all but two cases fell between 3.00 and 4.00. Looking at each of the eight symptoms revealed that the vast majority of parents reported that their alienated child always or mostly exhibited these behaviors. In general, these findings are consistent with Gardner's (1998) clinical observations about the key manifestations of PAS.

One exception pertained to the alienation spreading to the targeted parent's extended family. Only half of the parents reported this to be the case "always." However, the comments written by the targeted parents revealed that in some cases the relationship was with a member of the targeted parent's extended family from whom the targeted parent was estranged and the relationship was actually a part of the alienation as opposed to occurring in spite of the alienation. This suggests that the context of the contact with the targeted parent's extended family needs to be understood prior to concluding whether this component is present in the child.

In general, these findings support Gardner's (1998) observations regarding the constellation of the eight symptoms of PAS and should pave the way for the development of reliable and valid assessment tools for identifying PAS. It is clear from the data that requiring the presence of all eight symptoms would be too stringent a test for severe PAS. The results from the data suggest two approaches for assessing PAS. In the first approach a global judgment of PAS is made based on determining that a child (1) rejects the targeted parent (2) who does not deserve to be rejected (3) out of a desire to please or avoid recrimination from the other parent. This would help differentiate PAS from estrangement due to abuse or other mistreatment on the part of the parent. The degree of alienation (mild, moderate, severe) could be made once the overall determination of PAS is made. In the second approach, a checklist of the eight components could be developed along with a criterion score that identifies cases as mild (summary scores below 1.5), moderate (summary scores between 1.5 and 2.4) or severe (scores of 2.5 and above). It is advised based on the experience with the current survey that this information about the eight components be derived from interviewing the child(ren) and both parents rather than solely from a paper and pencil tool. Often the comments provided by the survey participants elucidated the rating system or shed helpful information on the case. Issues of timing were particularly tricky for parents completing the survey who would often provide answers for both before and after the alienation. Also difficult was determining exactly when the relationship became "severely damaged." Future work needs to build on these findings in a large-scale study in which independent assessments of PAS and the eight components can be made.

One surprising finding was that the campaign of denigration (often considered the hallmark of PAS) was reported to be extreme in only about 60% of the cases. The reasons for the lower than expected percentage can only be hypothesized. The narratives provided by the survey

respondents revealed that in some cases, rather than vigorously reviling the targeted parent, the child simply refused to have any contact, claiming not to be comfortable or having other things to do. In these cases the child simply refused to have a relationship with the targeted parent and, because of the child's age or other factors such as relocation of the child, the parent did not personally hear or witness the denigration. It is possible that a campaign of denigration would occur when the child grew older or be observed during an evaluation in which the child would be forced to justify the rejection. This would explain why Gardner (1998) observed during his evaluations this behavior so consistently while there was considerable variation reported in this sample.

It might be tempting based on the earlier discussion to conclude that these cases were not PAS but rather a more benign estrangement or alliance in response to a divorce. However, in all cases the parent reported that they had had a loving and positive relationship with the child prior to the divorce or separation and that the child appeared to be coached or influenced by a parent who made their wishes known to end the child's relationship with the other parent. For example, one parent who reported that his daughter only denigrated him "a little" wrote that she now completely refused to see him but prior to doing so explained why her older brothers also refused contact by saying they were "on mom's team." The story strongly suggests that the child was being pressured to choose one parent over the other after the divorce. Yet because of the particular confluence of family factors, the alienation was not expressed primarily through a campaign of denigration.

The item with the strongest endorsement was the child siding with the other parent in inter-parental conflicts. Close to 88% said that this was true all of the time and the remaining parents said that this was true most of the time. In a sense this is the essence of PAS, taking one parent's perspective all of the time rather than being able or willing to let the parents resolve their own conflicts or see that sometimes one parent is more wrong than right and sometimes it works the other way around. These children appear to be fully engaged in the inter-parental conflicts and actively and self-righteously take the alienating parent's side. This means that the children are not truly open to being close to the targeted parent because they are too willing to believe the worst in him or her. This result suggests that consistently (and unreasonably) taking sides with the alienating parent is as much or more of a hallmark of PAS than a campaign of denigration.

Another interesting point is that the vast majority of targeted parents had some form of joint or shared parenting arrangement prior to the so-

lidification of the PAS. This suggests two things. First, even when children spend considerable amount of time with the targeted parent PAS cannot always be prevented. Joint custody is not a de facto protective mechanism against PAS. In fact, in some cases it is possible that the order of joint custody actually triggered the PAS in that the alienating parent did not want the child to spend so much time with the other parent and, therefore, launched the campaign to prevent such extensive visitation. Second, in many cases the court-ordered arrangement was for joint custody while the children actually resided full-time with the alienating parent. Many of the survey respondents lamented that the courts did not consistently or effectively enforce visitation and shared parenting plans.

One of the stated aims of the study was to determine if there were some “cracks in the armor” of the alienation that could lead to reunification. This was borne out by the data. All but one parent reported some positive behaviors from the child some of the time. Most interesting was that the average PAS score and the average “cracks in the armor” score (the mean score of the eight variables) were not significantly correlated ($r = -.14$). This suggests that even the most seemingly alienated child according to the eight components still showed some positive inclination towards the targeted parent and or extended family. This should give targeted parents and therapist some hope for reunification (assuming their perceptions are accurate). From a clinical standpoint, these behaviors can be considered windows of opportunity for intervention and change. The question now for the field is to determine how parents (and therapists) can effectively build on these moments to begin dismantling the PAS.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study support Gardner’s (1998) identification of the eight symptoms that he defined as consistent with the PAS. Nonetheless, there was variability in the frequency of these symptoms even with the most severely alienated child. An important next step for the field includes determining how to assess and weight these eight symptoms in order to produce a reliable and valid assessment of PAS. Perhaps an evaluation needs to consider how much weight to put on the specific symptoms as well as issues related to frequency and duration of the behaviors. Equally important for the field is the fact that hope for reunification exists with even the most severely alienated child. All but one child exhibited some signs of attachment and affection towards the

targeted parent, despite the severity of the alienation. These moments of affection may represent windows of opportunity for facilitating reunification. Targeted parents are in need of guidance in how to constructively respond to these moments in order to maximize their potential for moving past the alienation.

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