The author wrote an article, “Parental Alienation and Misinformation Proliferation,” for this Special Issue of Family Court Review, which is devoted to various aspects of parental alienation (PA). This short article is a response to the article by Milchman, Geffner, and Meier, which discussed my article and other contributions to the Special Issue. All of these articles represent an attempt by the Editors of the Special Issue to promote “dialogue” among writers who have different perspectives regarding parental alienation. In my view, this is a misguided endeavor, since the publication of cascading criminations, recriminations, and re-recriminations simply creates confusion and consternation for the readers of Family Court Review. This new article offers an alternative approach for creating constructive dialogue among PA-promoters and PA-detractors, that is, convene a face-to-face discussion of these individuals and encourage them to write an article together in which they jointly explain their various perspectives regarding PA.

Keywords: Misinformation; Parental Alienation.

This author wrote an article, “Parental Alienation and Misinformation Proliferation,” in this Special Issue of Family Court Review, which is devoted to various aspects of parental alienation (PA). Milchman, Geffner, and Meier wrote a commentary—“Ideology and Rhetoric Replace Science and Reason in Some Parental Alienation Literature and Advocacy: A Critique”—that discussed my article and other contributions to the Special Issue. This short, new article is a response to the critique by Milchman et al.

It is noteworthy that Milchman et al. and I have almost the same definition for the phenomenon that I refer to as “parental alienation.” In my article in this issue of Family Court Review, I provided this definition of PA: “a mental condition in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies himself or herself strongly with an alienating parent and rejects a relationship with the target parent without legitimate justification.”

In their article in this issue of Family Court Review, Milchman et al. say:

None of the authors of this article dispute the need to identify, assess, and treat parent–child relationship problems where a parent may have manipulated a child to reject the other parent. … [Geffner, Milchman, and Meier] all agree that in cases where a parent intentionally attempts to cause a child to reject a parent, the parent’s actions should be described behaviorally and addressed through appropriate interventions, as should any other problematic parenting behavior (p. 342).
Thus, Milchman et al. and I appear to be talking about the same group of children. The difference is that my colleagues and I refer to this pattern of family pathology—certain behavioral symptoms in the child combined with alienating behaviors by the preferred parent—by a specific term, that is, “parental alienation.” In contrast, Milchman et al. say, “[W]e strongly object to using the label 'alienation' in place of an objective and comprehensive causal assessment, whether that assessment is done as a child custody evaluation or as a careful review of the facts by judges or other decisionmakers” (p. 342). This difference of opinion appears to be the main point of the commentary by Milchman et al.

This disagreement is a matter of semantics: some people say “parental alienation;” other people say “bad parenting” (p. 342). Why is this disagreement regarding terminology worth arguing about in an international family law journal? I do not think this topic merits the space that is being devoted to this discussion. My opinion is that it is perfectly fine for some writers to talk about “parental alienation,” while other writers avoid that term and write about “bad parenting” and “other key factors in family dynamics” (p. 342). It is fine with me for Milchman et al., custody evaluators, attorneys, and judges to simply talk about bad parenting. I am tolerant of academic, scholarly diversity. In contrast, Milchman et al. want us to stop talking about “parental alienation” and use some other generic term for the same set of maladaptive behaviors that are observed in some children and their parents.

I. MORE MISINFORMATION PROLIFERATION

In my primary article in this Special Issue of Family Court Review, I discussed the remarkable amount of misinformation regarding parental alienation syndrome (PAS) and PA that has been propagated in the professional literature since the 1980s. In that article, I cited more than 20 specific quotations from professional publications in which information regarding PA was either mistaken or misleading. In this issue of Family Court Review, Milchman et al. continue that tradition of making false statements regarding PA. In this response, I primarily cite false statements that pertain to me. In the following examples, the quotations from the Milchman et al. article are in italics. I will briefly explain the bases for my assertions regarding the misstatements by Milchman et al., but this is not the place for a thorough debate of what various writers have said or not said over many years.

Some alienation theorists still appear to propound a single-factor explanation of children’s rejection of a parent because they do not give weight to causes other than alienation in their approach to practice (Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013) (p. 341).

Milchman et al. are referring to Parental Alienation: The Handbook for Mental Health and Legal Professionals, edited by Lorandos, Bernet, and Sauber. Chapter 2 of that book, “The Psychosocial Assessment of Contact Refusal,” includes the following conditions in the differential diagnosis of contact refusal: normal preferences; loyalty conflicts; children’s acts to avoid conflict; worried or depressed children; stubborn children; maltreated children; accidental indoctrination; purposeful indoctrination; shared delusional disorder; and contact refusal resulting from a combination of causes. It is incongruous for Milchman et al. to claim that the Parental Alienation Handbook supports the “single-factor explanation of children’s rejection of a parent.” Milchman et al. are creating a straw man argument, so that they can criticize something that we did not say in the first place.

A rhetorical strategy we find often within certain writers’ publications and presentations is the assertion of world-wide consensus in favor of the alienation concept without acknowledging the controversy about this consensus (Bernet, 2008; 2013; 2020; …) (p. 343).
Milchman et al. are citing an article I wrote, “Parental Alienation and DSM-V;” a book chapter, “Parental Alienation, DSM-5, and ICD-11;” and my article in this Special Issue of Family Court Review. They are misrepresenting what I said. I have at times pointed out that PA has been observed in many countries. For example:

The international scope of PA is reflected by references from 35 countries on six continents, including: Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Cuba, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.¹

The bibliography of the Parental Alienation Handbook had more than 1,000 references regarding PA or a closely related topic. However, I do not recall claiming a “world-wide consensus in favor of the alienation concept,” since it is clear that there has been controversy regarding PA in Germany, Sweden, France, the U.K., Japan, and other countries. This is another straw man argument by Milchman et al.

There is less consensus than many advocates assert, and some recent research raises concerns about the core role that is claimed for denigration in parent alienation (Rowen & Emery, 2014, 2018, 2019). … Rowen and Emery … have continued to conclude that “the initial work we have completed on parental denigrations calls into question basic suppositions about parental alienation” (Rowen & Emery, 2019, p. 207) (p. 343).

Milchman et al. do not seem to be aware that Rowen and Emery studied a low level of parental denigration and not the persistent, high level of denigration observed in PA cases. I have criticized Rowen and Emery for comparing apples and oranges. I have also written letters to Rowen and Emery suggesting that we pool data from denigration research and data from PA research, to see if we could collaborate on writing a paper that synthesizes these different perspectives; they did not reply to my letters.

In addition, a lack of any scientific underpinnings for the basic premise that alienation is a mental disorder is precisely what led to the rejection of the diagnosis by DSM-5, as discussed above (p. 343).

I had discussions and correspondence with the leadership of the DSM-5 Task Force, such as Darrel Regier, M.D., and Daniel Pine, M.D. These individuals never said that they doubted the reality of PA. They repeatedly made the distinction between a “mental disorder” (the term for typical diagnoses such as schizophrenia, depression, etc.) and a “mental condition” (the term used for other diagnoses such as relational problems, child maltreatment, and intimate partner violence). Regier, Pine, and others said that PA was not a mental disorder because it was not located inside the individual patient; rather, it was an example of a mental condition, such as a relational problem, because it was located between two individuals, i.e., the child and one or more parents.² In the end, the concept of PA was expressed in DSM-5, but not the actual words. PA is an example of the novel diagnosis: child affected by parental relationship distress. That was later spelled out in an article, “Child Affected by Parental Relational Distress,” by Bernet, Wamboldt, and Narrow.³

To date, the empirical research studies on alienation are methodologically flawed and no one has found scientifically validated criteria to identify “alienated” children and differentiate them from abused or otherwise psychologically injured or traumatized children (Saini et al., 2012, 2016) (p. 345).

Milchman et al. should have mentioned my research regarding the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ) (see “An Objective Measure of Splitting in Parental Alienation:
The Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire,” by Bernet, Gregory, Reay, and Rohner.4) Dr. Milchman knows about this paper because she criticized it in a previously published article. The PARQ research is not perfect, but it certainly is a useful contribution to the task of distinguishing alienated from nonalienated children. The design of the PARQ study was replicated in another project using a different test and a different population of participants, “Exploring Parent–Child Relationships in Alienated versus Neglected/Emotionally Abused Children using the Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test,” by Blagg and Godfrey.5 Obviously, more research should be done, but it is hyperbole and misleading to say that “no one has found scientifically validated criteria” to help identify PA.

As it became clear that PAD was not going to be accepted as a new diagnosis in DSM-5, advocates dropped the “D” (Bernet, 2008, 2013) and then proposed that PA be included in sections describing relational problems that are not diagnoses (Bernet, 2013) (p. 346).

Contrary to what Milchman et al. say, relational problems are considered diagnoses. Relational problems are in the chapter of DSM-5 called “Other Conditions That May Be a Focus of Clinical Attention.” That chapter includes parent–child relational problem, child affected by parental relationship distress, child physical abuse, child sexual abuse, child neglect, child psychological abuse, spouse or partner physical violence, spouse or partner neglect, and spouse or partner psychological abuse. All of those conditions are considered diagnoses.

PAD/PA “diagnoses” are not based on particular behavioral symptoms. They are based on the motivations and justifications or lack thereof for the behaviors of the preferred parent and child (p. 346).

That statement reflects a total misunderstanding by Milchman et al. as to how PA is diagnosed. Although there are several criteria to consider, the most important are the presence of some or all of the eight classic symptoms of PA in the child (which are clearly behaviors) and the presence of some of the 17 common alienating behaviors in the preferred parent (which are clearly behaviors).

Bernet (2020, p 296) quotes Saini and colleagues’ (2016) statement that “there is remarkable agreement about PA and the ability to identify it “reliably” to support such an argument. Bernet’s statement implies that Saini et al. (2016) are saying that PA can be accurately identified, which means discriminated from other causes of parent rejection (p. 347).

In this case, Milchman et al. seem to be misrepresenting both Saini et al. and me at the same time. This is what I said in my primary article in this Special Issue of Family Court Review:

Also, Saini, Johnson, Fidler, and Bala reviewed 58 research studies regarding PA and they concluded: “[T]here is remarkable agreement about the behavioral strategies parents can use to potentially manipulate their children’s feelings, attitudes, and beliefs in ways that may interfere with their relationship with the other parent. The cluster of symptoms or behaviors indicating the presence of alienation in the child can also be reliably identified.”

I believe that both Saini et al. and I are using “reliable” in the traditional sense in science—a measure of the internal consistency and stability of a measuring device—not in the way claimed by Milchman et al.

The basis for Bernet’s (2017) claim that the ABA accepts PA is that they published a book, Children Held Hostage by Clawar and Rivlin in 1991, with a Second Edition in 2013. … Professional organizations publish, advertise, and promote many books that do not represent the official views of the organizations (p. 349).
I discussed this topic with Stanley S. Clawar and Brynne V. Rivlin. They told me that their books were “commissioned” by the Section on Family Law of the American Bar Association (ABA). That suggests some level of endorsement by that component of the ABA.

Similarly, Bernet claims that the American Psychological Association (APA) accepts parental alienation (p. 349).

Milchman et al. are mistaken. I do not say that APA accepts PA. The APA has made it clear on several occasions that it has no official policy regarding PAS. I recently wrote:

APA is a large organization with more than 120,000 members and many components, which may have conflicting opinions regarding PA and PAS. It is clear that many APA members and components accept the reality and the significance of PA, for example: the authors of the Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce Proceedings (1994); the authors of the Guidelines for the Practice of Parenting Coordination (2012); the authors of the chapter, “Child Custody and Access,” in the APA Handbook of Forensic Psychology (2015); and the editors of the APA Dictionary. There are other APA members who are critical of the concepts of PAS and/or PA. As an organization, APA apparently has “no official position” regarding PAS, but it has not made a statement regarding PA.6

The AACAP (1997), AFCC (2006), and AAP (2016) refer to “alienation” but do not recognize PAS/PAD/PA as a clinical diagnosis (p. 351).

No one is claiming that these organizations “recognize PAS/PAD/PA as a clinical diagnosis.” I have said that these organizations recognize the concept or the phenomenon of PA. Incidentally, I do not cite this type of information to prove the scientific validity of PA. Instead, I have used it to support the claim that PA is generally accepted by the relevant scientific community, which is one of the criteria for a Daubert or Frye hearing. I think these citations help to prove that the reality of PA has been acknowledged by a variety of professional organizations in the U.S.

However, as noted above, their documentation consists primarily of anecdotal evidence without analysis of other potential causes of a parent–child estrangement. This is not scientific data, no matter how much of it there is (p. 353).

Ironically, a few paragraphs later, Milchman et al. introduced their own anecdotal evidence to support an argument. They said, “Milchman had a case in which a boy had been beaten severely enough to lead child protective services to deny contact with the father” (p. 354). Also, “[i]n another case Milchman had, a three-year-old child returned from parenting time with her father with genital injuries that she attributed to abuse by her father” (p. 354).

II. CONCLUSIONS

The range of articles in this Special Issue represent an attempt by the Editors to promote “dialogue” among writers who have different perspectives regarding parental alienation. Although that seems like a good idea, their method for achieving that goal is flawed. In my view, the paper by Milchman et al. is riddled with misinformation, misleading statements, and outright false information. I recommended that the Editors of this Special Issue decline to publish the Milchman et al. article in its original form. The publication of cascading criminations, recriminations, and re-recriminations simply creates confusion and consternation for the readers of Family Court Review.

Instead, I propose a different method for accomplishing dialogue among clinicians, forensic practitioners, researchers, and other writers who have different and even contradictory opinions regarding PA. I suggest that the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts convene a
A discussion group consisting of both PA-promoters and PA-detractions. The task for the discussion group would be to talk to each other, listen to each other, and collaborate in writing an article in which they jointly explain their various perspectives regarding parental alienation. They would agree to base the article on scientific facts—both qualitative and quantitative research—and not on rhetoric.

ENDNOTES

1. William Bernet, References in the Professional Literature, in PARENTAL ALIENATION: THE HANDBOOK FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND LEGAL PROFESSIONALS, SUPPLEMENTAL REFERENCE GUIDE FOR PARENTAL ALIENATION 5, 6 (Demosthenes Lorandos et al. eds., 2013).

2. E.g., letter from Darrel A. Regier to William Bernet (January 24, 2012) (on file with the author).


William Bernet, M.D., a professor emeritus at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, has testified as an expert in forensic psychiatry about 300 times in 24 states. In 2007, Dr. Bernet and Judge Don R. Ash published Children of Divorce: A Practical Guide for Parents, Therapists, Attorneys, and Judges. Dr. Bernet edited Parental Alienation, DSM-5, and ICD-11, which was published in 2010. Dr. Bernet and his colleagues edited Parental Alienation: The Handbook for Mental Health and Legal Professionals, which was published in 2013. Dr. Bernet and Dr. Demosthenes Lorandos edited Parental Alienation – Science and Law, which will be published in 2020. He was the founder and first president of the Parental Alienation Study Group.