

SPECIAL SECTION COMMENTARIES

Examining the validity of parental alienation syndrome

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ABSTRACT

“Parental alienation syndrome” (PAS) is a phrase first coined by Dr. Richard Gardner. Since its inception several scholars have reviewed and criticized this construct, and it has never been accepted by the scientific community as a legitimate scientific construct, as a syndrome or as a mental disorder. Despite its general rejection as unscientific, the construct of PAS at times continues to be used in legal settings as if it has an adequate foundation within science, clinical, or forensic practice. This commentary briefly reviews past critiques of PAS and describes several additional problems that have occurred with the use of this construct.

KEYWORDS

Child custody; divorce; family court; parental alienation; parental alienation disorder; scientific status

In an effort to examine the roots of the construct of “parental alienation syndrome” (PAS), it is important to acquire a brief understanding of some of the key issues generally found in divorce and its impact on children. Currently in the United States, the lifetime probability of a marriage resulting in divorce is between 40–50% (Cherlin, 2010). Additionally, approximately 35% of marriages that end in divorce involve dependent children (Ravitz, 2011). Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) estimated that approximately 25% of parents are in “high conflict” post-divorce, which can be a severe stressor for both parents and children, and can result in significant adjustment problems for children. Indeed significant parental conflict surrounding divorce consistently has been shown to be associated with an array of deleterious effects on child and adolescent functioning (Amato, 2000; Otto, Buffington-Vollum, & Edens, 2003), in addition to being a stronger predictor of future adjustment than post-divorce family structure (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999). However, it is also important to note that these relationships are complex: due to a variety of moderating influences some children do quite well after divorce.

However, research generally shows that children exposed to high levels of parental conflict or abuse have a higher risk of developing behavioral and emotional problems (Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). When severe parental conflict is present among divorced parents,

long-term negative effects (e.g., depression) on their children have been observed at higher rates well into adulthood (Schmidtgall, King, Zarski, & Cooper, 2000). In addition, divorce has been shown to have some effect on children's interpersonal relationships in later life—as young adults, children of divorced parents have greater likelihood of showing a decreased quality of, and lack of commitment in, current romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Partly due to these findings it is often recommended that children's exposure to post-divorce parental conflict be minimized (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999). Hetherington and Stanley-Hagen highlighted that this also includes parents not fostering hostility against one another and not positioning the child in the “middle” of parental conflict.

The construct of PAS, also known as parental alienation disorder (PAD), was first introduced in the 1980s and arose from Dr. Richard Gardner using his own experiences as a psychiatrist to attempt to explain outcomes from what he saw as high conflict divorce on children. Despite the fact that PAS has been used in the courts for over 2 decades, no entity or professional organization has ever endorsed PAS as a syndrome or a disorder; in fact, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association) has continually disregarded PAS. The empirical claims that Gardner made were never validated by actual research data or published in any peer reviewed research journals. Houchin, Ranseen, Hash, and Bartnicki (2012) stated, “there remains a paucity of scientific evidence that PAS (or PAD) should be a psychiatric diagnosis” (p. 128). Pepiton, Alvis, Allen, and Logid (2012) likewise argued that this syndrome lacks scientific support. Specifically, they critiqued the book *Parental Alienation, DSM-5, and ICD-11* written by one proponent of the syndrome, William Bernet (2010) as it “fails to provide documentation of any empirical research supporting such a condition or diagnosis and instead is a long diatribe of a person promoting his own agenda with only anecdotal or unscientific references” (p. 252).

In fact, absent any scientific data at all, Gardener advanced the claim that when there is an alienating parent, a child will, fairly inevitably, develop a series of problematic behaviors and/or reactions. He also claimed that the reverse inference was valid; specifically, that clinicians could conclude that there is an alienating parent when they observed children exhibiting certain behaviors. While in science, hypotheses are developed and then empirically tested, Gardner (nor anyone else) has never empirically tested these two key claims. In addition, Gardner (1992) claimed that PAS only occurs within the context of high-conflict divorce. However, there are no data to support the actual frequency of occurrence in divorces, its relative absence in non-high conflict divorce, nor the exact causal processes that are necessary or sufficient for its occurrence.

Moreover, according to Gardner (1992), the alienating parent will typically engage in diverse strategies to brainwash or program the child against the

target parent. He asserts that as a result of this brainwashing, the child will manifest some subset of eight symptoms, and he claims that the precise number of these will vary across children. His list of eight symptoms is:

1. The child's campaign against, and withdrawal from, the targeted parent;
2. Unconvincing rationalizations for the hatred of the targeted parent;
3. The child's lack of ambivalence toward the targeted parent;
4. The child's insistence that his/her decision about custody and visitation is his or her own and not influenced by the parent;
5. The child's automatic support or love for the alienating parent;
6. The absence of guilt regarding the negative feelings for the targeted parent;
7. The child's use of concepts regarding the targeted parent that are developmentally inappropriate; and
8. A broadening of the hatred to the targeted parent's extended family. (Pepiton et al., 2012)

In later publications, Gardner (2004) stated that the primary manifestations of PAS involve:

1. The campaign of denigration;
2. Weak, frivolous, or absurd rationalizations for the deprecation;
3. Lack of ambivalence;
4. The "independent-thinker" phenomenon;
5. Reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict;
6. Absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the alienated parent;
7. Presence of borrowed scenarios;
8. Spread of the animosity to the extended family and friends of the alienated parent. (p. 83).

These later descriptions are sufficiently different that these might be considered a reformulation of the original theory and give rise to new questions (e.g., what happened to the construct of brainwashing?) as well as how to measure these additional constructs such as "independent thinker" and "borrowed scenarios."

In addition, in 1999 Gardner claimed that PAS was a form of child emotional abuse and that its consequences may be even more detrimental to the child than those of physical or sexual abuse. Again, there are no scientific data to support these assertions. He suggested that the child's relationship with the targeted parent is forever changed, and even more so than the relationship with a child who has been physically or sexually abused by a parent. This claim of course significantly raises the stakes regarding the use of this construct as it now indicates that the parent is engaging in criminal felonious behavior and also invokes, if accurate, mandated reporting laws for clinicians.

It is clear that, in some cases, a child's relationship with his or her parents may be negatively impacted by parental behaviors during parental divorce. This is, however, quite different from Gardner's assertions regarding PAS

(see Kennedy, 2009 for this distinction). As a result, several key questions remain unanswered and sometimes are unchallenged in family court:

1. In what percentage of divorce cases are the behaviors described by PAS actually exhibited;
2. By what processes is this done;
3. What is the relative rate of mothers exhibiting these behaviors versus fathers;
4. What effects do these actually have on the children;
5. Are there moderating influences regarding these effects;
6. How can one validly measure all this and show causality; and
7. If these effects are found what can be done to intervene, both in custody and/or visitation arrangements or clinically to reverse these effects?

To date, none of these questions have been answered in over 25 years since PAS was first promulgated.

Published critiques of PAS

Emery (2005) has described PAS as a hypothesis and noted that PAS fails to meet even minimal scientific standards. Bond (2007) posited that although one study (Burrill, 2001) found descriptive differences in symptom severity between children labeled with mild versus severe PAS, that there has not been virtually any scientific study of the phenomenon to conclude that it is a diagnosable syndrome or disorder.

In addition, Kelly and Johnston (2001) criticized PAS for focusing solely on the alienating parent as the etiological agent of the child's "symptoms." These authors pointed out that research shows that within high conflict divorce, both parents can behave in ways to harm the child's relationship with the other parent, sometimes inadvertently, yet the majority of children do not display the putative "symptoms" suggested by PAS. Additionally, Walker, Brantley, and Rigsbee (2004) argued that many children display separation anxiety when their parents are divorcing, and that the "symptoms" the child may display could in fact reflect the child's attempts to handle the inevitable stress of their current situation, independent of either parent being a bad actor. In addition these symptoms could also be a product of sexual abuse, child physical abuse or neglect, which may have been the reasons for the divorce in the first place. Furthermore, it has been argued that the PAS literature adopted use of the term "alienation" in ways that its original developers in the attachment field had not intended (Walker et al., 2004). Specifically, the original attachment literature focused on assessing a child's ability to develop a bond (or "attachment") to adults; in this case, the child may indeed develop a strong "attachment" to the alienating parent, while the bond with the other parent is harmed or destroyed. Thus, these authors suggest we should focus on attachment problems instead.

Finally, PAS has also been criticized due to its gender bias in that fathers generally have used it in court to contest custody decisions by stating that mothers had alienated the child against them (Ottman & Lee, 2008). Interestingly, when Gardner (2002a) first introduced the construct, he purported that mothers were more likely to alienate children than fathers, and that 90% of alienating parents were the mother, although, again, there are no data to support this claim. Gardner (2002a) starting in the late 1990s reversed his position and stated that the ratio of alienating parents being closer to 50/50, again without citation to any empirical data.

Some have explained the continued use of PAS in legal settings is due to the fact that family courts do not always adhere to the normal rules of legal admissibility (Kleinman & Kaplan, 2016) for putative scientific claims. Interestingly, Caplan (2004) pointed out that the use of PAS in court often unfortunately results in moving the focus from the child's needs to the rights of the "alienated" parent, and allegations of abuse become secondary, minimized, or dismissed. This appears from anecdotal information to be continuing in family courts throughout the country even when the term PAS itself is not used.

Because PAS or its framework and ideas are still used in forensic settings, particularly in custody cases and decisions, it is important to understand all its problems. It is also important to note that in more recent cases, the specific term PAS or PAD may not be used by evaluators or attorneys, but the same ideas, process, and recommendations promoted by Gardner and his followers are still being followed without support of any scientific evidence or theoretical framework in child development, family psychology, or trauma psychology.

In addition to the critiques previously summarized of some of the problems in the use of PAS ideas, we have identified 22 issues that we believe are of most concern, some of which are entirely novel and some are extensions or refinements of some of these previous concerns. These are described in the following sections.

PAS is vague in important details

The terminology used to describe the key characteristics is poorly characterized and ambiguous. Specifically definitional parameters for what constitutes a "high-conflict divorce" are not provided and it is unclear what is meant by informal lay terms such as "brainwash." Other verbiage used to describe PAS and the associated symptoms is also vague (i.e., it is unclear what is meant by "strategies" used in the context of "brainwashing"), "unconvincing rationalizations," "broadening of hatred," and so forth. Such vagueness has direct implications for whether claims that use these key terms can be validly measured and if these cannot, then these claims cannot be tested. If these claims cannot be empirically tested then they are not falsifiable.

PAS entails measurement operations that have not been developed

In order to determine if this alleged construct is present and in order to determine the magnitude of PAS if present, a complex set of measurements need to be taken. However, presently none of the constructs have valid measurement procedures and thus at present it must be concluded that the key constructs simply cannot be accurately measured. While Baker and Darnall (2007) did attempt to study the constructs that are said to make-up PAS, they failed to present most of the basic psychometric information needed to assure validity: The reliability of the measures was not given, content validity construct validity and discriminate validity data were missing as was predictive validity. While two studies examined inter-rater reliability with regard to diagnosing PAS (Morrison, 2006; Rueda, 2004) and reported that it had achieved significant inter-rater reliability, others have debated the quality of these studies due to factors such as small sample sizes and other methodological concerns (Houchin et al., 2012). Moreover, inter-rater reliability sets limits on validity but is not itself a validity metric.

PAS has not subsequently undergone scientific testing since it was proposed

Consistent with our review of the published peer-reviewed literature, no study has tested the entire PAS theory to see if any actual scientific data are consistent with its assertions. Moreover, research that has examined predictors of alienation has found that while aligned parents can contribute to the alienating a child's affection from the other parent, children's negative behavior and attitudes toward a parent usually has multiple determinants (Johnston, 2003) and these pathways have not been examined in any PAS study.

It is not clear what the boundary conditions of PAS are

Put simply it is not clear under what parameters (i.e., age, family circumstance, etc.) alienation is supposed to occur. Previous authors (e.g., Kelly & Johnston, 2001) have critiqued PAS due to the fact that many parents behave in somewhat "alienating" ways yet their children do not show symptoms. This critique can be expanded by more specifically examining the relevant boundary conditions. For example, are there any boundary conditions involving age (e.g., a child of two is too young to be manipulated by a parent in this way or a child who is 15 is old perhaps because they are too cognitively sophisticated)? Is alienation always intentional or can it be inadvertent? Are there mediating processes by which a child can minimize or thwart the alienating behaviors of the parent? Can the nonalienating parent in any way minimize or thwart this alienating process? Do parents from all cultures alienate in the same ways?

Does PAS apply in instances where the parent attempts to alienate the child against the other parent but is unsuccessful? Can the “alienation” sometimes be justified (e.g., when the parent has abused the child and is unrepentant)?

PAS has not achieved a consensus in the field

While certainly other researchers have noted that PAS has not been subject to the rigorous peer-review process, the problem is broader than this as even within the nonempirical literature, a consensus within the field has not been achieved. O’Donohue and Benuto (2012) previously discussed how scientific findings tend to produce more consensus (e.g., no one debates the law of gravity) but since the PAS is not a product of science, and has not undergone scientific testing, it remains controversial in the sense that it continues to be used in courts as though it is science and that it exists.

Its rates are unknown

Typically prevalence rates of psychological phenomenon are known and established. However, the prevalence rates for the purported “brain washing” behavior that one parent may exhibit in an attempt alienate the other parent, are unknown. Moreover, the prevalence rates of the actual development of PAS (and associated characteristics) in the child are unknown. While Johnston (2003) did attempt to establish the rates of parental rejection among children of divorce, he did not examine all elements of PAS (although interestingly he found that the prevalence of extreme alignment with or rejection of one parent was rare).

It does not have a known error rate

As discussed by O’Donohue and Benuto (2012), part of model testing in science is to determine “goodness of fit” between theories or models and actual data but because no data have been collected to test PAS, to date we do not know the how well this model/theory fits with actual data. Thus, there is not quantifiable data to even estimate an error rate.

PAS at times suggests the obvious and should get no confirmatory or corroborating credit for this

For example, PAS asserts that at times some parents involved in a divorce can say or act in negative ways toward the other parent. This is well known and rather obvious. That these negative behaviors may affect the child is also obvious. Thus, some elements of the PAS are “obvious” and thus a hypothesis should not get credit or “confirmation” for the obvious or what is already known.

If some sort of alienation has in fact occurred, it does not consider alternative, plausible explanations for the supposed behaviors on the part of the child that result from the alienation

In fact, as discussed in the following section, many of the “symptoms” of PAS are consistent with symptoms that might be experienced simply as a result of normal divorce (e.g., disturbed relationships with a parent, anxiety) or from abuse and may not be the result of alleged alienation.

Differential diagnosis/categorization are lacking but necessary

As illustrated earlier, PAS has not been added to the *DSM*.

It is used in an ad hoc manner

It does not clarify how to measure parents' behavior and then to measure children's behavior and then make valid causal inferences between these. Rather, it asserts that if someone sees some number and kinds of parent behavior and some number and kinds of child behavior that the parent behavior caused the child behavior.

It has not been published in peer review journals but cogent critiques have

While there is some research on alienating parental behavior, the use of alienating parental behavior as a syndrome has been heavily critiqued. As illustrated at the outset of this manuscript several critiques of PAS have been published in the peer-reviewed literature.

It has not been accepted by any official organization

It is not in the American Psychiatric Association's *DSM* (not in the *DSM-IV* nor in the more recently published *DSM-V*); not in the International Classification of Diseases, nor is it adopted by any organization (e.g., the American Psychological Association).

It fails to include information regarding what is normative in divorce as well as ways to demarcate that which is not

Parents often engage in negative behavior toward the other parent in divorce and children experience this; it provides no evidence about how normative negativity is in divorce and how “alienation” actually deviates in number and kind from this normative behavior.

It does not consider that sometimes a positive event or interaction might mitigate negatives

For example, it may not be uncommon for a divorcing parent to note a negative characteristic in the other parent. PAS does not consider the relationship between negative comments that may be viewed as “alienating” versus those that are accompanied by positive comments. For example, if a mother states, “You father is dishonest” but then acknowledges that the child’s father is “a hard worker,” does the latter statement in anyway mitigate the former, and thus not constitute “brainwashing” or alienation? Is a mother declaring a father to be dishonest alienating in and of itself? What if it is a true statement?

It fails to consider that a child may be the cause of the alienation

Children, particularly older children may have their own legitimate or illegitimate reasons to reject a parent, due to that parent being more strict or having different values or even that the parent has indeed acted improperly in some way.

It fails to differentiate the negative states the child may be experiencing from other causes versus the parent’s behavior

Children can become depressed, anxious, or have negative relationships with others from a variety of other causes and the PAS has to distinguish these causal pathways from the alienation pathway.

It is developmentally insensitive

It assumes that the same sort of behaviors affect children of all ages, and children of all ages will display the same sorts of symptoms. Rarely is behavior so developmentally robust.

It is culturally insensitive

While some critics of PAS have noted that there is a possible gender bias in PAS, cultural sensitivity in the context of PAS has not been discussed. It assumes that the PAS applies to parents and children of all cultures. It provides no information on how parents and children of diverse cultures may engage in this behavior in a cultural context.

It fails to consider whether multiple people can be involved

It focuses on parents and children. It does not consider whether others may be involved in a problematic relationship, such as grandparents, parental friends, new boyfriend, or girlfriend.

It has the potential to cause harm

When PAS is alleged it has the potential to harm the targeted parent and perhaps even the children. This involves a very serious accusation, perhaps even one that triggers mandated reporting due to alleged emotional abuse. Being involved in such an accusation is harmful to the targeted parents and thus the children.

There is no evidence that it is actually a syndrome

Syndromes have features that regularly co-occur and that can be used to deduce the presence of other phenomena. For example in Down Syndrome, certain physical abnormalities tend to co-occur and can be used to deduce the presence of a genetic abnormality. There is no evidence that the features that are allegedly involved in PAS constitute a valid syndrome.

Summary and conclusions

This article listed previously stated problems of PAS and described 22 additional problems, some which may be extensions or refinements of previously stated problems while some are novel. These problems are fundamental in that they involve core issues. In science, it is the burden of the individuals making the claim to show that their claims are clear and supported by data. This burden has not been met with PAS. In clinical practice, it is the burden of the practitioner to show that their professional behavior is not harmful, is accurate and is the most effective pathway to the desired goal. Again, this burden is not met with the PAS.

We agree with previous reviewers that the PAS does not meet Daubert (Daubert v. Merrell-Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc. 509 U.S. 579 [1993]) or Frye (Frye v. United States 293 F. 1013 [D.C. Cir. 1923]) standards and thus ought not to be admitted in courts; however, we supply more evidence and reasons for this conclusion. Thus, the concept of alienating parental behavior should not be used in the courts as it is currently conceptualized. However, the second construal of “parent alienation” is still viable; our critique should not be construed as stating one parent never engages in behaviors that can harm the relationship with the other parent.

We recommend that it is not a prudent course of action to attempt to salvage the PAS due to the seriousness and number of its problems. Rather, it appears that it would be more prudent to start anew and to attempt to identify specific behavior or sets of behaviors on the part of parents that have either negative or positive effects on the child's relationship with the other. Some of this kind of research has already been done under the rubric of co-parenting. Cooperation between parents in the child's (children's)

cognitive, social and emotional development was found to be associated with better adjustment in children post-divorce (Whiteside & Becker, 2000). Also, when conflict is decreased, children from divorced families appear to function as well as those from intact families (Gasper, Stolberg, Macie, & Williams, 2008). Pruett, Williams, Insabella, and Little (2003) examined relations among family dynamics, attorney involvement, and the adjustment of young children (0–6 years) at the time of parental separation from 102 nonresidential fathers and 110 primary caretaking mothers extracted from a larger longitudinal study. Results indicated that the effects of parental conflict on child outcomes were mediated by paternal involvement, the parent-child relationship, and attorney involvement.

This approach represents a more “bottom up” empirical approach toward understanding which behaviors of parents result in what kinds of effects on children and their relationship to the other parent. The PAS represents more of an *a priori* approach that unfortunately has not resulted in progress in this domain and has not resolved any of its problems in its nearly 30-year lifespan. What is clear is that some fundamental questions need to be addressed: (a) What are optimal co-parenting behaviors that promote a child’s best interests? Are these fairly universal or are these mediated by certain variables (e.g., age of the child, culture)? How can these be measured? How can these be taught to parents or a parent who are not displaying these? What impact on custody arrangements ought to occur if these are not present in one or more parties? (b) What behaviors on the part of parents while seemingly negative or “alienating” (e.g., “I am divorcing your father because of his affair”) actually don’t “alienate” or have a significant negative effect on the child? Why is this the case? And finally, (c) What parent behaviors (perhaps independent of their topography) actually do hurt the relationship with the other parent? How can these be validly measured in an individual case? Can these be modified and if so how? What is fairly normative regarding these, and is there some frequency of behaviors that is sufficiently high that it somehow mitigates the impact these have on custody arrangements? These are key unanswered questions that represent an important forward movement beyond the many problems of PAS. Scientific answers to these key questions can actually provide the courts with more useful information regarding custody arrangements and the best interests of children.

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