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To cite this article: Madelyn Simring Milchman (2019) How far has parental alienation research progressed toward achieving scientific validity?, Journal of Child Custody, 16:2, 115-139, DOI: 10.1080/15379418.2019.1614511

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15379418.2019.1614511

Published online: 02 Jul 2019.

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How far has parental alienation research progressed toward achieving scientific validity?

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes the evidence for parental alienation (PA) through the lens of construct validity. It defines PA as a theoretical construct. It explains why construct validity is needed to identify PA and reliably differentiate it from other causes of parent rejection. It discusses validity problems in using case examples to support PA and then focuses on empirical research. It makes recommendations for future research. Finally, it proposes a way to present evidence about PA in child custody cases that is responsive to the current state of the evidence regarding construct validity. It concludes that PA is a descriptive concept but is not yet a psychological construct because it has not yet achieved construct validity. The article suggests that the political context for PA has obstructed science. While some PA researchers are overcoming that obstacle theoretically, empirical research and forensic practice in child custody cases have yet to catch up.

While only a small fraction of families litigates custody of their children, most being able to make custody decisions consensually (Levy, 2010), those that do become a vocal presence in public discourse, particularly when parental alienation (PA) and child sexual abuse (CSA) allegations are involved (Neustein & Lesher, 2005). Public discourse has a powerful political, legislative, and legal impact that can often override scientific information (American Psychological Association, 2018; Hornsey & Fielding, 2017; Milchman, 2018a; Saunders, Faller, & Tolman, 2012).

The concept of PA originated with Richard Gardner (1986, 1987, 1992a) who proposed the Parental Alienation Syndrome (“PAS”) more than 30 years ago, in the heated context of feminist demands for recognition of child sexual abuse (CSA) and incest (along with other sexual coercions). It gave the imprimatur of medical authority to time-worn Western myths about the dangerousness of the female sex (Milchman, 2018a). As a result, it became a useful tool for “fathers’ rights” advocates in child custody cases, particularly when sexual abuse allegations against them were raised.
(Gardner, 1987, 1992b). The PAS provoked strong opposition from feminist advocates on behalf of mothers who brought children’s CSA allegations to the attention of family courts (Meier, 2009). While few today would explicitly endorse its misogynistic beliefs, they can still operate implicitly, biasing forensic practice and decision making in favor of fathers in child custody cases (Meier & Dickson, 2017; Milchman, 2018b; Neilson, 2018; Neustein & Lesher, 2005; Saunders et al., 2012).

Even while scientific studies carefully analyze the serious flaws in the empirical evidence claimed to prove parental alienation (PA; Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2012, 2016), PA advocates assert its scientific merits (Baker, 2013; Baker, Burkhard, & Albertson-Kelly, 2012; Bernet, 2013). Experts who ignore, dismiss, or minimize the power of PA advocates’ assertions on the grounds that they lack scientific credibility do so at the risk of the children in the cases in which they testify (Meier & Dickson, 2017; Milchman, 2018b; Neilson, 2018). It is a mistake to think that the credibility of PA claims in the eyes of attorneys, judges, jurors and even experts depends primarily on scientific evidence. Rather, credibility appears to depend on the power of PA as a cultural argument (Rothenberg, 2002; Milchman, 2018a), that is, on the willingness to believe that innocent parents, usually fathers, can be “set up” by vindictive and malevolent spouses, usually mothers, who allegedly brainwash their children to make false abuse allegations (Milchman, 2018b; Saunders, et al., 2012). Credibility sometimes appears to rest more on credulity than on evidence.

Scientific researchers have countered implicit misogynistic bias in theorizing about PA by developing theories that recognize the complexity of parent rejection (Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Drozd, Olesen, & Saini, 2013; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Kelly & Johnston, 2005). While there are exceptions (Turkat, 1997; n.d.; von Boch-Galhau, 2018), most of the theoretical work on PA has removed its offensive historical misogynistic assumptions (Gardner, 1986, 1987, 1992a, 1992b). PA theories now recognize that both fathers and mothers can alienate their children (Fidler & Bala, 2010; Johnston, 2003; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005; Warshak, 2015), and that fathers can alienate their children even if they do not live with them (Warshak, 2015). It recognizes that alienation can occur in intact families as well as divorced ones (Deutsch & Pruett, 2009; Mone & Biringen, 2006) and that therapeutic interventions must be designed to address the specific causes of parent rejection in individual families (Pruett, Deutsch, & Drozd, 2016). There are signs that some PA research, even that conducted by strong PA advocates such as Amy Baker and William Bernet, has made preliminary attempts to incorporate psychological tests or clinical assessment methods that come from independent researchers in the fields of child trauma, child abuse, and parent–child relationships (Baker, 2010;
Baker & Schneiderman, 2015; Bernet & Corwin, 2006; Rowlands, 2018). While “father’s rights” groups continue to advocate in support of PA (Bernet, 2013), today many PA scholars who do not self-identify as either fathers’ rights advocates or feminists take the concerns of each seriously, and assert that abuse and poor parenting provide legitimate reasons for parent rejection that should not be confused with PA (Drozd et al., 2013).

However, these theoretical complexities have often not been met with equally complex and nuanced arguments in practice. PA remains a politically and legally powerful concept that is often used by accused parents to defend against abuse allegations in family courts and can be persuasive against the weight of evidence (Meier & Dickson, 2017; Milchman, 2018b; Neilson, 2018; Neustein & Lesher, 2005; Saunders et al., 2012). Simplistic applications of the PA concept generate a “PA narrative” that could become even more powerful if advocates continue to be successful in their aggressive attempts to institutionalize it—legally, politically, and psychiatrically—cross the world (Bernet, 2013; Brockhausen, 2013; Dum, 2013; Lorandos, 2013).

Resistance to the PA narrative does not require accurate scientific knowledge. In J.F. v. D.F. (2018), Judge Dollinger rejected claims of PA based on his deep and compassionate understanding of divorce pain and its impact on the mother’s behavior. He wisely refused to equate PA with deficits in an idealized version of mother-child communications that occur during the divorce process. Nevertheless, while scientific knowledge may not be necessary or sufficient to resist ill-founded PA claims in family court, its dissemination could help support that resistance (Hornikx, 2005). It could empower experts, attorneys, and judges to resist a too-ready acceptance of PA as an explanation of parent rejection when abuse allegations are raised but the available evidence is insufficient to prove it according to the operative legal standard. That empowerment is the purpose of this article.

PA advocates rely on two types of evidence that they claim supports PA: anecdotal evidence and empirical evidence (see Bernet, 2010, Appendix D, E, for evidence that advocates claim supports PA; also see Baker, 2013 and Bernet & Baker, 2013 for claims about the validity of this evidence). While anecdotal evidence for PA may be simply dismissed by empiricists, experts who understand the value as well as the limits of anecdotal evidence (Moore & Stilgoe, 2009) position themselves in a more objective manner. They are empowered by avoiding the appearance of being “anti-PA” and unduly aligned with the party opposing PA allegations. Experts are also empowered by being able to explain to attorneys and judges why the methodological weaknesses in PA empirical studies (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2012, 2016) matter for deciding the child custody issue at hand.
This article uses the lens of construct validity to analyze the issues involved in advocates’ claims that anecdotal and empirical evidence support PA. Construct validity is the foundation for scientific validity. Without it, no claim that evidence of any type “proves” PA can stand. This article addresses the construct validity of PA.

The article is organized as follows. First, it gives the definition of PA as a theoretical construct. Second, it explains why construct validity is necessary to support a claim that PA can be identified specifically and differentiated from other causes of parent rejection. Third, it discusses the evidence cited to support PA and analyzes its adequacy for establishing construct validity. Fourth, it makes recommendations for future research. Finally, it proposes a way to present evidence about PA in child custody cases that is responsive to the state of the evidence for construct validity. The article concludes that PA is a descriptive concept that has not yet achieved the status of a psychological construct because it has not yet achieved construct validity. Nevertheless, it concludes that such descriptive concepts have a legitimate role to play in child custody cases as long as their limitations are acknowledged. The article shows that the political context for PA has favored the misuse of science. While scientists are beginning to overcome that obstacle in developing theories of PA, empirical research and forensic practice in child custody cases lag behind.

What is scientific validity?

Construct validity

Construct validity is the basis of scientific validity. A psychological “construct” is a theoretical concept that has been defined in observable terms so that it can be measured or assessed objectively (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2006). When a test is shown to measure the concept it is theoretically designed to measure, it contributes construct validity to the theoretical concept.

Construct validity has two subcomponents: convergent validity and discriminant validity. Convergent validity is established when a construct is associated (converges) with other constructs in ways that make sense and would be expected. Discriminant validity is established when the construct is not associated with (can be discriminated from) other constructs with which it might be confused because the two appear similar though they are actually different. Convergent and discriminant validity are both necessary for scientists to conclude than an observed phenomenon is a “this” and not a “that.” The central issue is whether the behaviors that define the construct allow it to be identified reliably and not confused with other phenomena.
In order for PA to achieve construct validity, research must show that measures of PA are associated with measures of other constructs in expectable ways (convergent validity). Further, research must also show that measures of PA are not associated with measures of parent rejection that have other causes (discriminant validity). For example, PA hypothesizes that a child’s rejection of a parent is “programmed” by the other parent and has no rational basis. Convergent validity would be indicated if PA was associated with suggestibility in areas unrelated to child–parent relationships, because both PA and suggestibility are related to adopting beliefs that are not based on personal experience. Discriminant validity would be indicated if parent rejection caused by PA was not associated with parent rejection that has another cause such as a bad relationship history. In other words, to identify PA reliably, the behaviors that define it must be specific to PA and cannot overlap with behaviors that have other causes. Demonstrating behavioral specificity is central to establishing construct validity.

**Definition of PA as a theoretical construct**

**Alienated children’s behaviors**

The eight behaviors that define PA in children have not changed since they were originally conceptualized in the PAS (Gardner, 1986, 1987, 1992a; Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013, p. 17). They are:

1. Campaign of denigration against the target parent
2. Frivolous rationalizations of the child’s criticisms of the target parent
3. Lack of ambivalence
4. Independent thinker phenomenon: denial of the favored parent’s influence
5. Reflexive support of the alienating parent against the target parent
6. Absence of guilt over exploitation and mistreatment of the target parent
7. Borrowed scenarios: rehearsed statements about events not involving the child that come from the favored parent’s statements
8. Spread of animosity toward the target parent’s extended family

PA advocates assert these behavioral criteria of PA as if their assessment were straightforward. They are not. The behaviors are actually difficult to discriminate from behaviors related to child abuse.

Is “campaigning” a cry for help from an abused child? Doesn’t it depend on whom the child tells, when, and for what perceived purpose? Are the “frivolous rationalizations” actually defensive excuses made by a child who is afraid to disclose the truth? Is the “lack of ambivalence” proportionate to
the anger and hatred an abused child would feel towards an abuser? Is it proportionate to the severity and chronicity of abuse? Is the claim that abused children typically love their abusive parent and long for that parent’s love (Baker & Schneiderman, 2015) a myth? Wouldn’t the child’s love depend on the quality of the relationship with the abusive parent when the parent was not being abusive? Are there circumstances in which some abused children are just happy to escape? Is the child’s claim to be an “independent thinker” true? How would you know that the consistency between the child’s statements and the favored parent’s statements hasn’t been caused by the parent’s repetition of the child’s prior statements rather than vice versa? Is the absence of guilt about exploiting or mistreating a parent coming from satisfaction at getting revenge for abuse? Are “borrowed scenarios” references to witnessing domestic violence, living with coercive control, and/or accidentally learning about the favored parent’s grievances? Does the child “spread animosity” toward the accused parent’s extended family because they have taken that parent’s side against the child? Assessing these supposed indicia of PA requires understanding the meaning of the supposed PA behaviors in a specific child and relating that meaning to the totality of the case-specific evidence. It is not simply a matter of observing overt behavior.

**Alienating parent’s behaviors**

The parenting behaviors that are proposed to produce PA in children have also not changed since they were originally proposed (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Gardner, 1986, 1997, 1992a; Turkat, n.d.). They are:

1. Brainwashing/programming
2. Pervasive denigration and vilification of the target parent
3. Seeking revenge
4. Interference with visitation and communication
5. Lying to the children and others
6. Violating the law
7. Absence of other contributing psychopathology

PA advocates also assume that these supposedly alienating parental behaviors can be assessed in a straightforward manner. However, like children’s purported PA behaviors, they cannot. They are actually difficult to discriminate from protective parental behaviors.

Is accepting a child’s abuse complaints by expressing empathy and promising to help “brainwashing”? Is a parent supposed to express disbelief to the child when the child confides in the parent? Should a parent risk
invalidating and abandoning an abused child? Is condemning abusive behavior “denigration and vilification”? Is persistently appealing for help in blocking an alleged abuser’s access to the child “denigration, vilification, or vengeful”? Shouldn’t the audience for these appeals matter? Shouldn’t a protective parent reach out to child protection agencies, police, family courts and other agencies or individuals responsible for protecting children? And do so as often and as forcefully as possible? Wouldn’t behaving otherwise constitute neglect? How about reaching out to the protective parent’s confidants? How could a frightened parent seek emotional support without revealing the allegations? Shouldn’t a parent who believes that the child needs protection interfere with visitation and communication? What is the basis for asserting that the parent bringing the abuse allegations to attention is “lying”? The accused’s word? What law is “violated” when a parent seeks to protect a child? In what state does a parent’s constitutional right to raise a child preempt the child’s equally legal right to be protected from abuse? How could “other contributing psychopathology” be ruled out when the parent’s protective behaviors are assumed to be the evidence for psychopathology? Again, the assessment of alienation requires understanding the meanings of the behaviors in context. Simply observing overt behaviors is not enough.

**Can case examples containing these behaviors provide construct validity for PA?**

The anecdotal evidence that PA advocates believe is sufficient to support an international consensus that PA exists and can be reliably identified consists largely of clinical examples and expert opinions (Bernet, 2010, Appendix D, E; Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2012; 2016). The examples are stories provided by parents who believe they were PA targets, their adult children, aligned experts, and judges. This anecdotal evidence is cited in peer-reviewed journals and commercial books. Nevertheless, despite the voluminous examples, and despite claims to the contrary in these and other sources (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Dum, 2013; Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013), this kind of evidence intrinsically cannot identify PA as a distinct phenomenon that can be differentiated from other similar appearing phenomena.

The anecdotal evidence for PA research is “voices of victims” evidence. Research that obtains these stories is designed to find them. It searches for corroborating evidence and only corroborating evidence. However, searches for corroborating evidence unbalanced by affirmative searches for disconfirming evidence demonstrate confirmatory bias (Drozd et al., 2013; Gould & Martindale, 2007; Zapf & Dror, 2017). In contrast, scientific evidence is
produced by affirmatively searching for evidence that deliberately tests rival alternative hypotheses, that is, competing explanations of the same phenomena. It searches for evidence that supports and refutes its favored hypothesis.

The major competing rival hypotheses in PA cases are alienation vs. abuse or poor parenting. To support a claim that the examples drawn from voices of victims are examples of PA and no other cause of parent rejection, that is, to identify it specifically and differentiate it from other similar appearing phenomena, researchers must show that the parent rejection in these examples cannot be explained by abuse or poor parenting.

Case examples from real life cannot do this. Examples are messy. They are an amalgam in which different causes are indistinguishable and often not discoverable without external evidence. They are presented from the point of view of the believer. Without deliberately seeking to disprove victims’ stories, which advocates collecting them to prove PA do not do, how could anyone discover whether, for example, a parent’s claim that a child’s rejection is irrational is an accurate claim or a defensive or simplistic one?

I treated a mother who blamed her children’s rejection on their father’s influence, even as child protective services ordered supervision because she mocked, humiliated, and raged at the children during the divorce proceedings.

Similarly, without deliberately seeking disproof, how could anyone discover whether an adults’ retrospective claim that there was no reason for him to reject his parent is an accurate claim or is the product of wishful thinking, defensiveness, dissociative amnesia, or rationalization? I had a young child patient who returned from parenting time with his father with bruises all over his chest. He alleged being beaten. His detailed description along with other evidence led child protective services to substantiate the allegation. As a teenager, he did not remember the bruises and claimed he’d made up the allegation when his mother pressured him. He expressed a wish for contact with his father, which his mother facilitated. However, the medical evidence and child protective services’ finding suggests that his retrospective PA claim was based on his denial that his mother needed to protect him so he could reestablish contact with his father.

Again, without deliberately seeking disproof, how could anyone discover whether a PA claim in the midst of divorce proceedings is a new parent-child relationship problem or whether it is a continuation of a long-standing pre-divorce problem that the target parent previously denied or disavowed or just did not recognize? How could anyone tell whether the divorce intensified or diminished a preexisting problem? The mocking mother in the above example alleged that her pre-divorce relationship with the children was fine, but the father and children asserted that there was less conflict because her work-related travel diminished their time together.
In order to analyze such case examples and decide whether they represent PA, abuse, or poor parenting, the behaviors specific to each cause and their relationships to the other causes must be known. Alienated children could also be abused children, or they could be children who were vulnerable to alienation because their prior relationships with the target parent were so poor. This is why evidence that consists of common features in case examples is not enough. The meaning of the common features is wide open to subjective interpretation. It cannot rule out competing interpretations. A set of examples, no matter how consistent and extensive it is—and the examples cited as PA are both consistent and extensive—does not identify the examples as “this” and not “that.”

However, if the examples do not support differential identification, that is, if they do not provide construct validity, then what credibility do they deserve? Do they provide any kind of validity? The voices of victims in PA research have “face validity.” Face validity means “it looks like what I think it is” (i.e., it is valid on the face of it). While this is not scientific validity, at a certain point, when there are so many examples that appear face valid, dismissing them outright risks overlooking a real phenomenon. Extensive examples suggest the need for scientific scrutiny. This article now turns away from the case examples to the empirical studies offered in support of PA.

**Does the empirical evidence support PA?**

*Failure to establish specificity for relationships between children’s PA behaviors and other psychological constructs*

PA advocates who conduct research recognize the limitations in field studies, do not dispute the need for scientific validation, and claim to conduct scientific validity research (e.g., Baker, 2010, 2013, 2014; Baker, Burkhard, & Albertson-Kelly, 2012; Baker & Verrocchio, 2014). Nevertheless, overall, the research designs in PA studies to date have been shown to have serious, even fatal, methodological flaws (Saini, et al., 2012, 2016). These include inadequate assessment instruments, biased selection of subjects, lack of adequate comparison groups, inadequate statistical analyses, and circular reasoning. All these flaws are obstacles to achieving construct validity.

A pervasive problem in PA research on children appears to be a failure to appreciate the importance of behavioral specificity for construct validity. Many studies show that alienated children are more psychologically symptomatic than nonalienated ones (Baker & Ben Ami, 2011; Baker & Brassard, 2013; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012; Bernet, Baker, & Verrocchio, 2015). They show that children classified as alienated compared to those not so classified are more depressed and anxious; act-out more; have low
self-esteem; decreased self-sufficiency; increased attachment problems; and are more prone to substance abuse. However, these are symptoms of general psychological distress. All of them could be explained without PA, particularly during the course of a high conflict divorce with its attendant stresses on children. These studies do not establish construct validity because they do not test hypotheses about specific symptoms related to PA but not to other psychological disorders. An argument could be made that they detract from the face validity provided by case examples because their methodological weaknesses invite scientific skepticism and dismissal.

Failure to establish specificity for relationships between parents’ PA behaviors and other psychological constructs

Failure to appreciate the importance of behavioral specificity affects research on the relationship between parents’ PA behaviors and psychological maltreatment (PM) as defined by the American Professional Association on the Abuse of Children/APSAC (1995; Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001; Hart, Brassard, Binggeli, & Davidson, 2002). Baker and Verrocchio (2014) argue that PA is a type of PM. They title one study, “Parental alienation as a form of psychological maltreatment” (emphasis added). Others assert the equivalence between the two constructs without indicating that the equivalence is a theoretical hypothesis in need of empirical testing (von Boch-Galhau, 2018). However, PM is associated with specific caregiver acts. The general categories of PM are spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting, denying emotional responsiveness, and neglecting (APSAC, 1995; Binggeli et al., 2001; Hart et al., 2002). In order to establish that PA is a type of PM, researchers must demonstrate that parents’ alienating behaviors are associated with these specific maltreating behaviors. The studies making this claim (Baker, 2010, 2014; Baker & Verrocchio, 2014) do not accomplish this. They do not measure PA and PM independently and then measure their associations with each other.

The basis for Baker and Verrocchio’s (2014) assertion that PA is a type of PM is that caregiving acts associated with PA and PM would both be likely to make children feel worthless and unloved. However, many kinds of bad parenting and child abuse would be likely to make children feel unworthy and unloved. These are symptoms of a damaged sense of self, which is a general symptom of trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is not surprising that self-concept damage would be associated with PM because PM is believed to be the emotional milieu accompanying all forms of child maltreatment (Binggeli et al., 2001; Hart et al., 2002). The APSAC Guidelines (APSAC, 1995) specifically advise forensic evaluators not to assume that
psychological harms are caused by PM rather than co-occurring child maltreatment.

Evidence that PA and PM both make children feel worthless and unloved does not provide convergent or discriminant validity for PA because these feelings are not specific to PA or its relationship to PM. While the attempt to relate PA research to child abuse research could reduce the isolation between these two fields, PA research cannot simply borrow psychological constructs from the child abuse field because they sound similar without designing studies that empirically measure the relationships between the constructs. Again, an argument could be made that the methodological weaknesses in this research invites scientific skepticism and dismissal, detracting from the face validity provided by the case examples.

**Psychological tests**

**Standards for psychological tests.** The American Educational Research Association (AERA) in collaboration with the American Psychological Association (APA) sets standards for psychological tests (AERA/APA, 1999). Standards are rules for practice that are agreed upon within the profession. The AERA/APA (1999) test standards require evidence that the test actually measures what it is intended to measure. The tests of PA that are in development and the uses of some existing tests fail to meet this requirement, though there are a few promising exceptions.

**Faulty PA test development.** PA research is developing specific tests of PA (Baker, 2010; Baker & Ben Ami, 2011; Baker & Brassard, 2013; Baker et al., 2012; Baker & Chambers, 2011; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012; Bernet & Baker, 2013). These are forensic tests, meaning they are intended to assess a construct of legal relevance directly (Oldham & Otto, 2008). The research design for two tests in development is particularly problematic: the Baker Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ; Baker et al., 2012), and the Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ; Baker & Ben Ami, 2011; Baker & Brassard, 2013). Neither uses research designs that meet AERA/APA standards (AERA/APA, 1999).

The BAQ is a 28-item paper-and-pencil measure in which children answer questions (e.g., “Do you think your [parent] is a good [parent] to you?”) that reveal polarized, all-good versus all-bad perceptions of their parents, that is, splitting (Baker et al., 2012). PA conceptualizes splitting as a cognitive support for irrational parent rejection. In other words, an alienated child would be expected to reject an adequate parent. Therefore, high BAQ scores should be associated with measures of competent parenting (Teti, Cole, Cabrera, Goodman, & McLoyd, 2017). Such associations would contribute convergent validity for PA. Conversely, all-bad perceptions of a
parent would not be irrational if they were caused by child abuse or poor parenting. Thus, high BAQ scores would not be expected to be associated with independent measures of abuse or poor parenting, which would contribute to discriminant validity for PA.

However, none of the research for the BAQ assessed abuse or parenting quality independently of the alienation allegations. Instead, the researchers relied on court referrals for reunification therapy as evidence that the child’s parent rejection was irrational and, by inference, that parenting quality was adequate. This standard biases the test development process. The criteria on which the judges would likely have relied to make their referral would be the same criteria that the BAQ measures. These are the criteria that testifying experts would have used to make their recommendations to the court. Thus, the children classified as alienated in the research study were already known to exhibit the PA behaviors tested by the BAQ. Without any independent measure of parenting behavior in the research study, there is no way to determine whether the BAQ scores are or are not associated with actual parenting quality, and without knowing that, the BAQ cannot claim to measure irrational perceptions of parents. To date, the BAQ does not contribute to establishing construct validity for PA.

The BSQ (Baker & Ben Ami, 2011; Baker & Verrocchio, 2014) is a 20-item paper and pencil questionnaire that assesses how frequently adult children report that their parents engaged in PA. Baker and Verrocchio (2014) reports that the measure has good internal consistency, which means that the items are interrelated so that they are measuring the same construct. The items have content validity, that is, they all describe parent behaviors that have been defined as PA. However, this test also has not been validated against any independent measures of parenting behavior and so it cannot discriminate between PA, abuse, or bad parenting. Some of the items could clearly be related to protective parenting (e.g., saying a parent was unsafe). Other items are ambiguous and could be interpreted as parenting in the context of reasonably suspected abuse (e.g., making negative comments; limiting contact; discomfort at the other parent; encouraging reliance on the favored parent). Until the BSQ is tested against credible independent evidence of abuse or bad parenting, it cannot contribute to construct validity for PA.

Baker and her colleagues claim that associations between PA and PM (Baker (2010; Baker & Ben Ami, 2011; Baker & Brassard, 2013; Baker, Burkhard, & Albertson-Kelly, 2012) provide concurrent validity for PA. Concurrent validity refers to associations between a new test and a well validated one (Rohling, Axelrod, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2017). However, there is no well-validated test of PM to which PA measures could be compared. This is not an accident or a reflection of the early stage of
research on PM. The developers of the APSAC Guidelines deliberately refused to identify specific child symptoms associated with PM because they decided that the acts should be considered PM regardless of whether they caused harm at the time that they were assessed (Hart et al., 2002). Baker (2010) uses a variety of tests that have been validated as tests of child trauma, distress, and family problems as measures of PM. These tests indicate that children are suffering harm, but harm is not equivalent to specific PM symptoms (APSAC, 1995; Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001; Hart, Brassard, Binggeli, & Davidson, 2002). Since there is no validated test of PM, there are no way associations between PA and PM could establish concurrent validity for PA. If PM is used as a broad category that includes any harmful parental behavior, it loses its theoretical meaning and value. Again, PA research fails to appreciate the need for behavioral specificity.

Faulty use of the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ). The PARQ (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002) is a validated psychological test developed for clinical purposes (Oldham & Otto, 2008). Using clinical tests in forensic contexts requires inferences from the specific clinical behaviors measured by the test to the forensic concept, in this case PA.

PA advocates and one of the test’s authors, Rohner, assert that the PARQ is “an objective measure of splitting in parental alienation” (Bernet, Gregory, Reay, & Rohner, 2018, p. 776). The PARQ, which is derived from Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory (PARTTheory; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002) is a validated test. However, it is not a test of splitting in PA. The relationship between the PARQ test and PA has been misinterpreted. The items contained in the PARQ clearly indicate that this claim is wrong. There is no item on the PARQ that assesses any of the behavioral criteria proposed for PA.

It is true that PARTTheory and PA both address children’s negative statements attributing bad behavior to their parents. It is also true that PARTTheory and PM both consider parental rejection vs. acceptance to be defining behaviors. PARTTheory has been recognized as having “strong relevance” to understanding PM (Hart et al., 2002), and, as we previously noted, Baker and Verrocchio (2014) consider PA a type of PM. Despite the hypothesized relationship between PA and PM, on the one hand, and the common behaviors shared between PM and PARTTheory, on the other, PARTTheory and PA are significantly different.

PARTTheory concerns children’s rational perception of their parents’ rejection of them (e.g., “My mother ignores me as long as I do not do anything to bother her”; Khaleque & Rohner, 2002, p. 58). In contrast, PA concerns children’s irrational rejection of their parents (e.g., “My father is a murderer. I saw him kill my hermit crab. He stepped on it”; Dr. Milchman, case example). In each theory, the agents of the rejection and
the objects of the rejection differ. In PART theory, the parent is the agent and the child is the object. In PA, the child is the agent and the parent is the object. The PARQ cannot be a test of PA and, because the two concepts are dissimilar, it also cannot contribute to convergent validity for PA. Their dissimilarity might, however, contribute to discriminant validity, an idea that is discussed in the section titled “Assess whether relationships among specific PA and PM behaviors suggest discriminant validity.”

**Promising PA test development.** The research on the Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS; Rowlands, 2018) is a more promising approach to developing a PA measure because it assesses associations among specific PA criteria and other psychological constructs. Rowlands (2018) performed a factor analysis that investigated interrelationships among the eight PA symptoms originally proposed by Gardner (2003). These results contribute to resolving the conflict between PA advocates and child abuse professionals.

The factor analysis confirmed five of Gardner’s (2003) eight PA symptoms: campaign of denigration, independent thinker, reflexive support, borrowed scenarios, and spread of animosity. Rowlands (2018) considers a sixth factor, lack of positive affect toward the target parent, to be a new factor, but it appears comparable to Gardner’s (2003) lack of ambivalence.

However, weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations for rejecting the parent, and absence of guilt about behavior towards that parent, did not emerge as significant factors. The failure to confirm these two symptoms is clearly consistent with the objections to PA claims raised by child abuse professionals. As I previously discussed, the reasons children give for rejecting a parent cannot simply be accepted at face value. Reasons that are logically weak, absurd, or frivolous might be defensive screens for abuse. The fact that they are illogical might be the exact cue that something is very wrong, that the children are trying to communicate something that they cannot or will not express directly. The children’s lack of guilt might also be abuse-related. They might be identifying with the aggressor. They might be reversing traumatic helplessness. They might simply be too angry to have empathy for their abusive parents. Rowlands (2018) factor analysis is encouraging. It suggests that it might be empirically possible to differentiate between children’s alienated behavior and behavior that is interpreted as alienation but is really abuse-related.

Despite this contribution, Rowlands’ (2018) attempt to validate the RPAS does not succeed. The RPAS assesses self-identified alienated parents’ perceptions of their children’s behavior toward them. It tries to test for convergent validity by comparing RPAS scores with a PA questionnaire developed by Baker and Darnall (2007), which also assesses self-identified target parents’ PA claims. It tries to test for discriminant validity by
comparing RPAS scores with scores on the Child–Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS; Pianta, 2002), which tests parents’ perceptions of their children’s conflict vs. their closeness with them. Despite Rowlands’ (2018) efforts to use independently developed instruments to measure convergent and discriminant validity, the design of the study significantly reduces its ability to provide construct validity for PA.

First, the sample is biased. The respondents were recruited from on-line PA forums and these recruits then recruited others. These venues provide information about PA to their readers that inevitably coach them, tainting their responses to research questions.

Second, the use of Baker and Darnall’s (2007) questionnaire to test for convergent validity is biased. Reliability and validity statistics have not been reported for this questionnaire. A scientifically unvalidated measure cannot be used to test convergent validity with a new measure. While Rowlands (2018) found positive associations between the RPAS and Baker and Darnall’s (2007) questionnaire, without scientific validation these associations cannot be interpreted. There is no way to know what the Baker and Darnall (2007) questionnaire actually measures. It claims to measure PA, but it could measure false perceptions of PA by parents who lack insight into their contribution to their children’s rejection.

Third, the RPAS items are biased (Rowland, 2018, Table 2, p. 1–16). They ask self-identified target parents whether they believe that their children’s fear and negative judgments of them, reasons for rejecting them, and accusations about them and their extended family are unreasonable, frivolous, or unsupported by evidence. The wording of the items assumes the trustworthiness of the targets parents’ judgments regarding the rationality of their children’s rejection and the independence of their thoughts and feelings. The questions are presented in a yes/no format. It is a foregone conclusion that parents claiming PA are going to answer “yes” to questions about whether their children’s rejection of them and alliance with the other parent are unjustified. If they did not believe that, they would not claim PA. There is no measure of PA that is independent of targeted parents’ claims.

Fourth, the interpretation of results is biased. Rowlands’ (2018) criterion for identifying the presence of PA was judges and/or experts’ opinions (as reported by the parents) that the children’s rejection was unreasonable and unjustified. However, the experts’ and judges’ opinions are not independent of the parents’ claims, along with the persuasiveness with which their attorneys argue those claims and the cultural biases with which their arguments are received (Meier & Dickson, 2017; Milchman, 2018b; Neilson, 2018; Neustein & Lesher, 2005; Saunders et al., 2012). The opinions of parents, experts, and judges are inextricably intertwined.
In order for RPAS’ results to be interpreted as indicating PA, they must be related to a measure of PA that is independent of parents’ PA claims. The only way that this could be accomplished is by using a research design that includes a comparison group made up of known abusive and/or bad parents. Such a comparison group would allow the RPAS responses of allegedly alienated parents to be compared with those whose bad parenting has been objectively assessed. Differentiating between these two groups of parents—alienated versus abusive or bad ones—would establish discriminant validity for the RPAS.

Rowlands (2018) claims that her results comparing parents’ RPAS scores with their CPRS scores (Pianta, 2002) provide discriminant validity for PA. Her claim cannot stand. She found that parents who scored high on the RPAS also scored high on the CPRS child-parent conflict scale but low on the child-parent closeness scale. These results do not establish discriminant validity for the RPAS because there are many child–parent relationship problems other than PA that could be associated with these CPRS scores. Parents, who abuse their children or who are bad though not abusive, might also say that they have a lot of conflict with their children and that their children are not close to them. If the associations between RPAS and CPRS scores obtained by allegedly alienating parents cannot be differentiated from the associations obtained by abusive or bad parents—and they cannot without a comparison group—then the CPRS cannot contribute to discriminant validity for PA. The RPAS might not indicate PA; it might indicate abusive or bad parenting rationalized as PA. Without discriminant validity, interpreting the RPAS as a measure of PA is biased in favor of supporting PA.

Rowlands (2018) recognizes many of the problems discussed here as issues to be addressed in future studies. Nevertheless Rowlands’ (2018) use of a scientifically validated measure of child–parent relationships, like Baker’s (2010) use of scientifically validated measures of childhood trauma, is a step toward moving PA research in the direction of achieving scientific validity. The glaring lack throughout this research is any objective measurement of parenting quality.

Promising approaches to using the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory – 2 (MMPI-2). Research relating the MMPI-2 (Graham, 2006), a well-validated test of clinical symptoms, to PA is promising. The MMPI-2 has validity scales (L, K, S) that assess self-idealization. Thus, they provide an independent measure of splitting that would be expected to be associated with PA because a central PA hypothesis is that alienating parents portray themselves as all-good and the other parent as all-bad. While self-idealization on the MMPI-2 is common in custody litigants in general (Bathurst, Gottfied, & Gottfried, 1997), two MMPI-2 studies showed that
alienating parents tend to present themselves in idealized ways more than do other custody-litigating parents (Gordon, Stoffey, & Bottinelli, 2008; Siegel & Langford, 1998). These are only two studies and the number of subjects is small, but they offer promise as a way to assess convergent validity for PA.

**Recommendations for future research**

Validate a measure of PA that provides convergent and discriminant validity. This measure must differentiate between PA and all other forms of child abuse and poor parenting that could cause a favored parent to be protective by obstructing the child’s access to the other parent. The measures of child abuse must be based on evidence that is independent of the targeted parents’ claims and must not confuse unsubstantiated with false allegations. The need for a validated measure of PA is pressing because any research that claims to relate PA to any other psychological construct stands or falls on the validity of its assessment of PA.

Develop an independent measure of parenting quality. The PM (APSAC, 1995; Binggeli et al., 2001; Hart et al., 2002; Myers, Berliner, Briere, Hendrix, Jenny, & Reid, 2002) and parenting competency literatures (Teti et al., 2017) could be used to develop independent measures of parenting quality.

Assess the construct validity of Baker’s (2010) PM survey as a stand-alone test of PM. Baker (2010) measures PM with scales taken from five scientifically validated tests of child trauma along with a new measure developed for the study based on the PM criteria defined by APSAC (1995; Binggeli et al., 2001). All the scales used in this research contain items that replicate items identified as PM by APSAC (1995), giving the composite measure content validity as a test of PM. Nevertheless, the validity of the composite measure cannot be assumed to be the same as the validity of the individual scales from which it was derived. Differences between the original scales and the composite measure in subjects, instructions, response formats (which were revised for uniformity, Baker, 2010), and other factors could affect the construct validity of the composite measure. The composite measure needs to be independently subjected to validity testing to establish its convergent and discriminant validity. Once there is a validated measure of PM, associations between it and a validated measure of PA could be assessed.

Assess whether relationships among specific PA and PM behaviors suggest convergent validity. The importance of attention to behavioral specificity is illustrated by considering the complexity of interpreting relationships between parents’ behavior in PA and PM (Baker & Ben Ami, 2011; Baker & Brassard, 2013; Ben Ami & Baker, 2012; Bernet et al., 2015).
Such relationships, if empirically demonstrated, could be general expressions of bad parenting shared with other forms of child maltreatment (APSAC, 1995; Hart et al., 2002). However, some of the behaviors of PA and PM appear to be more specifically comparable. For example, parents could refuse to allow medical treatments (PM) and refuse to communicate about medical issues to exclude a parent who would be likely to object (PA). Empirical associations between specific behaviors in the two constructs might contribute to convergent validity for PA.

Assess whether relationships among specific PA and PM behaviors suggest discriminant validity. The importance of behavioral specificity is also illustrated by considering relationships between specific PA symptoms in children and other symptoms of psychological distress associated with PM and co-occurring child abuse in those cases where children become symptomatic at the time of the maltreating acts. Splitting is hypothesized to play a specific role in PA (Baker et al., 2012) that it has not been hypothesized to play in PM (APSAC, 1995), and so its assessment might help establish discriminant validity for PA. When alienated children engage in splitting and construct an image of the target parent as all-bad, they protect themselves from a variety of divorce-related losses: grief over the break-up of the family; anxiety about losing contact with the non-custodial parent; anger at the non-custodial parent for leaving, feelings of betrayal, financial anxiety, and so on. None of those losses matter if the children have convinced themselves the target parent doesn’t matter. In effect, the children think, “Who cares? I don’t love him/her anyway.” This kind of mental maneuver should reduce symptoms of psychological distress, at least partially and temporarily. If PA children develop symptoms of splitting but lower levels of distress symptoms, whereas PM children develop higher levels of distress symptoms but do not develop symptoms of splitting, then assessing children’s splitting in PA and PM could provide discriminant validity for PA.

The PARQ (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002) could be used to test this hypothesis. The PARQ measures bad parenting whereas PA claims to be associated with good enough parenting. Thus, if high scores on an adequate measure of PA were not associated with high scores on the PARQ, it would indicate that children could irrationally reject a parent (PA) without perceiving that parent as rejecting them (PARQ). The absence of associations between these tests would thus provide discriminant validity for PA, rather than convergent validity as Bernet et al. (2018) proposed.

How does PA research fit into the work of child custody evaluators?

Bernet (2013) reports that the American Psychiatric Association (2013) refused to include PA in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental
Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) because of the scientific limitations of PA research. Of particular concern was the inadequacy of the empirical research needed to establish scientific validity. The exclusion of PA from DSM-5 based on the lack of evidence for its scientific validity undermines forensic claims that PA represents scientific knowledge.

In the absence of institutionalization by DSM-5, Bernet (2013) advises legitimizing PA as a diagnostic construct by using more general diagnostic categories that could include PA. Children’s unrealistic negative perceptions, hostility, and estrangement from a parent apply to PA and are contained in the category of a “Parent–Child Relational Problem” (Bernet, 2013, p. 715). Children’s negative responses to parental conflict apply to PA and are contained in the category of “Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress” (Bernet, 2013, p. 716). However, while both are generally applicable, neither identifies particular symptoms and causes needed to diagnose PA. This solution by-passes the lack of scientific validity in order to legitimize PA advocacy.

Despite the concerns of PA advocates, it is not necessary to claim either scientific validity or diagnostic institutionalization in order to provide reliable testimony about PA in court. Expert testimony is admissible when it helps the court and is based on scientific or specialized knowledge (Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin, 2007). When a CCE is conducted in conformity with accepted forensic practice standards, which are grounded in the scientific method (Ackerman, Kane, Gould, & Dale, 2015; Drozd et al., 2013; Gould & Martindale, 2007), then the case-specific knowledge it provides could be conceptualized as helpful specialized knowledge. While scientific status may be most prestigious in the eyes of some, claiming scientific legitimacy prematurely is likely to provoke opposing experts to discredit the credibility of the over-reaching expert and leave the court disenchanted with both. Experts have to be prepared to acknowledge that the lack of scientific validity reduces the degree of certainty about the general reliability of specific PA behaviors. However, without over-reaching, they could still claim that their opinions are based on a “reasonable degree of certainty” in the instant case based on the relationship between the PA behaviors assessed and the totality of the evidence in that case. Shifting from claims of scientific knowledge to specialized knowledge at the present time does not gut the forensic value or credibility of expert opinions. It just makes them appropriately cautious.

Conclusion

This article analyzes and criticizes the evidence for claims that PA has been scientifically validated. As others have commented (Saini et al., 2012, 2016),
at present the bulk of evidence for PA consists of reports by self-proclaimed victims’ and their allies. This article explains why a consensus among victims and their allies does not produce scientific validity. The article explains how scientific validity turns a descriptive concept into a scientific construct. PA is not yet a scientific construct.

While recognizing the scientific limitations of “voices of victims” evidence, this article nevertheless does not discount the value of such evidence entirely. Extreme skepticism about victims’ stories is a double-edged sword. Historically, accusations of “junk science” have been used against victims claiming CSA, incest, and recovered memory (Hagan, 1997; Kitaeff, 2007), just as they are used against false memory proponents (Whitfield, 2001), and PAS advocates (Whitfield, 2001). This article seeks to remove the critique of PA science from polemical language. It asserts that voices of victims, whether they are victims of CSA or PA, are a starting point for scientific investigations and respecting them, though with a critical eye, can inhibit ideological bias.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that politically embedded science develops on a trajectory in which Stage 1 is marked by oversimplified polemics and Stage 2 is marked by responsiveness to polarized debate (Milchman, 2018a). As Stage 2 matures, science achieves complexity by acknowledging the merits of some of the issues raised by both sides. This article suggests that PA theory has entered Stage 2, but PA empirical research and forensic practice in child custody cases have yet to catch up. The inadequacies in empirical research suggest that PA may be misused in court in part because science has been impeded by advocacy needs. When advocacy is aggressive, advocates’ “need to prove” overrides scientists’ “need to know.”

Notes on contributor

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References


