

## PAPER

## PSYCHIATRY &amp; BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

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## Measuring the Difference Between Parental Alienation and Parental Estrangement: The PARQ-Gap<sup>\*,†</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** Parental alienation (rejection of a parent without legitimate justification) and realistic estrangement (rejection of a parent for a good reason) are generally accepted concepts among mental health and legal professionals. Alienated children, who were not abused, tend to engage in splitting and lack ambivalence with respect to their parents; estranged children, who were maltreated, usually perceive their parents in an ambivalent manner. The hypothesis of this study was that a psychological test—the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ)—will help to distinguish severely alienated from nonalienated children. The PARQ, which was used to identify and quantify the degree of splitting for each participant, was administered to 45 severely alienated children and 71 nonalienated children. The PARQ-Gap score—the difference between each child’s PARQ: Father score and PARQ: Mother score—was introduced and defined in this research. Using a PARQ-Gap score of 90 as a cut point, this test was 99% accurate in distinguishing severely alienated from nonalienated children. This research presents a way to distinguish parental alienation from other reasons for contact refusal. The PARQ-Gap may be useful for both clinicians and forensic practitioners in evaluating children of separating and divorced parents when there is a concern about the possible diagnosis of parental alienation.

**KEYWORDS:** forensic child psychiatry, splitting, alienation, estrangement, Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire, PARQ-Gap

*Contact refusal* is a behavior that is sometimes manifested by children of separating and divorced parents. When contact refusal occurs, the child refuses to have a relationship with the rejected parent. The child may strongly dislike and fear the rejected parent. Contact refusal may be transitory and self-limited. In that circumstance, the family moves on and the problem is not brought to the attention of a mental health professional.

However, if contact refusal is persistent, it indicates significant problems within the family, which are apparent especially in the relationship between the child and the rejected parent. Persistent contact refusal is a serious problem in the family that should be carefully assessed in order to determine the underlying cause.

The two most important reasons for contact refusal are estrangement and alienation. *Estrangement* refers to a child’s rejection of a parent for good cause, for example, because that parent had a history of neglecting or abusing the child. On the other hand, *parental alienation* (PA) refers to a child’s rejection of a parent without a good reason. In PA, the child’s parents are typically engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce. The child escapes the battle zone between the parents by gravitating to one parent and persistently rejecting a relationship with the second parent—even though the child and the rejected parent previously enjoyed a healthy, mutually satisfying relationship. When PA occurs, of course, the preferred parent has encouraged, indoctrinated, and brainwashed the child to reject the alienated parent.

It is important for clinicians to distinguish estrangement from alienation because the treatment of the child and the family is quite different, depending on whether the child’s rejection of the parent is justified or driven by a false belief that the rejected parent is unsafe to be with, unloving, or psychologically unavailable. Also, it is important for forensic practitioners to distinguish estrangement from alienation because it bears on recommendations regarding the child’s parenting time arrangements.

After the parental alienation syndrome (PAS) was defined by Gardner (1), clinicians and researchers proposed factors to

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consider and protocols for distinguishing estrangement from alienation. These approaches, summarized below, focused on features of alienated children, features of estranged children, the parents' behavior, family history, record review, and psychological testing. Of course, these factors and protocols are simply components of a comprehensive child custody evaluation, which consists of three main legs: forensic interviews, testing, and collateral sources. Information about the children, parents, and family history is derived in part from forensic interviews.

In a recent review of "Empirical Studies of Alienation," Saini, Johnston, Fidler, and Bala stated, "There is a virtual absence of empirical studies on the differential diagnosis of alienation in children from other conditions that share similar features with parental alienation, especially realistic estrangement..." (2). Although Saini et al. acknowledged that PA exists and that there is ample empirical evidence to identify the types of behaviors that alienating parents manifest, they highlighted the need for tools to differentiate alienation from estrangement. The research presented here explains an objective method for distinguishing the mental state of severely alienated children from children who are not alienated. This psychological test—the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ)—does not all by itself differentiate alienation from estrangement; the PARQ identifies a high level of splitting, which is one of the factors to consider in distinguishing alienation from estrangement.

### Features of Alienated Children

When Gardner introduced the concept of PAS in 1985, he proposed that eight behavioral symptoms, taken together, identified PAS and no other psychological condition (1). These symptoms included: a campaign of denigration against the target parent; frivolous rationalizations for the child's criticism of the target parent; lack of ambivalence; the "independent-thinker" phenomenon; reflexive support of the alienating parent against the target parent; absence of guilt over exploitation and mistreatment of the target parent; borrowed scenarios; and spread of the child's animosity toward the target parent's extended family. According to Gardner, a child who manifested most or all of the eight symptoms was likely to be experiencing PAS. Currently, most writers—including the authors of this article—use the phrase "parental alienation" rather than "parental alienation syndrome" because the latter phrase has become controversial for some practitioners. In this context, we consider "parental alienation" and "parental alienation syndrome" to be synonymous. However, PA-detractors repeatedly criticize the use of "syndrome"—in writing and in court testimony—and it is not worth the time and energy required to defend the use of that word.

### Parental Behavior

After introducing the concept of PAS, Gardner addressed the task of differentiating PAS from bona fide abuse or neglect. He observed that competing parents made complementary accusations about each other: "[One] parent has accused the other parent of inducing PAS in the children. In response, the responding parent accuses the other parent of abusing and neglecting the children" (3). In addition to noting the symptoms presented by the child, Gardner thought that the behaviors seen in the parents of alienated children differed from the behaviors seen in the parents of abused or neglected children. For example, he noticed that perpetrators of abuse (alienating parents) are less likely than victims of the abuse (alienated parents) to cooperate with a neutral examiner. Although

Gardner's early comments on distinguishing alienation from bona fide abuse were interesting and useful, they are now regarded by many practitioners as being too simplistic.

### Clarification of Terminology

While Gardner consistently distinguished PAS from "bona fide abuse-neglect," he did not use the term estrangement. The distinction between alienation and estrangement was established by Kelly and Johnston, who said, "Children who are realistically estranged from one of their parents as a consequence of that parent's history of family violence, abuse, or neglect need to be clearly distinguished from alienated children" (4). Although they did not provide a method for accomplishing that task, Kelly and Johnston did note, "Unlike alienated children, the estranged children do not harbor unreasonable anger and/or fear."

### Differential Diagnosis

Several authors have presented sets of differential diagnoses that address the task of differentiating estrangement from alienation. All of these formulations were based on qualitative research, such as clinical experience, and not validated through quantitative research. Kelly and Johnston (4), for example, identified multiple reasons for children to resist visitation, including: resistance rooted in normal developmental processes; resistance related to high-conflict marriage and divorce; resistance due to a parent's parenting style; resistance related to alienating behaviors by the parent with whom the child is aligned; resistance arising from the child's concern about an emotionally fragile custodial parent; and, resistance prompted by a parent's remarriage. Kelly and Johnston also explained that children's relationships to each parent after separation and divorce can be conceptualized along a continuum of positive to negative, with the following possibilities: positive relationships with both parents, affinity with one parent, allied children, estranged children, and alienated children.

Later, Bernet and Freeman (5) and Freeman (6) published a differential diagnosis that should be considered in both clinical and forensic evaluations when the presenting problem is contact refusal. The differential included: the child's normal preference; a loyalty conflict; the child's attempt at avoiding the conflict between the parents; the worried child, for example, a child with separation anxiety; the stubborn child, for example, a child with oppositional defiant disorder; the abused child; delusional disorder shared by parent and child; and PA. These authors emphasized that selection of the most appropriate treatment depends on correctly identifying the underlying cause of the contact refusal.

### Evaluation Protocols

Likewise, the following protocols were also based on qualitative rather than quantitative research. Lee and Olesen presented a method for distinguishing alienated children from realistically estranged children. The first step is to assess whether the child looks alienated. That is, "We can look at the child's rigidity; lack of ambivalence; apparently trivial reasons given for the parental rejection; and the intense, unrelenting, negative portrayal of the parent" (7). Here, Lee and Olesen were referring to the same clinical indicators of PA that had been described by Gardner and restated by Kelly and Johnston. The second step in Lee and Olesen's model for differentiating alienation from realistic estrangement is "the assessment of both parents, the investigation of abuse allegations, and the assessment of the child's relationship to each parent."

Three years later, Drozd and Olesen published an elaborate decision tree for distinguishing abuse, alienation, and estrangement (8). They used the same definitions of alienation and estrangement that Kelly and Johnston (4) proposed. According to Drozd and Olesen, there are multiple allegations and counter-allegations in many litigating families, such that one parent may allege domestic violence, and the second parent may allege alienation against the parent who raised the issue of domestic violence. Those authors introduced a model for dealing with competing cross-allegations. They emphasized that if a child does not have basically positive relationships with both parents, the following hypotheses should be considered: normal developmental processes (such as “affinity” and “alignment”); poor parenting (e.g., alienating behaviors); and abuse (e.g., child abuse, substance abuse, and domestic violence). Drozd and Olesen explained the features of the parents, such as the various types of alienating behaviors and the typical patterns of domestic violence, but they did not address in depth how to distinguish an alienated child from an estranged child.

Ellis described a three-step process for diagnosing PAS and for distinguishing it from realistic estrangement (9). The three steps were as follows: (i) determining if the refusal of contact with the parent is extreme and the alienation is severe, (ii) determining if there is a basis for extreme fear and anger toward the parent, and (iii) determining if the child meets at least 10 of the 15 criteria that she proposed. Ellis focused on the detailed assessment of the child, consistent with Gardner’s eight criteria for PAS, although she also discussed typical behaviors and personality traits of the alienating parent. Further, she identified 15 specific criteria—all of them behaviors and attitudes of the child—for establishing the diagnosis of PAS. She recognized that these criteria are tentative, but offered them as a first step toward standardizing the evaluation of PAS.

Ellis’s second criterion was the child’s use of “the mechanism of splitting to reduce ambiguity.” That is, the child views the alienating parent as all good and denies that this parent has any negative traits. Likewise, the child views the targeted parent as all bad, and denies that this parent has any positive traits. Ellis explained that splitting can be identified by interviewing the child and asking questions which would elicit ambiguity. The alienated child’s responses avoid ambiguity or ambivalence and reflect a black-and-white perception of the parents.

### Family History

The history of a child’s relationship with his or her parents is an important consideration in distinguishing alienation from estrangement. If, for example, the child had a long history of conflict with the rejected parent, estrangement may be the underlying reason for a current pattern of contact refusal. However, if the child previously had a healthy, loving relationship with the rejected parent, alienation is more likely the reason for contact refusal. This feature of PA was noted by Warshak when he proposed a definition of pathological alienation: “A disturbance in which children, usually in the context of sharing a parent’s negative attitudes, suffer unreasonable aversion to a person or persons with whom they formerly enjoyed normal relations or with whom they would normally develop affectionate relations” (10). Gottlieb expressed the same opinion when she wrote: “Bonding with the alienated parent prior to the alienation . . . is the same with all degrees of the PAS; the bonding was strong, healthy and minimally problematic, if at all” (11). In addition, Clawar and Rivlin emphasized, “The single most important element in

uncovering the content, intensity, and impact of programming-and-brainwashing in children is *researching the social history of the children*” (12).

### Collateral Records

Johnston, Lee, Olesen, and Walters argued that collateral records can be used to substantiate allegations of abuse by a parent, such as child protective service reports, self-admissions, eye-witness reports, expert testimony, medical records, police reports, arrests, plea-bargains, and criminal convictions (13). Those authors thought that such records often reliably differentiate abuse from alienation. Of course, practitioners should look for records of child maltreatment as well as evidence that the child witnessed a hostile and abusive environment. If the child has witnessed domestic violence, estrangement may be more likely than alienation. However, children do not necessarily prefer the less toxic parent. In some scenarios, the child may side with the abusive parent and become another abuser of the rejected parent. An abusive parent may persuade the child to become alienated from the protective parent (14).

### Features of Estranged Children

Many estranged children—in contrast to alienated children—hope for a relationship with their abusive parents. In a commentary on realistic estrangement, Fidler and Bala stated that estrangement “may result from the trauma of witnessing domestic violence or from experiencing physical abuse, sexual abuse, or significantly inept or neglectful parenting by the rejected parent” (15). They continued, “In these cases, children may exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder rather than a disproportionate or unjustified reaction to their actual experience with the rejected parent.” Fidler and Bala also commented that “even abused children are likely to want to maintain a relationship with their abusive parents.” A review of the literature found that youth in foster care due to abuse or neglect typically yearn for their abusive parent, while they also express feelings of gratitude at being removed from the abusive home (16). Also, abused children tend to engage in attachment-enhancing behaviors rather than attachment-disrupting behaviors toward their abusive parents (17).

### Psychological Testing

Psychological testing is an accepted method in child custody evaluations. The *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory–2* (MMPI-2) is well-established and most often used in these evaluations. Siegel and Langford found that alienating mothers were more likely to complete MMPI-2 questions in a defensive manner, striving to appear as flawless as possible (18). Gordon, Stoffey, and Bottinelli found that parents who induced alienation in their children manifested higher scores (in the clinical range) on the MMPI-2 than control mothers and fathers (scores in the normal range), indicating primitive defenses such as splitting and projective identification. The scores of target parents were mostly similar to the scores of control parents (19).

There are also psychological tests of children that may help distinguish alienation from estrangement. The *Bricklin Perceptual Scales* (BPS), which were developed specifically for use in child custody evaluations, define and quantify children’s attachment to and perceptions of their parents (20). Estranged children are likely on the BPS to manifest ambivalence toward both

parents. Alienated children, on the other hand, are likely to see the preferred parent as totally good and the rejected parent as totally bad. The BPS consists of 64 questions, which pertain to the child's perception of the mother (32 questions) and the child's perception of the father (32 questions). Although Bricklin did not use the term "splitting" in his discussion of the BPS, that appears to be what he was measuring. Bricklin later said that alienated children had a mind-made-up (MMU) configuration, which occurred as part of a not-based-on-actual-interaction (NBOAI) scenario (21). Bricklin found that MMU children rated the preferred parent extremely or abnormally high (i.e., favorably) and the rejected parent extremely or abnormally low (i.e., unfavorably) on the BPS. Although Otto et al. (22) criticized some aspects of the BPS, this test appears to identify the psychological mechanism of splitting.

Baker, Burkhard, and Albertson-Kelly introduced the *Baker Alienation Questionnaire* (BAQ), which is intended to identify alienated children using a paper-and-pencil measure that is short, easy to administer, and easy to score objectively (23). The 28 items of the BAQ are designed to capture a child's extreme rejection of one parent and extreme idealization of the other. The BAQ is administered to children who either select a response from the choices provided (i.e., Not At All, A Little Bit, Somewhat, Much, Very Much) or write an answer to an open-ended question (e.g., What are some things you don't like about your mother?). In their pilot study, Baker et al. found that children who had been court ordered for reunification therapy—specifically for PA—consistently responded in a polarized fashion in which one parent was denigrated and the other was idealized. Baker et al. found that the BAQ discriminated well between alienated and nonalienated children.

More recently, Rowlands introduced the *Rowlands' Parental Alienation Scale* (RPAS), which was a questionnaire for parents designed to capture the manifestations of PA that had been described in the literature (24). Six significant factors were extracted from the original 42 items representing the eight traditional behavioral symptoms of PA. It is noteworthy that lack of ambivalence or splitting was not one of the six factors in the final version of the RPAS. It is easy to understand why that occurred: The RPAS was administered to parents and was based on the child's behaviors that the parents personally observed. However, splitting is a mental state of the child, which may not be manifested in their visible behaviors. Although splitting is readily elicited in a psychiatric or psychological interview, it might not be recognized by outside observers such as parents or teachers.

The *Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire* (PARQ), featured in this article, is a 60-item questionnaire that children complete regarding their perceptions of their mothers' and fathers' accepting-rejecting behaviors (25). It was derived from interpersonal acceptance-rejection theory (IPARTheory), an evidence-based theory of socialization and lifespan development that attempts to predict and explain major effects, causes, and other correlates of parental acceptance and rejection worldwide (26). The PARQ: Father refers to the child's perceptions of the father's love-related behaviors; the PARQ: Mother refers to the child's perceptions of the mother's love-related behaviors. Further details about the PARQ are provided in the Methods section. Here, though, it is important to note that there are significant differences between the PARQ used in the current research and the BPS and BAQ. The BPS and BAQ were developed specifically for use in child custody evaluations or related forensic tasks. The PARQ, on the other hand, was developed as

part of IPARTheory and has been used hundreds of times to assess children's perceptions of their parents in a wide range of clinical and research settings worldwide. Moreover, the BPS and BAQ both have subjective components. The BPS requires face-to-face interaction in which the evaluator reads the questions to the child; the BAQ requires the evaluator to rate the hand-written prose responses of the child. The PARQ, in contrast, is administered with paper and pencil or on a computer, and scoring is totally objective.

### Significance of Splitting

As noted by Bricklin (21), Ellis (9), Gardner (1), Kelly and Johnston (4), and Lee and Olesen (7), one of the most notable features of alienated children is their lack of ambivalence toward their parents, especially the rejected parent. It is normal for children to perceive their parents in an ambivalent manner, recognizing their strong points as well as their weak points. It is not normal for a child to perceive a parent in an all-or-none fashion, totally good, or totally bad. Children who experience severe PA almost always lack ambivalence toward the rejected parent, and they usually manifest splitting. That is, they idealize the alienating parent and devalue the target parent.

Recently, Jaffe, Thakkar, and Piron related to how an alienated child's denial of ambivalence was expressed in an elaborate case derived from "a sample of forensic child custody interviews court ordered and conducted by the authors" (27). For example, when asked whether she could say something positive about her mother, the child said, "She's not ugly. . . . She doesn't have empathy, she can walk into a room full of people crying and not feel anything. . . . She knows how to use retail therapy." The authors summarized, "The expressed lack of ambivalence as manifested by the alienated child serves as an observable defining characteristic of the presence of parental alienation." The extensive qualitative research regarding PA by Jaffe et al. complements quantitative research regarding PA in this article.

The present study considers splitting to be a maladaptive mental mechanism by which children protect themselves from the uncomfortable feelings of cognitive dissonance. When parents continually fight, children often find it difficult to maintain affection for both parents at the same time. The children often resolve the dissonance by the mechanism of splitting, that is, gravitating to an enmeshed relationship with one parent and strongly rejecting the other parent. In PA, the child's rejection of the target parent is far out of proportion to anything that parent has done to justify the rejection. PA is maladaptive because the child's behavior is driven by a false belief that the rejected parent is evil, dangerous, or not worthy of love. If a parent was truly abusive or severely neglectful, the child's rejection of that parent would constitute realistic estrangement, not PA. While alienated children perceive the rejected parent as evil, most estranged children still perceive the abusive parent in an ambivalent manner.

### Measuring Splitting

The design of the current research was first described by Bernet (28). Later, Bernet, Gregory, Reay, and Rohner showed that the PARQ clearly demonstrates the defensive splitting that often occurs among alienated children (29). Bernet et al. administered the PARQ: Father and PARQ: Mother to 116 children and adolescents from the following family types: children from intact families; children from divorced families (who continued to see

both parents on a regular basis); neglected children (who lived with their mothers and rarely or never saw their fathers); children who were alienated from their fathers; and children who were alienated from their mothers. The authors found that (i) neglected children manifested ambivalence toward the less preferred parent; (ii) alienated children tended to manifest splitting, that is, the mean PARQ score for the preferred parent was exceptionally low (perceived acceptance) and the mean PARQ score for the alienated or target parent was exceptionally high (perceived rejection); and (iii) the pattern of PARQ scores for the neglected children differed significantly from the pattern of PARQ scores for the alienated children.

Conclusions reached by Bernet et al. (29) were echoed by Blagg and Godfrey, using a different instrument, the Bene–Anthony Family Relations Test (BAFRT), and a different population, that is, children in the United Kingdom (30). The BAFRT (developed by Eva Bene and E. James Anthony in the 1950s) is a projective test that explores indirectly children’s perceptions of their relationship with family members (31). In the BAFRT, children are asked to place “postcards” with various positive and negative messages into a collection of “mailboxes” representing their family members. Blagg and Godfrey administered the BAFRT to 17 neglected/emotionally abused children and 16 alienated children. They concluded that “children in the alienated group who had not been abused or neglected by their target parent expressed almost exclusively negative (hostile) feelings toward them, while also expressing almost exclusively positive (affectionate) feelings toward their preferred parent” (30). In contrast, the neglected/emotionally abused children did not reject their neglectful/emotionally abusive parents, but showed signs of “dealizing their parents.” We should note, however, that the BAFRT has been used less often since the mid-1970s because of its questionable psychometric properties (32).

In this article, we analyze in a different manner the same data reported in Bernet et al. (29). Here, we introduce the concept of the *PARQ-Gap*, which is the absolute difference in participants’ PARQ: Father scores from their PARQ: Mother scores. The hypothesis for this research was that there will be large and significant PARQ-Gap differences between severely alienated children on the one hand and nonalienated children on the other. We predicted that PARQ-Gap differences would be so great that it would be possible to identify a PARQ-Gap cut score that distinguishes severely alienated from nonalienated children with a high degree of accuracy. We also expected that the PARQ-Gap score would be helpful in distinguishing severely alienated and nonalienated children in both clinical and forensic settings. Review and approval of this study were obtained from the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board.

## Methods

### *Participants*

As noted in Bernet et al. (29), 116 participants were recruited for the following family types:

Children from intact families ( $n = 35$ ): a control group, that is, children who lived together with both parents in one household.

Children of divorced parents ( $n = 20$ ): a second control group, that is, children whose parents were divorced or separated, but the children continued to see both parents on a regular basis.

Neglected children ( $n = 16$ ): Children whose parents were divorced or separated, but the children did not see both parents on

a regular basis. In this research, all the neglected children lived with their mothers and rarely or never saw their fathers. The mothers uniformly described the fathers as being unreliable in contacting their children, uninterested in having a relationship with their children, and neglectful by abandoning the family. Although we know the children in this group were neglected by their fathers, we do not know whether they were estranged from their fathers.

Alienated children ( $n = 45$ ): Children whose parents were divorced or separated, and the children strongly rejected a relationship with one of their parents. Of the 45 youth in the alienated families, 24 were alienated from their fathers and 21 were alienated from their mothers. Thus, the alienated families were divided into the alienated-father families and the alienated-mother families.

Children from intact families, divorced families, and families where the children were neglected by their fathers were recruited through Research Match, a national health volunteer registry that was created by several academic institutions and supported by the U.S. National Institutes of Health as part of the Clinical Translational Science Award program. Children alienated from their fathers and children alienated from their mothers were recruited from the Family Reflections Reunification Program, a program in British Columbia, Canada, that specialized in the treatment of PA (33). Other details about the methodology for this research are described in Bernet et al. (29).

### *Measures*

The Child Version of the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire: Mother and Father Forms (Child PARQ: Mother and Child PARQ: Father) were administered. The Child PARQ is a self-report questionnaire designed to assess children’s perceptions of the degree to which they experience parental (maternal and paternal) acceptance or rejection (34). The measure consists of four scales: (i) warmth and affection (or coldness and lack of affection, when reverse scored); (ii) hostility and aggression; (iii) indifference and neglect; and (iv) undifferentiated rejection. Undifferentiated rejection refers to children’s feelings that the parent does not really love them, want them, appreciate them, or care about them in some other way without necessarily having any objective indicator that the parent is cold, aggressive, or neglecting. Collectively, the four scales constitute an overall measure of perceived parental acceptance–rejection. The mother and father versions of the measure are identical except that one asks children to reflect on their mothers’ behavior, and the other asks children to reflect on their fathers’ behavior.

Sample items on the Mother version of the Child PARQ include: My mother “lets me know she loves me” (warmth/affection), “yells at me when she is angry” (hostility/aggression), “pays no attention to me” (indifference/neglect), and “does not really love me” (undifferentiated rejection). Children respond to items such as these on a 4-point Likert scale from (4) “almost always true” through (1) “almost never true.” Scores on the scales are summed after reverse scoring the entire warmth/affection scale to create a measure of perceived coldness and lack of affection (a form of rejection), and after reverse scoring specified items on the indifference/neglect scale. Possible scores on the measure range from a low of 60 (revealing the perception of extreme acceptance, probably unrealistic idealization of the parent in most cases) through 240 (revealing the perception of profound rejection). The PARQ is designed in such a way that its midpoint of 150 reveals the perception of significantly more rejection than acceptance. Scores between 140 and 150,

however, reveal the perception of serious rejection, though not significantly more rejection than acceptance (25). On average, it takes about 10–15 min to complete the PARQ.

Khaleque and Rohner summarized the reliability of the Child PARQ (along with the Adult and Parent versions of the measure) in a meta-analysis of 51 studies worldwide (35). These studies were based on 6898 respondents from every major ethnic group in the United States (i.e., African Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, and Hispanic Americans), as well as respondents from Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. Overall, the PARQ is known to have been used with more than 150,000 children and adults worldwide; the PARQ has been used extensively in research, in clinical settings, in schools, by the courts, and in other applied contexts (26). Results of research using the PARQ over the past 45 years strongly suggest that the measure is reliable for research and for clinical and applied purposes internationally as well as for use among ethnic groups within the United States. More specifically, the mean weighted alpha coefficient for the Child PARQ was 0.89 (for the Adult PARQ it was 0.95, and for the Parent PARQ it was 0.84). This evidence is especially compelling because no study utilizing the PARQ anywhere in the world was found where alpha coefficients were low and nonsignificant. Moreover, there was no significant heterogeneity in effect sizes (alphas) across the major geographic regions of the world or within the American ethnic groups studied. Extensive evidence about the convergent, discriminant, and construct validity of the PARQ is provided by Rohner (25).

Multiple versions and forms of the PARQ are available. These include the Child PARQ, Mother and Father versions, in a standard (60-item) as well as in a short (24-item) form. Additionally, the Adult PARQ, Mother and Father versions, is also available in a standard and short form, as is the Parent PARQ. The Early Childhood PARQ, however, is available only in a short form. The research reported in this paper is based solely on the standard (60-item) form of the Child PARQ, Mother and Father versions.

## Results

The mean PARQ: Father scores and PARQ: Mother scores for the 116 participants in the five groups were reported in Bernet et al. (29). In summary, as shown in Fig. 1: for intact families, the PARQ: Father and PARQ: Mother scores were almost exactly equal; for divorced families, in which the children continued to see both parents on a regular basis, the PARQ: Father and PARQ: Mother scores were also very close to each other; in neglected families, in which the children of divorced parents lived with their mothers and saw their fathers rarely or never, the PARQ: Mother scores were significantly lower (revealing greater perceived acceptance) than the PARQ: Father scores; for the alienated-father families, PARQ: Mother scores were dramatically lower (accepting) than PARQ: Father scores (rejecting); and for the alienated-mother families, PARQ: Mother scores were dramatically higher (rejecting) than PARQ: Father scores (accepting). These scores indicate that alienated children have extremely positive perceptions of the preferred parent and extremely negative perceptions of the rejected parent. These data supported the hypothesis that alienated children tend to manifest the psychological mechanism of splitting.

## Measuring the PARQ-Gap

The current research extends the analysis of data previously reported in Bernet et al. (29). We introduce here the concept of the PARQ-Gap, which refers to the absolute difference in scores between child's responses on the PARQ: Father and PARQ: Mother. In this study, the PARQ-Gap scores in intact families and divorced families—where children had regular contact with both parents—were very small. That is, children in both family types perceived both parents as being loving and accepting. The PARQ-Gap score in families where children were neglected by their fathers was considerably greater than in either intact or divorced families. The PARQ-Gap score for alienated children, however, tended to be very large

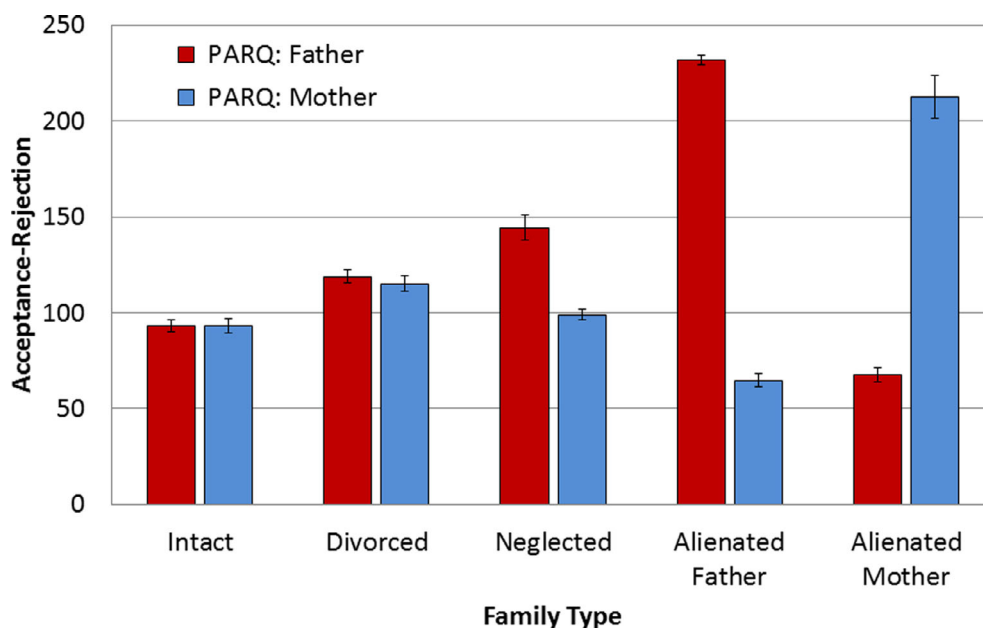


FIG. 1—Relation between perceived parental acceptance–rejection and family type. Lowest possible score on PARQ = 60 (very positive perception of parent); highest possible score on PARQ = 240 (very negative perception of parent). Error bars: 95% CI. From Bernet et al. (29), used with permission.

because children perceived the preferred parent extremely positively, but the rejected parent extremely negatively. Table 1 indicates the Mean PARQ-Gap scores for the five family types; Fig. 2 displays mean PARQ-Gap scores for the five family types.

Results of statistical analysis shown in Table 1 reveal a significant difference between family types, as determined by one-way ANOVA ( $F(4,111) = 593.597, p < 0.001$ ). A Games-Howell post hoc test revealed that the mean PARQ-Gap scores for all family types were statistically different ( $p < 0.001$ ), except that there was no significant difference between intact and divorced family groups ( $p = 0.241$ ). Most importantly, though, the mean PARQ-Gap scores for both the father-alienated group and the mother-alienated group were significantly higher than that of the neglected group ( $p < 0.001$ ). Table 2 shows the significant differences among children neglected by their fathers, children alienated from their fathers, and children alienated from their mothers.

**Using the PARQ-Gap to Help Identify Parental Alienation**

Researchers and practitioners who use the PARQ to help identify possible PA should consider using a PARQ-Gap score of at

TABLE 1—Family types and the Mean PARQ-Gap Scores for each type, with SD and 95% CI.

Family Type	N	PARQ-Gap		
		M	SD	95% CI
Intact families	35	7.54	5.65	±1.87
Divorced families	20	11.35	6.86	±3.01
Neglected families	16	45.31	13.42	±6.58
Father alienated	24	167.21	13.89	±5.56
Mother alienated	21	144.67	29.16	±12.47

The PARQ-Gap is the difference between children’s responses on the PARQ: Father and PARQ: Mother for each subject.

PARQ, Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire.

least 90 points—that is, the difference between scores on the PARQ: Mother versus the PARQ: Father—as being an indicator of PA. The proposed PARQ-Gap cut score of 90 is based on the data displayed in Fig. 3, where the 90-point PARQ-Gap successfully distinguished children in the two groups (severely alienated vs. nonalienated) with 99% accuracy. (Binary accuracy is the proportion of true results [115 in this study] among the total number of cases [116 in this study]). There was only one exception to this criterion in a sample of 116 children, 45 of whom were alienated from either their mother or their father. The one exception, a 12-year-old child severely alienated from the father, had a PARQ-Gap score of 58 points (PARQ: Mother = 67 points; PARQ: Father = 125 points). In this case, the father was not perceived to be all bad; in fact, he was still perceived to be reasonably loving. This criterion—the PARQ-Gap score of at least 90 points—is appropriate, however, only when the child perceives the favored parent to be extremely (and probably unrealistically) accepting, as defined by PARQ scores between 60 and 70. Using the criterion of a 90-point PARQ-Gap then places the disfavored parent in the seriously rejecting range of at least 140, and often higher. A PARQ-Gap score of 90 anywhere else in the distribution of possible PARQ scores is likely to have different implications. For example, the meaning of scores is very different in families where one parent scores 100 on the PARQ and the other parent scores 190 (a 90-point PARQ-Gap). Scores such as these reveal the fact that one parent is perceived to be loving and accepting—though not idealistically perfect—whereas the other parent is perceived to be seriously rejecting. This is a common scenario in many psychologically neglecting and emotionally abusive families.

**Discussion**

Clinicians and researchers have consistently observed for more than 35 years that alienated children generally perceive their parents in a manner consistent with splitting. That is, they tend to perceive the preferred parent in a strongly positive manner and

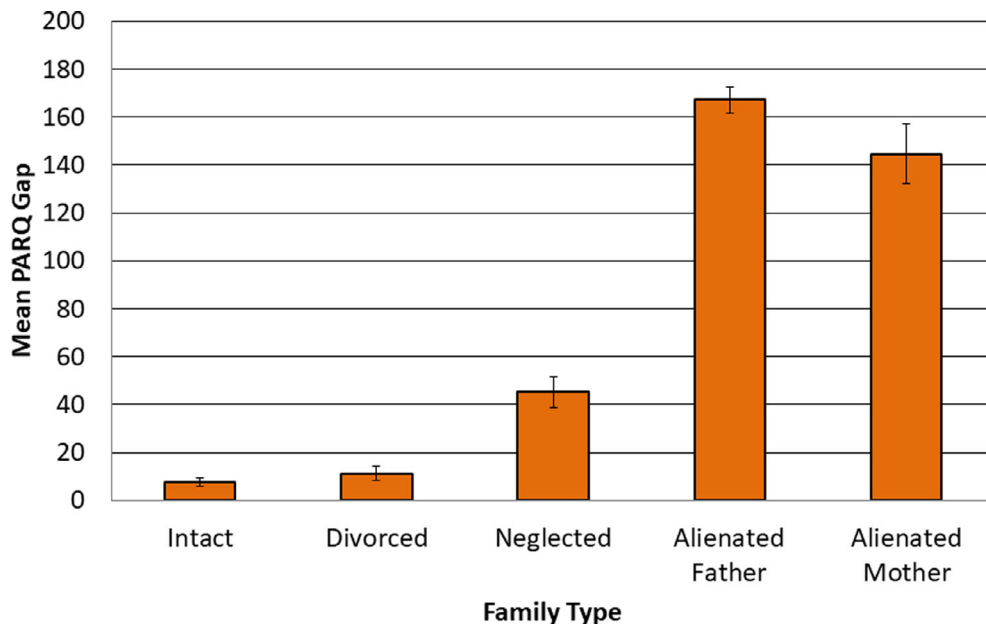


FIG. 2—Relation between children’s responses on mean PARQ-Gap and family type. The PARQ-Gap is the difference between the PARQ: Father and PARQ: Mother for each subject. PARQ = Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire. Error bars: 95% CI.

TABLE 2—Statistically significant differences between the mean PARQ-Gap scores of family types as determined by one-way ANOVA and Games-Howell post hoc test.

Family Type	1	2	3	4	5
1. Intact families					
2. Divorced families	2 > 1, <i>p</i> = 0.241				
3. Neglected families	3 > 1***	3 > 2***			
4. Father alienated	4 > 1***	4 > 2***	4 > 3***		
5. Mother alienated	5 > 1***	5 > 2***	5 > 3***	5 < 4***	

The PARQ-Gap is the difference between children’s responses on the PARQ: Father and PARQ: Mother for each subject.

PARQ, Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire.

\*\*\**p* < 0.001.

the rejected or alienated parent in a strongly negative manner. Likewise, clinicians and researchers have pointed out that children who have been abused or neglected tend not to perceive abusive or neglectful parents in such a negative manner. Abused children typically have a somewhat negative perception of the abusive parent, but they usually maintain a sense of ambivalence toward that parent. That is, they dislike the abusive acts, but they hold out hope that the abusive parent will reform and become more loving (36). Thus, the difference between alienated and neglected children is counterintuitive: The alienated child (who was never abused by the rejected parent) frequently has a more negative perception of the parent than does the neglected child (who was actually maltreated by the rejected parent).

Empirical research presented here demonstrates how the PARQ-Gap helps to distinguish severely alienated from non-alienated (including neglected) children in an objective, quantitative manner. The PARQ-Gap is defined as the absolute difference between children’s scores on the PARQ: Mother and the PARQ: Father. In this study, children in intact families have very low PARQ-Gap scores. That is, they tend to perceive both parents as being loving and accepting. Children in divorced

families, who continue to see both parents, also tend to have low PARQ-Gap scores. That is, they also tend to perceive both parents as being accepting, although not as positively as children in intact families. These trends are typical for most intact and divorced families where the children continue to have ongoing contact with both parents (26). However, children in the current study who were neglected by their fathers have moderately high PARQ-Gap scores. That is, they continue to perceive their mothers as being accepting, but they perceive their fathers to be moderately rejecting. Children in this study who were alienated from their fathers, on the other hand, tend to have extremely high PARQ-Gap scores. They perceive their mothers as extremely accepting and their fathers as extremely rejecting. Likewise, children who were alienated from their mothers have extremely high PARQ-Gap scores in that they perceive their mothers as extremely rejecting and their fathers as extremely accepting. The 90-point PARQ-Gap criterion used in this study distinguished severely alienated children from neglected and other children with 99% accuracy.

We should note that in this research we intentionally compared neglected children (who experienced *mild to moderate maltreatment*) with alienated children (who manifested a *severe degree of PA*). That type of comparison is similar to the task confronting child custody evaluators. In custody evaluations, children might say that they refuse visitation and never want to see their father again (consistent with a severe level of PA) because their father failed to give them good food, confiscated their cell phone, and always yelled at them (consistent with a level of mild maltreatment). The custody evaluator could administer the PARQ to a child regarding each parent. This would help clarify whether the more likely explanation for the child’s contact refusal is PA or maltreatment by the father.

Although children who have been mildly to moderately maltreated are likely to maintain ambivalence toward the abusive parent, children who have been very severely maltreated probably do not. Children who have been mildly to moderately

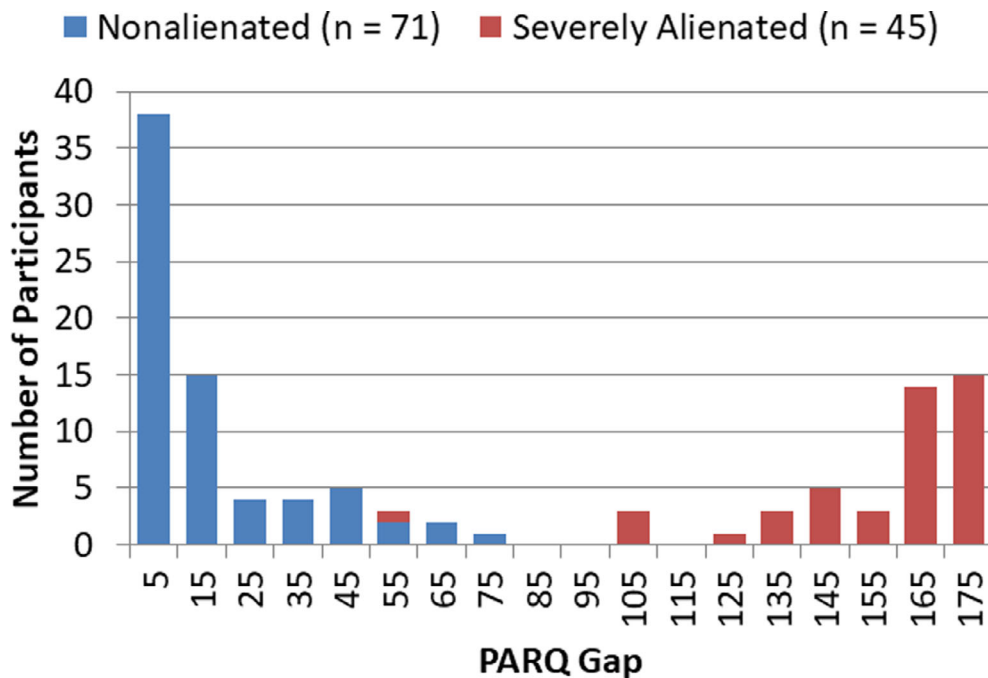


FIG. 3—Distribution of participants based on each individual’s PARQ-Gap score. A cut score of 90 distinguishes severely alienated from nonalienated children with 99% accuracy.



maltreated usually continue to hope that the abusive parent will become nice again; children who have been very severely maltreated are likely to abandon hope that the abusive parent will reform. Thus, the observations made in this article that mildly to moderately abused children frequently maintain ambivalence toward the abusive parent may not apply to children who have been repeatedly and severely abused. Children who are estranged due to a history of persistent, severe abuse are likely to have very negative perceptions of the abusive parent, similar to the perceptions of alienated children toward the rejected parent. The PARQ-Gap appears to distinguish children who have been mildly to moderately maltreated from children who are severely alienated. It may not distinguish alienation from estrangement due to very severe abuse. Furthermore, the PARQ-Gap score is not “a test for parental alienation.” Rather, the PARQ-Gap score may indicate a high degree of splitting, which is simply one of the known features of severe PA.

Future research should clarify how children who have experienced mild, moderate, and severe abuse respond to the PARQ for the abusive parent versus the nonabusive parent. Future research should also clarify how children who have experienced mild, moderate, and severe levels of PA respond to the PARQ for the preferred parent versus for the rejected parent. It will also be relevant to explore whether the PARQ-Gap varies with children’s age within the same family, since there have been anecdotal reports that the oldest children of several siblings tend to be more intensely alienated compared with their younger brothers and sisters. It would be interesting, also, to compare the MMPI-2 results of the parents of alienated children with parents of physically or sexually abused children.

This research has both strengths and limitations that should be recognized. Strengths, for example, include the homogeneity of the study groups, that is, all participants in the intact, divorced, and neglected families came from the same pool of volunteers by way of ResearchMatch. Likewise, all alienated respondents came from the same PA-specific treatment program, that is, the Family Reflections Reunification Program. Also, we consider it a strength that the PARQ was not developed specifically for use in child custody disputes or for identifying PA. In contrast, the PARQ came out of an independent line of research—IPARTheory—and has been used successfully in hundreds of studies only occasionally having anything to do with divorce or child custody. The PARQ is also known to be reliable and valid for use in international and multi-ethnic contexts. Since it is available for use in 65 languages and dialects worldwide, it can be used by many researchers and practitioners concerned with issues of PA internationally.

The major weakness of this research involves the family type that we characterized as neglected. There were 16 participants in that group. In all cases, the children lived with their mothers and rarely or never saw their fathers. Although their mothers reported that those 16 children had been rejected, avoided, and abandoned by their fathers, none of the mothers said that the fathers had been abusive. We therefore considered those children to be mildly to moderately maltreated. Although it seems unlikely, it is possible that a child characterized by the mother as neglected by the father was actually alienated from the father. In future research, the features of the control groups should be determined with greater precision.

This research indicates that the PARQ-Gap might become useful for clinical and forensic evaluations of children who may be alienated or estranged. Of course, the PARQ should not be used in isolation to determine whether a child is alienated or

estranged. When it is used during child custody evaluations, the PARQ—like any psychological test—should be only one part of a comprehensive psychiatric or psychological assessment of the family. A comprehensive evaluation includes multiple interviews, meetings with collateral informants, review of records, and teamwork with other professionals. However, we conclude that both clinical and forensic practitioners should consider using the PARQ as one component of a comprehensive evaluation when they are concerned about the possible diagnosis of PA.

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