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## **MMPI-2 Findings of Primitive Defenses in Alienating Parents**

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*To test the involvement of primitive defenses in Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), we collected 158 MMPI-2s from court ordered custody evaluations from 7 forensic psychology practices; 76 were PAS cases and 82 were custody cases without PAS (controls). We used two MMPI-2 indexes to measure primitive defenses:  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . We found that mothers and fathers who were alienators had higher (clinical range) scores indicating primitive defenses such as splitting and projective identification, than control mothers and fathers (normal range scores) in both our indexes. Target parents were mostly similar to the control parents. The results showed strong support for Gardner's definition of PAS.*

Psychological diagnoses become particularly controversial when they are not just weighted on the scales of objective science, but when they become the center of passionate advocacy. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as one such example, was finally included as a diagnosis in the American Psychiatric Association's 1980 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition* (DSM III). The acceptance of PTSD was complicated by its economic, political and legal implications. Many Viet Nam war veterans were seeking help from the government for their war related PTSD. However, the symptoms of PTSD can be easily feigned for monetary compensation, which

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helps personal injury attorneys and makes it difficult for defense attorneys (Moyer, Burkhardt, & Gordon, 2002). Despite the problems of malingering, PTSD became accepted because of the accumulated objective evidence, and is today considered the “gold standard” for describing the psychological effects of severe trauma.

Similarly, the acceptance of the diagnosis of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) (Gardner, 1985) is complicated by passionate advocacy in child custody cases. Richard Gardner (2002b) defined Parental Alienation Syndrome as:

a childhood disorder that arises almost exclusively 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 the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent. When true parental abuse and/or neglect is present, the child's animosity may be justified and so the Parental Alienation Syndrome explanation for the child's hostility is not applicable. (p. 3)

Few people deny that a parent can turn a child against the other parent in a bitter divorce. However, since the determination of PAS may affect the outcome of a child custody dispute, and if a child's hatred is based on reality or pathological distortion, everything about PAS is open to scientific, legal and advocacy debate.

Attorney Hoult (2006) argued that PAS is biased against realistically protective mothers and helps abusive fathers fight for custody and that there is no evidence that the so-called “alienating” parent (typically mothers), show any signs of psychopathology. She believes that there is no validity to PAS and it should not be used in court.

While the controversy over PAS is often waged in the legal system, which psychotherapists most commonly try to avoid, they do see the consequences of PAS in their practices. Gardner and others (Weigel & Donovan, 2006) consider PAS a form of child abuse, and several researchers have found lasting effects into adulthood. Baker (2005b) interviewed 38 adults who experienced PAS as children. Her participants reported problems with self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, and enduring conflicts with intimacy. Carey (2003) interviewed 10 adults to assess the long-term effects of PAS and found that they experienced problems in later intimate relationships. Baker (2007) surveyed 106 professional custody evaluators (response rate 75.7 percent) and found general consensus for the concept of PAS, but they had concern about its admissibility in court at this time. Many psychologists and family therapists treat children who have been harmed by PAS and target parents who have lost the love of their child. Yet these same psychotherapists may not feel confident defending the actual term if the case may be involved in a custody

dispute. Also, many psychologists who perform child custody evaluations for the courts may avoid the term "Parental Alienation Syndrome" while using other words to describe it.

Because of the heated environment surrounding PAS fueled by a number of competing interest groups, only accumulated objective findings can fairly assess Parental Alienation Syndrome. We will test an essential construct of PAS, the use of primitive defenses, with the most frequently used objective psychological test in custody evaluations, the MMPI-2 (Ackerman & Ackerman, 1997). We hope to bring to this controversy some empirical and conceptual precision in order to better understand, diagnose and treat this serious disorder.

### PAS Reformulation by Kelly and Johnston

Gardner's definition is clear enough for psychologists to reliably diagnose PAS from case examples (Rueda, 2004). However, Kelly and Johnston (2001) suggest a reformulation of PAS, which takes into account the broader context of the family system. They consider an array of factors that include intense marital conflict, a humiliating separation, parental personalities and behaviors, protracted litigation, and professional mismanagement, all in the context of the child's capacities and vulnerabilities. Kelly and Johnston suggest a continuum of child-parent relationships after the marital split ranging from healthy intimacy to severe alienation, i.e., positive with both parents, affinity for one parent, allied children, estranged children and finally the alienated child. Mon and Biringen (2006) in their study of 227 undergraduates found support for Kelly and Johnston's theory. Their results indicated that alienation from a parent is related to the poor parent-child relationships during childhood and young adulthood and can be found in intact as well as divorced families.

Baker's research (2005a, 2005c, 2006) shows support for both Gardner's and Kelly and Johnston's definitions of PAS. Baker conducted a study of 40 adults who experienced PAS as children and found several results that support Gardner's definition of PAS, such as vilifying and limiting contact with the targeted parent, withdrawing love and becoming angry if the child shows positive regard for targeted parent, forcing the child to choose between parents, and inducing conflict between the child and targeted parent.

Baker also found patterns supporting Kelly and Johnston's definition of PAS. She found that personality disorders co-occurred in most of the alienating families. She found that parental alienation occurred in intact families as well as in non-litigious divorced families. She also found that some of the targeted parents appeared to play a role in their own alienation.

However, Dunne and Hedrick (1994), looking at 16 cases of PAS, found that PAS appeared to be primarily a function of the pathology of the alienating parent and that parent's relationship with the children. Thus, PAS did not

signify dysfunction in the target parent or in the actual relationship between that parent and child.

Johnston and Campbell (1988) found that parents who are narcissistically vulnerable are more likely to use the more primitive defenses and draw their children into the custody conflict. Johnston (2003) analyzed an archival database of 215 children from the family courts and the general community. She found that the children's rejection of a parent has multiple determinants, with both parents contributing to the problem, in addition to vulnerabilities within children themselves.

Kopetski (1998) reported in 1987, without awareness of Gardner's work, that 20 percent of the 413 families in custody disputes had dynamics remarkably similar to Gardner's concept of PAS. She found that a normal parent making an allegation is different from an alienating parent making an allegation. Normal parents did not present themselves as all good and the other parent as all bad. The normal parent making allegations had the capacity to tolerate flaws and imperfections in him or herself and to take in information that disproves the allegation as well as information that confirms it.

### Why Are Mothers More Likely to be the Alienating Parent?

Gardner (2002a) reported that more mothers were alienators than fathers because mothers are more likely to be in the role of primary caregiver and therefore have the most psychological power over the child. He felt that as more men move into the role of primary caregiver, the percentages are likely to even out. Rand (1997) reported that in The California Children of Divorce Study mothers were twice as likely as fathers to form PAS type alignments with their children. On the other hand, fathers were more likely to abduct children. The gender differences in PAS are consistent with findings in other forms of child abuse. For instance, males are more likely to sexually abuse children, while mothers are more likely to mistreat and murder their own children (Sedlak, 1996).

### MMPI-2 Findings in Child Custody Research

Over 94 percent of psychologists used the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) in custody evaluations according to Ackerman and Ackerman's (1997) survey. These MMPI-2s provide some of the most objective and reliable personality data on parents involved in custody litigation (Pope, Butcher, & Seelen, 2006).

Most custody litigants consciously wish to make a good impression (a situational state of impression management). In addition, many parents are in custody disputes because they favor primitive (immature) defenses and therefore have difficulty perceiving and negotiating realistically. The MMPI-2 has validity scales to assess to what degree testees are biased in their

responses. Situational impression management and/or defensive traits could elevate the “fake to look good” scales, and decrease the “fake to look bad” scales. The impression management and defensive reactions to the MMPI-2 act to suppress the clinical scales and therefore the clinical scales do not reveal much useful information. This often leaves the MMPI-2 validity scales as an important objective assessment of a parent’s style of defensiveness.

### MMPI-2 Validity Scales as Measures of Defensiveness

The traditional MMPI validity scales are L (Lie), F (Unusual Psychopathology), and K (Correction for Defensiveness). L, F, and K are useful as indicators of not only impression management but also as measures of enduring defensive traits. Only careful interviewing and fact-finding can determine if the L, F, or K scales are measuring defensiveness as a trait and not just a conscious impression management as a situational state (Gordon, 2002, 2007). For example, a high L and K and a low F could indicate a custody litigant who is not usually defensive, but wants to appear like the ideal parent. This same configuration of a high L and K and a low F in another custody litigant could mean the enduring trait of primitive defenses that involve a considerable distortion of reality and interpersonal provocation.

Bathurst, Gottfried, and Gottfried (1997) established MMPI-2 norms based on 508 child custody litigants. Only 2.5 percent of participants had elevations into the clinical range on any MMPI-2 clinical scale. This suppression of clinical scales could be from any combination of impression management or defensiveness. The mean validity T scores were similar for men and women, showing elevated Lie and K and lower F as compared to the standard norms; Lie = T 56.01, K = T 58.68, and F = T 44.67. (A score of T 50 is the mean score for normals, and a T score greater than 64 is high.)

Siegel and Langford (1998) compared the MMPI-2 validity scales of two groups of parents going through child custody evaluations. They hypothesized that PAS parents would have significantly higher L and K scales and a significantly lower F scale than parents who do not engage in these behaviors. Using MMPI-2s from 34 mothers, since few alienating fathers were available, their hypothesis was confirmed for the K and F scales. They found that the 16 mothers who engaged in alienating behaviors were more likely than the non-PAS mothers to use the primitive defenses of denial, splitting and projection as indicated by their MMPI-2 scores.

Wakefield (1990) compared the personalities of 72 parents falsely accusing sex abuse and 103 falsely accused parents to each other and to a control group of 67 custody only parents (who were involved in custody disputes but without allegations of sexual abuse). The falsely accusing parents were much more likely than were the other two groups to have a personality disorder such as Histrionic, Borderline, Passive-Aggressive, or Paranoid. Only one-fourth was seen as normal. In comparison, most of the individuals in the

custody control group and in the falsely accused group were seen as normal. The MMPI mean profiles for the clinical scales were within normal limits for all three groups despite the clinical observations of psychopathology. The falsely accusing females responded more defensively than did the custody only females. Their L and K scales were higher, and their F scale was lower than for the custody only females. This reached statistical significance on F and F-K.

### L + K – F as a Measure of Primitive Defenses

Lanyon and Lutz (1984) found that the combination of L + K – F was a good measure of denial. Brophy (2003) found that L + K – F indexes correlate highly with other measures of defensive underreporting in both normative and clinical samples. Although L + K – F add little additional independent information from the individual scales, this index has retest reliability greater than that of the individual scales.

Both the L and K scales assess the denial of common human flaws and the denial of normal feelings of aggression. Hall (1989) found negative correlations between L + K – F and the admission of hostility in 239 sexual offenders. This finding supports that L + K – F can measure the denial of aggressive motives.

Duckworth and Anderson (1995) interpret the LFK configuration of elevated L and K scales and a low to average F scale as indicative of people who “. . . see their world in extremes of good and bad” (p. 79). This corresponds with the definition of the defense of splitting in the DSM IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 757) and the Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual (PDM Task Force 2006). The PDM defines splitting as, “The self and outer objects are not experienced ambivalently, with good and bad features, but one-sidedly as only good or only bad. . . .” (p. 643).

### A High Goldberg Index as a Measure of Borderline Level of Personality and Primitive Defenses

Since the MMPI-2 clinical scales are rarely elevated due to the custody litigant’s test set and defenses, it might be useful to look at the relative elevation of the MMPI-2 scales according to the Goldberg Index (1965). The Goldberg Index (GI) is a regression equation that was originally used to differentiate Psychotic from Neurotic MMPI profiles. The Goldberg Index (GI) score is the T scores of (Lie + Paranoia + Schizophrenia) – (Hysteria + Psychasthenia). While Goldberg (1972) reported a hit rate of 93 percent correct (psychotic vs. neurotic MMPI profiles), Roy (1984) found it only useful for extreme scores. Egger, Delsing, and De Mey, (2003) found that the Goldberg Index was also valid for the MMPI-2.

In light of the recent research behind the new Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual, we prefer the more precise terms “Neurotic-Level Personality

Disorders” and “Borderline-Level Personality Disorders.” (Lie + Paranoia + Schizophrenia) mostly assesses Borderline-Level Personality Disorders and primitive defenses, and (Hysteria + Psychasthenia) mostly assesses Neurotic-Level Personality Disorders and higher level defenses such as repression. Neurotic-Level defenses result in less distortion of reality and interpersonal provocation, as compared to the primitive defenses. Persons with Borderline-Level Personality Disorders favor mainly the primitive defenses such as splitting and projective identification.

Both  $L + K - F$  and the Goldberg Index:  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$  assess primitive defenses in different ways. High scores on the  $L + K - F$  configuration are more associated with splitting and viewing the self as all good. Whereas high scores on  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$  assess a Borderline-Level of psychopathology and the favoring of primitive defenses such as projective identification (the Lie scale indicates denial, the Paranoia scale indicates projection, and the Schizophrenia scale indicates poor reality testing and provocation). Projective identification is projection with provoking the target person to act according to the projection. We would expect alienating parents to view themselves as all good and view the target parents as all bad (splitting), and then treat and provoke the target parents accordingly (projective identification).

Many of the studies of PAS have suffered from limited sample sizes from single sources, methodological problems such as retrospective self-reports, and no data on alienating fathers and target mothers. We hope that by studying objective data from the MMPI-2s of parents in custody litigation from a larger and more diverse sample, and from several psychology practices, we will be able to test the role of primitive defenses and the competing theories of Gardner and Kelly and Johnston.

## Hypotheses

1. We predict that if the reliance on primitive defenses is a significant contributing factor in PAS, then the alienating parents (mothers and fathers) should produce higher T scores than the control parents (mothers and fathers) in  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . The alienating parents should have clinical range scores (greater than T64) and the control parents should have normal range scores (within the T40 to T60 range).
2. According to Gardner’s definition of PAS, the unambivalent denigration of the target parent is unjustified; therefore, the target parents should be no different than the control parents, but lower than the alienating parents in favoring primitive defenses as measured by the T scores of  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ .
3. According to Kelly and Johnston’s definition of PAS, the target parents are part of the family system and though the degree of denigration is not justified, the target parents may contribute to the PAS. Therefore, the target



parents should be higher than the control parents in  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , but less than the alienating parents.

## METHOD

In order to help control for the many possible sources of bias in archival research, we requested data from several forensic psychologists whether they used the diagnosis of PAS or not. We asked members of the Pennsylvania Psychological Association's (PPA) listserv and PPA's Custody Evaluators listserv to contribute MMPI-2 profiles from parents who were court ordered to be evaluated for child custody. We requested custody cases that: (1) according to either Gardner's or Kelly and Johnston's definitions indicated PAS, (2) did not indicate PAS (controls), and (3) had the names removed and replaced with "A" for alienating parent, "T" for target parent, or "C" for control. We collected PAS and control cases from seven forensic psychologists who are from different areas of Pennsylvania. Most of the MMPI-2s had within normal limit clinical scales. Therefore these MMPI-2 profiles were not likely to be used to support a diagnosis of PAS. This lends support to the independence of the independent and dependent variables.

We used all the MMPI-2 cases that were father-mother pairs. We eliminated from the analysis other cases that were not father-mother pairs (i.e., a stepmother alienator and mother target, same-sex parents and grandparents). These cases were too few to include in our study. No MMPI-2 profile was eliminated due to the L, F, or K scales. There were no MMPI-2 profiles that were invalid due to inconsistent, random, or irrational responding (VRIN, TRIN, F, Fp, Fb). The sample size was 158 MMPI-2s, with 76 cases of PAS and 82 custody cases in which there was no PAS (control cases). As expected from previous research, there are far more mothers who are alienators than fathers. We used MMPI-2 profiles from 31 mother alienators, 31 father targets, 7 father alienators, 7 mother targets, 41 mother controls, and 41 father controls.

We limited our dependent measures to two indexes,  $L + K - F$  and the Goldberg Index (GI). We expect more reliability from indexes that are meaningfully related clusters of scales than from individual scales. In addition, both these formulas produce easily interpreted T scores, which we used in our data analysis.  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$  with scores greater than T64 indicate the favored use of primitive defenses.

## RESULTS

The MMPI-2 data came from three sets of mother-father pairs (i.e., mother alienators-father targets, father alienators-mother targets, and control mothers-control fathers). We tested the assumption of independence between

the mothers and fathers in each of the three pairings on both measures of primitive defenses. The correlations ranged in magnitude from  $r = .07$  (mother alienators and father targets on  $L + K - F$ ) to  $r = .26$  (mother alienators and father targets on the Goldberg Index), all  $p > .05$ , 2-tailed. The results of the correlational analysis suggested no violation of the assumption of independence.

We predicted in hypothesis 1 that if reliance on primitive defenses is an important contributing factor in PAS, then the alienating parents (mothers and fathers) should produce higher T scores (in the clinical range) than the control parents (mothers and fathers, who should have normal range scores) on our dependent measures of primitive defenses:  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ .

In testing hypothesis 1, we used focused  $t$  tests for two independent samples (Rosnow, and Rosenthal, 2002). The first two  $t$  tests compared the alienating mothers ( $n = 31$ ) and control mothers ( $n = 41$ ) on  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , respectively. The results of the first  $t$  test found that alienating mothers scored higher ( $M = 78.32$ ,  $SD = 22.60$ ) than the control mothers ( $M = 55.56$ ,  $SD = 20.18$ ) on  $L + K - F$  (note: 40-60 are normal range scores, and  $> 64$  is clinically high). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(70) = 4.50$ ,  $p = .000013$  (1-tailed),  $d = 1.08$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around Cohen's  $d$  ranging from .56 to 1.60 (Cohen's  $d$  is a way of expressing the difference between two means in standard deviation terms). The results showed that the alienating mothers had very high  $L + K - F$  (clinical range) scores indicating primitive defensiveness, and the control mothers had normal range scores.

The results of the second  $t$  test found that alienating mothers also scored higher ( $M = 67.65$ ,  $SD = 15.43$ ) on  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$  than the control mothers ( $M = 53.15$ ,  $SD = 16.55$ ). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(70) = 3.79$ ,  $p = .00158$  (1-tailed),  $d = .91$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around Cohen's  $d$  ranging from .46 to 1.36. That is, the alienating mothers had clinically high borderline pathology, which is associated with reality distortions and being provocative. In summary, the results of the first two  $t$  tests found that alienating mothers were both clinically high in  $L + K - F$  (splitting) and the Goldberg Index  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , (borderline pathology and projective identification). The control group mothers had scores on both measures in the normal range.

The next series of  $t$  tests for independent samples compared the alienating fathers ( $n = 7$ ) and control fathers ( $n = 41$ ) on  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , respectively. The results of the third  $t$  test found that alienating fathers scored higher ( $M = 84.57$ ,  $SD = 25.72$ ) on  $L + K - F$  than the control fathers ( $M = 60.00$ ,  $SD = 18.11$ ). This difference was statistically significant,  $t(46) = 3.12$ ,  $p = .0016$  (1-tailed),  $d = 1.30$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around Cohen's  $d$  ranging from .41 to 2.19. Finally, the results of the fourth  $t$  test found that alienating fathers scored higher

( $M = 65.14$ ,  $SD = 9.15$ ) on  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$  than the control fathers ( $M = 52.56$ ,  $SD = 19.13$ ). This difference was also statistically significant,  $t(46) = 1.70$ ,  $p = .048$  (1-tailed),  $d = .70$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around Cohen's  $d$  ranging from  $-.15$  to  $1.55$ . As predicted, alienating fathers were both clinically high on  $L + K - F$  (splitting) and the Goldberg Index  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , (borderline pathology and projective identification). The control group fathers had scores on both measures in the normal range.

Taken together, the analyses strongly support hypothesis 1: alienating parents (both mothers and fathers) produced higher T scores in the clinical range associated with primitive defenses in  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$  than the control parents who were in the normal range.

Based on Gardner's definition of PAS, the target parent should not be favoring primitive defenses. Therefore, we predicted in hypothesis 2 that the target parents (mothers and fathers) should be no different from the control parents (mothers and fathers) on  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , but lower than the alienating parents (mothers and fathers) on these measures. Hypothesis 3 is a test of Kelly and Johnston's definition of PAS in that the target parents may to some degree favor primitive defenses. We predicted that the alienating parents (mothers and fathers) should be higher than the target parents (mothers and fathers) who, in turn, should be higher than the control parents on  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ .

In testing these two competing hypotheses, contrast  $t$  tests, "alerting correlations" and effect size correlations were computed following the procedures outlined in Rosenthal, Rosnow and Rubin (2000), and Rosnow and Rosenthal (2002). The alerting correlation ( $r$  alerting) is the correlation between the means of the different groups or conditions and the contrast weights (lambda coefficients) associated with the groups. Rosenthal et al. (2000) call it the alerting  $r$  because it can alert the researcher to overall trends in the group means that may be neglected or overlooked using diffuse (omnibus)  $F$  tests (i.e.,  $F$  with numerator  $df > 1$ ). The squared alerting correlation can be used to evaluate the success of various contrasts as it tells us the proportion of the overall between-group sum of squares ( $SS$  between) accounted for by the specific contrast. Finally, the effect size correlation ( $r$  effect size) is a way of indexing the magnitude of an effect by relying on the product-moment correlation. Rosenthal et al. (2000) defined the effect size correlation as, "the simple correlation (unpartialled) between membership in a group or condition and scores on the dependent variable" (p. 451). It has the advantage over other effect size procedures in that it can test patterns in more than two groups.

In hypothesis 2 we predicted that, for both our measures of primitive defenses  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , the target parents (mothers and fathers) should be no different from the control parents (mothers and fathers), but score lower in both measures in comparison to the alienating

parents (mothers and fathers). We used contrast (lambda) weights of  $-1$ ,  $-1$ ,  $+2$  to express this hypothesis. We first compared target mothers ( $n = 7$ ), control mothers ( $n = 41$ ) and alienating mothers ( $n = 31$ ) on  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , respectively. The first  $t$  contrast tested the prediction that target mothers ( $M = 52.29$ ,  $SD = 26.20$ ) should be similar to control mothers ( $M = 55.56$ ,  $SD = 20.18$ ) on  $L + K - F$ , but lower on the dependent measure in comparison to alienating mothers ( $M = 78.32$ ,  $SD = 22.60$ ). The results of the analysis were statistically significant with  $t(152) = 4.48$ ,  $p = .0000073$  (1-tailed),  $r$  alerting = .99,  $r$  effect = .40, and a 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .26 to .52. Based on the squared alerting correlation, 98 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS$  between) was accounted for by the contrast. Given our three parent groups (and thus 2  $df$  between groups), the contrast exceeds the .50 or 50 percent of  $SS$  between (i.e., 50 percent = the reciprocal of the  $df \times 100$ ) expected by chance (Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000).

The second  $t$  contrast tested the prediction that target mothers ( $M = 65.14$ ,  $SD = 16.60$ ) should likewise be similar to control mothers ( $M = 53.15$ ,  $SD = 16.60$ ) on  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , but lower on the dependent measure in comparison to alienating mothers ( $M = 67.65$ ,  $SD = 15.43$ ). The results of the analysis were statistically significant,  $t(152) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .03$  (1-tailed),  $r$  alerting = .63,  $r$  effect = .22, and a 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .07 to .38. However, the squared alerting correlation indicated that the contrast accounted for only 40 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS$  between), which is below the 50 percent  $SS$  between expected by chance. This finding suggests that the predicted contrast does not adequately model the pattern of means for our mother parent groups on this one measure of primitive defenses. This small group of target mothers had a high degree of psychopathology similar to the alienating mothers as indicated by the Goldberg Index.

The next analyses for testing hypothesis 2 compared target fathers ( $n = 31$ ), control fathers ( $n = 41$ ), and alienating fathers ( $n = 7$ ) on  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . We also used the prediction indexed by contrast (lambda) weights of  $-1$ ,  $-1$ ,  $+2$ . The third  $t$  contrast tested the prediction that target fathers ( $M = 59.29$ ,  $SD = 16.36$ ) should be similar to control fathers ( $M = 60.00$ ,  $SD = 18.11$ ) on  $L + K - F$ , but lower on the dependent measure in comparison to alienating fathers ( $M = 84.57$ ,  $SD = 25.72$ ). The results of the analysis was statistically significant,  $t(152) = 3.14$ ,  $p = .001$  (1-tailed),  $r$  alerting = 1.00,  $r$  effect = .40, and a 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .26 to .52. Based on the squared alerting correlation, 100 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS$  between) was accounted for by the contrast. The final  $t$  contrast tested the prediction that target fathers ( $M = 47.39$ ,  $SD = 14.72$ ) should be similar to control fathers ( $M = 52.56$ ,  $SD = 19.13$ ) on  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , but lower on the dependent measure in comparison to alienating

fathers ( $M = 65.14$ ,  $SD = 9.15$ ). The results of the analysis were statistically significant,  $t(152) = 2.32$ ,  $p = .01$  (1-tailed),  $r_{\text{alerting}} = .96$ ,  $r_{\text{effect}} = .26$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .11 to .40. The squared alerting correlation indicated that the contrast accounted for 92 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS_{\text{between}}$ ).

Taken together, the analyses showed good support for hypothesis 2: overall, the prediction based on Gardner's definition of PAS by contrast (lambda) weights of  $-1$ ,  $-1$ ,  $+2$ , fared well. For three of the four contrasts, the squared alerting correlations indicated that the contrast accounted for 92 to 100 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS_{\text{between}}$ ). These percentages are well above the 50 percent  $SS_{\text{between}}$  expected by chance. The predictive power of the contrast was less effective with the measure  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , when comparing mother targets, mother controls, and mother alienators.

In testing hypothesis 3, derived from Kelly and Johnston's definition of PAS, we predicted that the alienating parents (mothers and fathers) should be higher than the target parents (mothers and fathers) who, in turn, should be higher than the control parents in  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . In other words, the alienating parents should favor primitive defenses at the highest rates, the control parents should not be favoring primitive defenses and the target parents should be in the middle of these two groups. This can be represented by a linear prediction indexed by contrast (lambda) weights of  $+1$ ,  $0$ , and  $-1$ . As in testing hypothesis 2, we conducted contrast  $t$  tests first comparing alienating mothers ( $n = 31$ ), target mothers ( $n = 7$ ), and control mothers ( $n = 41$ ) on  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , respectively.

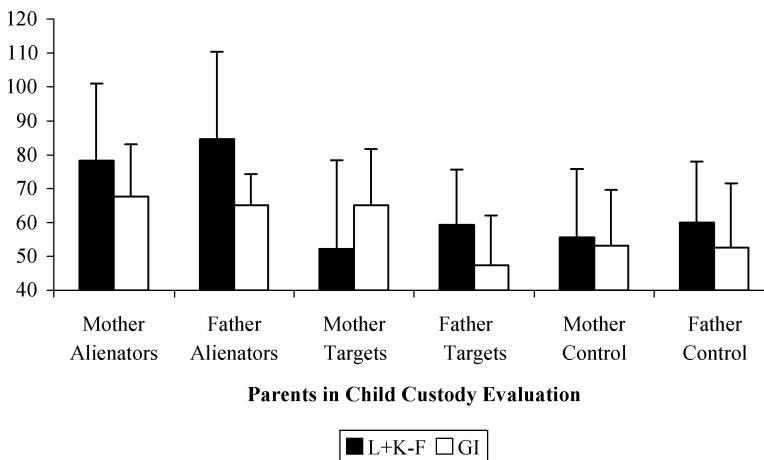
The first  $t$  contrast in this series tested the prediction that alienating mothers ( $M = 78.32$ ,  $SD = 22.60$ ) should be higher than target mothers ( $M = 52.29$ ,  $SD = 26.20$ ) who, in turn, should be higher than control mothers ( $M = 55.56$ ,  $SD = 20.18$ ) in  $L + K - F$ . The results of the analysis were statistically significant,  $t(152) = 4.78$ ,  $p = .000002$  (1-tailed),  $r_{\text{alerting}} = .80$ ,  $r_{\text{effect}} = .32$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .18 to .45. However, the squared alerting correlation indicated that the contrast accounted for only 64 percent of the between groups sum of squares ( $SS_{\text{between}}$ ), which is not substantially greater than .50. The second  $t$  contrast tested the prediction that alienating mothers ( $M = 67.65$ ,  $SD = 15.43$ ) should be higher than target mothers ( $M = 65.14$ ,  $SD = 16.60$ ) who, in turn, should be higher than control mothers ( $M = 53.15$ ,  $SD = 16.60$ ) in  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . The results of the analysis were statistically significant,  $t(152) = 3.69$ ,  $p = .0001$  (1-tailed),  $r_{\text{alerting}} = .94$ ,  $r_{\text{effect}} = .33$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .19 to .46. The squared alerting correlation indicated that the contrast accounted for 88 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS_{\text{between}}$ ).

The next analyses for testing hypothesis 3 compared alienating fathers ( $n = 7$ ), target fathers ( $n = 31$ ), and control fathers ( $n = 41$ ) on  $L + K - F$

and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , a linear prediction indexed by contrast (lambda) weights of +1, 0, -1. The first  $t$  contrast in this series tested the prediction that alienating father ( $M = 84.57$ ,  $SD = 25.72$ ) should be higher than target fathers ( $M = 59.29$ ,  $SD = 16.36$ ) who, in turn, should be higher than control fathers ( $M = 60.00$ ,  $SD = 18.11$ ) in  $L + K - F$ . The results of the analysis were statistically significant,  $t(152) = 3.00$ ,  $p = .002$  (1-tailed),  $r_{altering} = .85$ ,  $r_{effect} = .35$ , and a 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .20 to .48. The squared altering correlation indicated that the contrast accounted for just 72 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS_{between}$ ).

The last  $t$  contrast tested the prediction that alienating fathers ( $M = 65.14$ ,  $SD = 9.15$ ) should be higher than target fathers ( $M = 47.39$ ,  $SD = 14.72$ ) who, in turn, should be higher than control fathers ( $M = 52.56$ ,  $SD = 19.13$ ) in  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . The results of the analysis were statistically significant,  $t(152) = 1.86$ ,  $p = .03$  (1-tailed),  $r_{altering} = .69$ ,  $r_{effect} = .25$ , and 95 percent confidence interval around the effect size ranging from .10 to .39. However, the squared altering correlation indicated that the contrast accounted for only 48 percent of the between-group sum of squares ( $SS_{between}$ ), which is below .50. Overall, the analyses showed little support for Kelly and Johnston's definition of PAS.

Taken together, the results of the analyses provided support for hypothesis 1 (that alienating parents favor primitive defenses), and for hypothesis 2 (Gardner's definition of PAS) but weak support for hypothesis 3 (Kelly and Johnston's definition of PAS) (See summary in Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1** Bars show mean MMPI-2 T-scores ( $T_{50}$  is average and  $T_{65}$  is high) and lines show standard deviations of 158 parents court ordered to have child custody evaluations.  $L + K - F$  indicates denial of faults and splitting defenses, and the Goldberg Index (GI)  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$  indicates a borderline level of functioning and the favoring of primitive defenses such as projective identification. There were 31 Mother Alienators, 31 Father Targets, 7 Father Alienators, 7 Mother Targets, 41 Mother Controls and 41 Father Controls. Alienating parents use primitive defenses, while the target parents are more like the controls.

## DISCUSSION

We predicted in hypothesis 1, that if the reliance on primitive defenses (such as splitting and projective identification) is a significant contributing factor in PAS, then the alienating parents should have clinical range scores and the control parents should have normal range scores in both our measures. The MMPI-2 data supported that hypothesis.

We found that the alienating parents (mothers and fathers) had clinical range scores while the control parents (mothers and fathers who were in custody litigation, but without PAS), had normal range scores in both our measures of favoring primitive defenses,  $L + K - F$  and the Goldberg Index  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . Alienating parents who use primitive defenses injure children by damaging their ability to form judgments of others based on objectivity. When alienating parents teach children to subjectively classify others as all good or all bad, and justify treating others unfairly, the children's capacity for healthy intimacy becomes impaired.

The results also showed strong support for hypothesis 2, which is a test of Gardner's definition of PAS and the critical role of the target parent. Gardner stated that the degree of rejection of the target parent by the child is not justified by the target parents' behaviors.

Overall both the target parents and the control parents had lower mean scores as compared to the alienating parents in the use of primitive defenses. We found evidence of primitive defenses in the alienating parents, but for most of our groups, we did not find significant evidence of primitive defenses in the target parents. Hypothesis 2 was not supported with only one group and one measure, the mother target group with the Goldberg Index.

Our hypothesis 3 is a test of Kelly and Johnston's definition of PAS. Kelly and Johnston stated that the target parents are part of the family system and the target parents' behaviors may contribute to the PAS. Therefore, the target parents should be higher in the use of primitive defenses than the control parents in  $L + K - F$  and  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ , but less than the alienating parents.

While we did not find support for this in general, there is some evidence for the support of Kelly and Johnston's view only in the mother target group with one measure. The mother target group had high scores in the Goldberg Index ( $M = 65.14$ ) at the borderline level of personality functioning. Because the father alienator/mother target groups were small (seven in each group), we must be cautious in interpreting such limited cases. However, these results from this rare father alienator/mother target group do make sense.

Most mothers are primary caregivers. If these mothers were too disturbed (as indicated by the high Goldberg Index) to care for their children, then the father could have functioned as the primary caregiver. Once the fathers had psychological control over the children, they could use their primitive defenses to alienate the children from the mothers. The mother target group

had normal  $L + K - F$  scores, but a high mean score in  $(L + Pa + Sc) - (Hy + Pt)$ . This combination may suggest that these target mothers did not engage in splitting and demonizing the fathers, but their psychopathology might have contributed to the alienation from their children. It is in these cases, where the target parent contributed to the child's rejection, that Kelly and Johnston's classification of the "estranged child" might be more accurate than a designation of PAS.

As we discussed in the method section, we had to limit our data to the MMPI-2s of mother and father pairs. We also had a few cases of PAS involving grandparents, same sex parents and stepparents. These were too few to use in our analysis. We wish to note that the MMPI-2s of these cases were consistent with our hypotheses of greater use of primitive defenses in the alienating parent figure. It appears that the main factor is the use of primitive defenses and not gender issues or roles.

Our research shows that alienating parents favor primitive defenses that we believe are a main component of high conflict custody battles, the worst of which results in the childhood disorder of PAS. Primitive defenses include the splitting of reality into an all good parent and an all bad parent and projective identification. Projective identification occurs when one denies personal faults, and projects them on to another and then treats and provokes that person accordingly. For example, a child or alienating parent with irrational aggression infuriates a target parent so that the child and alienating parent can claim that the target parent has the anger problem.

Our sample of father alienators and mother targets is small and should be interpreted cautiously, but it is perhaps the first empirical study of this rare group. We would like to see a larger national sample that includes more cases of father alienators and mother targets, the use of other objective scales that measure primitive defenses and the use of interview data. The MMPI-2 proved to be a valuable research instrument in assessing primitive defenses. However, in the actual practice of custody evaluations, interviewing and fact-finding are the most reliable way to determine the use of primitive defenses, in conjunction with the MMPI-2 data (particularly the validity scales) (Gordon, 2007).

The next step in understanding PAS is to see to what extent various constructs in addition to primitive defenses contribute to the etiology and dynamics of PAS. Donner (2006) recently discussed pathological narcissism, pathological envy of the child, and a perverse attitude towards reality as dynamic factors contributing to ongoing high conflict custody disputes.

We consider Parental Alienation Syndrome as a childhood disorder caused by an alienating parent sharing primitive defenses with a vulnerable child against a target parent. The sharing of primitive defenses helps the child maintain a pathological symbiosis with the idealized alienating parent who is seen as all good while the target parent is seen as all bad. Projective identification is used to blame and provoke the target parent. We found little



support for the idea that the target parent is similar in dynamics to the alienating parent. When the target parent significantly contributes to the alienation of the child, according to our findings, then Kelly and Johnston's definition of the estranged child seems more appropriate than PAS. We hope that studies such as ours help in understanding the etiology and dynamics of PAS so that psychotherapists will know to focus on the use of primitive defenses in alienating parents and children with PAS.

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