

# The Lost Parents' Perspective on Parental Alienation Syndrome

DESPINA VASSILIOU and GLENN F. CARTWRIGHT  
*McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada*

*This study examined five alienated fathers' and one alienated mother's perception of parental alienation syndrome (PAS). The data were collected via semistructured, open-ended interview questionnaires to determine if there were shared characteristics among alienated families, common issues in the marital conflicts that contributed to the marriage dissolution, the nature of the participants reports of alienation, similarities in the experience of alienation, and what things a lost parent might do differently. The findings are discussed along with limitations of the study.*

## THE NATURE OF PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME

Dr. Richard A. Gardner, a forensic and child psychiatrist, has conducted evaluations regarding the custody of children following divorce (Rand, 1997a). Through his casework he observed that many divorcing families shared common characteristics that he labelled as parental alienation syndrome (PAS). Parental alienation syndrome was defined as a syndrome where one parent (usually the custodial parent) alienates the child or children from the other parent. Parental alienation syndrome involves the alienating parent engaging the child in a series of conscious and subconscious techniques like brainwashing in an attempt to denigrate the other parent. The child also contributes to the denigration of the allegedly hated parent (Cartwright, 1993; Gardner, 1992, 1998).

The child's contribution to the PAS has been postulated by Rand (1997b) to be due to one of several reasons. One may be the child's need to protect and care for an angered and disturbed alienating parent. A second reason may be the child's sense of powerlessness in the conflictual situation. The child then manipulates the conflicts between the parents as a means of gain-

---

Address correspondence to Despina Vassiliou, McGill University, 3700 McTavish, Montreal, Quebec H3A 1Y2, Canada. E-mail: dvassi@PO-BOX.McGill.ca

ing greater control and power. Third, an adolescent seeking freedom may use a PAS situation to gain greater freedom from the stricter parent. This, in turn, fuels the negative view the more permissive parent holds of the other and weakens the more permissive parent's ability to control the child. The child then engages in more acting out behavior which adds further stress to the conflictual situation.

Cartwright (1993) claimed that the frequent allegations of abuse associated with PAS may be virtual. Virtual allegations refer to cases where the abuse is simply suggested in order to cast aspersions on the lost parent's character without the alienating parent having to fabricate incidents of alleged abuse. These allegations are subtle and, as a result, difficult to prove or disprove. Cartwright (1993) maintains that as lawyers and judges become more aware of PAS and more skilled at evaluating real allegations, the incidence of virtual allegations will increase.

### High Conflict Situations

As the dissolution of a marriage proceeds and court proceedings begin regarding custody, there is likely to be increasing conflict among the divorcing parents. It is believed that this conflict propels and intensifies the occurrence of PAS. Family conflict may contribute to many difficulties that the individual family members encounter—problems in social development, emotional stability, and cognitive skills. These difficulties can seed long-term consequences that may persist long after the finalization of the divorce (Kurdek, 1981). Moreover, when the conflict occurring in a family (whether divorced or intact) is ongoing and heightened, the individual family members have been found to express feelings of lowered self-esteem, increased anxiety, and diminished self-control (Slater & Haber, 1984). Particularly at risk are the children. There are reports that adolescents have a greater risk of developing adjustment problems whether the family goes through divorce or remains intact (Hoffman, 1971). The level of family conflict is an important dimension that can alter the family structure and affects the children's well-being (Demo & Acock, 1988). Parental alienation syndrome is a syndrome that is often associated with an elevated level of conflict.

### Divorce

The effect of the divorce itself on the family can be devastating. What was once decided between the parents is now decided by third parties like lawyers and judges (Girdner, 1985). Access to the children by each parent also changes. Whereas before everyone lived together and parents and children had the freedom to interact whenever they wished, divorce dictates that they must now abide by rules set by others. The most common effect of divorce is that the child remains primarily with one parent, while the other parent becomes a "visitor" who is only allowed to see the child on certain occa-

sions. Theoretically, this visitor is allowed to have parental authority, that is, to engage in the decision-making process regarding the children (e.g., what school they should attend; Turkat, 1994). However, divorce occurs partly because the parents could no longer make decisions together. Consequently, the visiting parent does not always have the agreed visitation and may be unable to participate in the decision-making process for important issues in their children's lives. One-time significant parents soon become unwanted visitors for their children. The Children's Rights Council in 1994 reported that an estimated six million children in the U.S. were victims of interfered visitation by their custodial parents. Arditti (1992) found that as high as 50% of fathers (usually the noncustodial parents) reported that their visitation with their children had been interfered with by their ex-wives. Furthermore, as many as 40% of custodial mothers admitted denying their exhusbands their right to visitation as a means of punishing them (Kressel, 1985). In PAS families, the interference with child visitation is but one of the symptoms, though the most important. It is believed that the goal of the alienating parent is not only to interfere in the lost parent's visits but to eliminate both the visits and the visiting parent from the child's life. Gardner (1992) postulated that PAS is of a serious nature which may be provoked by a serious emotional issue, such as custody and Cartwright (1993) has noted that PAS may also be provoked by other serious and emotional issues such as property division or finance.

### Contributions of the Legal System

Cartwright (1993) observed that the prolonged involvement of lawyers and courts contributes not only to the development of PAS, but also to the increase in the severity and longevity of PAS. Clawar and Rivlin (1991) conducted a 12-year study regarding the parental programming of children "to influence the outcome of disputes," which was commissioned by the American Bar Association Section of Family Law. They found that 80% of divorcing parents practiced parental programming to varying degrees—20% of whom did so at least once a day. Furthermore, Rand (1997a) postulated that many allegations of either sexual or physical abuse may be an alienating technique. These allegations are powerful factors in the courts' decisions for custody and are, therefore, an invaluable tool to the alienators. Cartwright recognized that the courts require adequate time to assess each case in order to determine the best interests of the child. However, he cautioned that once identified as a PAS case, the courts then need to make speedy judgments in order to stop the alienation process immediately. Unfortunately, the usual procedure of court postponements and continuances permit the PAS process to continue and strengthen. Moreover, Goldwater (1991) had postulated that the longer the children are in the alienating custodial situation, the "further they will drift away from their noncustodial parent" (p. 130). Cartwright also recognized that a forceful judgement is required to counter the force of

alienation. Clear and forceful judgements are believed to deter possible alienating parents from even beginning the alienation process if they risk immediate loss of custody of their children.

### Combined Factors

A number of factors influence the occurrence of PAS. The family unit does not function in isolation. Individual characteristics of family members may also play a role in the occurrence of PAS. A study conducted by Calabrese, Miller, and Dooley (1987) examined the characteristics of 49 parents and their children from two fourth grade classes. They found that the best predictors of alienation was related not to the children's academic attitudes or performance but to the characteristics of the individuals involved. Specifically, they reported that high levels of alienation were found to be associated with unemployed, single mothers, whose child was female with few perceived friends. While these findings appear to support Gardner's early contention that the alienator is usually the mother, they provide little support for Gardner's (1998) position that the shift from the "tender years" presumption to that of the "best-interests-of-the-child" contributes to this phenomenon. Specifically, such a shift leaves mothers in a weakened position for custody disputes, as fathers now have an equal opportunity to gain custody. As a result, mothers begin using such techniques as alienation to regain strength.

## METHOD AND PROCEDURES OF THE STUDY

### Participants

To be included in the study, the participants met the following criteria:

1. they were formerly part of a family unit that included at least one child;
2. they had divorced or were in the process of divorcing;
3. they identified themselves as experiencing parental alienation.

The participants were five fathers and one mother. Two resided in different areas in the province of Quebec and the rest in the United States.

### Method and Research Questions

The data were collected through semistructured, open-ended, tape-recorded telephone interview questionnaires. The interview method was chosen as a means of achieving a more holistic understanding of the alienating situation. Each participant was interviewed separately by the researcher.

The following categories of questions were posed:

1. Are there characteristics (e.g., number of children, number of marriages, etc.) common to alienated families?
2. Are there common themes or issues among the conflicts within couples that contribute to marriage dissolution?
3. Are there common themes in the participants' perceptions of the alienation process?
4. Given the opportunity, what are some things that the lost parents perceive they might have done differently?

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The results of the study suggest that:

1. Family characteristics, such as number of children and number of marriages, were weak components in the occurrence of PAS.
2. The alienators' changes of homes were not a salient characteristic of PAS families.
3. Marital conflicts and their intensities were weak predictors in the development of PAS.
4. The relationships between the alienating and lost parents were strained after the onset of PAS.
5. There was a general decrease in the frequency of visitation for the lost parent, which may or may not have been due to PAS.
6. As expected, there was a reduction of other contacts (aside from visitation) between the lost parents and their children that further limited the relationships between them.
7. All of the participants perceived a general "sabotage" of their relationships with their children by the alienators. The findings confirmed that the alienators used denigrating techniques (e.g., implying that the lost parents were not good people).
8. The children acted as secondary alienators.
9. The alienator's close family members also tended to alienate.
10. The participants perceived the underlying cause of the alienation to be hatred of the lost parents, anger, revenge, or some combination of these.
11. The lost parents experienced a loss of both parental role and power whether or not they had visitation with their children.
12. Lost parents were generally dissatisfied with legal and mental health assistance. Both the legal and mental health professions have inadequately explored all the parameters of PAS.
13. Given the opportunity, lost parents would go to great lengths to avoid experiencing alienation again. They continued to hope to be reunited with their children in the future. Specifically, the participants believed that maintaining contact with their children (i.e., by sending letters and cards) increased the possibility of a reconciliation with their children.

14. Given the knowledge they now had about PAS, the participants would have behaved differently towards their ex-spouses.
15. The participants perceived the alienating circumstances as exerting serious negative emotional and financial consequences in their lives.

Though tentative, these findings demonstrated both the complexity and seriousness of PAS. A more detailed discussion of these results is found in Vassiliou (1998).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### Common Characteristics in Alienated Families

Previous studies on alienation, which have examined the role of family characteristics as possible components in the development of PAS, have found differing results. For instance, in the study by Dunne and Hedrick (1994), family characteristics were not found to be a factor of PAS, whereas a study by Calabrese et al. (1987) found that the characteristics of individuals were better predictors of alienation than family characteristics. Although a number of the participants in the present study tended to have had only one PAS child, the lost parents tended to remarry after the alienation, and the alienators tended to relocate with the PAS child. These results were found to be weak indicators of PAS as they were not reported by a majority of the participants (i.e., greater than 50%). Supporting the results of Dunne and Hedrick (1994), it appears that family characteristics such as number of children, number of marriages, and number of relocations were weak indicators in the occurrence of PAS. Though these findings contradict those of Calabrese et al. (1987), they examined different family characteristics reported by the alienator and found that individual family members' characteristics, such as the alienator's employment and the gender of PAS and non-PAS children, were relevant in the occurrence of PAS. Further study is required with a larger sample and more detailed questions concerning the number and gender of PAS and non-PAS children, the number of marriages by both alienator and lost parent, the current marital status and employment of each parent, and the numbers and reasons for relocations. With these specific questions and a comparison group of non-PAS divorced families, more light may be shed on the role of family characteristics in PAS.

### Common Themes in Marriage Dissolution

Previous studies examined the effects of conflict involved in separation, divorce or both on individual family members. For instance, Johnston, Gonzalez, and Campbell (1987) examined the behavior of children from separated and divorced families who were subjected to "entrenched" parental conflict re-

garding their custody. It was postulated in the current study that an elevated level of conflict contributed to the occurrence of PAS. However, the results indicated that the dissolution of the PAS marriages occurred with varying degrees of conflict, from high levels of conflict including physical aggression, to situations with absolutely no conflict. The current study also found that with time, the majority of the participants reported strained relationships with their ex-spouses, where most had had little or no contact with their exspouses due to a degradation of communication between them. There may also be other elements aside from initial marital conflict that contributes to the occurrence of PAS. Lund's (1995) findings indicated that an elevated number of conflicts occurring during the divorce rather than during the marriage heightens the likelihood of PAS. Again, further study of separating families is necessary to determine whether it is other elements during the dissolution of the marriage and subsequent custody proceedings or the time of the conflicts with respect to the divorce that plays the more significant role in PAS. Such studies should consist of long-term examinations of the situations that occur in separating families and the family members' responses to them. For instance, a future study may have participants maintain daily journals that chronicle the events of the separation and these journals may later be analyzed qualitatively in order to determine whether any similarities exist among different families.

### Common Themes in the Alienation Process

Several common themes among the cases were found in the present study. Interestingly, these commonalities were not focused geographically and spanned the continent. The first such commonality was that the PAS children were "enlisted" by the alienating parent as secondary alienators to them (i.e., to the primary alienator) to contribute to the alienation. This finding is consistent with the characteristics of PAS children described by Gardner (1992, 1998). Also described by Gardner (1992, 1998) and Cartwright (1993), others such as grandparents participate and contribute to the alienation. The reasons why extended family members participate in the alienation remain unclear. Although there is some support for the notion that the closeness of these secondary alienators to the alienating parent may play a role, the results were inconclusive. A future study may wish to examine the roles of the extended family members of PAS children.

A second commonality was that the lost parents reported feeling powerless as a result of the alienating situation. Others, especially the children, appeared to have gained control of the lost parents' behavior. These children could determine when, if at all, they would see their lost parent and under what circumstances, and particularly what the lost parent would do with the child. The lost parent had to be careful not to anger their child lest they not see their child again. The sense that power shifted from the parent

to the child, although not previously examined in the field of PAS, remains a logical consequence of the custody proceedings.

Third, the results suggested a lack of satisfaction with the services rendered by both legal and mental health professionals. The participants perceived a lack of knowledge of PAS on the part of the professionals, as well as a failure at the professional level to gather pertinent information prior to drawing conclusions. Participants reported that the psychological services they received did not help the alienating situation, and perceived the legal professionals as supporting and even contributing to the alienation. The sense of dissatisfaction toward mental health professionals may be merited as there is minimal research, thus limiting the number of professionals who have any knowledge and understanding of PAS. Further research and discussion of the topic is necessary in order to provide more mental health professionals with greater knowledge and useful intervention techniques for PAS families.

Dissatisfaction with the legal system appears to stem from lawyers contributing to the alienation, as many have postulated (Gardner, 1991, 1992; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Girdner 1985). For instance, Cartwright (1993) noted that prolonged legal proceedings contribute to the occurrence of PAS. Much of the blame for the development of PAS may be related to the dissatisfaction the lost parents experienced with the legal system. This dissatisfaction may be due to the lost parents losing primary custody of their children to alienators. As a result, it is critical that the precursors and indicators of PAS be determined in order to better inform judges, lawyers, and mental health professionals about PAS. These professionals, working together, can influence the outcome for PAS families. Their influence is shown in the findings of Dunne and Hedrick (1994), who linked the termination of PAS to the legal enforcement of a change in custody from the alienators to the lost parents. Their study was one of the few to suggest an effective intervention for PAS families. Specifically, a possible intervention includes mental health professionals identifying PAS families to the legal professionals, who may then precipitate the necessary change in custody.

Fourth, the results of the present study suggested that the lost parents attributed the cause of the alienation to the alienators' feelings and desires. Specifically, they perceived the alienators' actions as motivated by hate and anger, revenge, or some combination of these. However, these results lack the detail to determine whether these motivations may be influenced by the indicators that Gardner (1992, 1998) had suggested, such as the alienators' mental health or the legal system. Specifically, the motivations of hate, anger and revenge, or both found in the present study may be mediated by the alienators' mental health, as well as by the alienators' reactions to the lengths, processes, and outcomes of their legal cases.

Fifth, the results suggested that a change in the frequency of visitation and custody arrangements had an impact on the relationships between the lost parents and their children. The participants reported that primary custody was given to the mother at the onset of the divorce, regardless of who



later became the alienator. Furthermore, the fathers all had a consistent visitation schedule at the beginning of the custody arrangements (e.g., one weekend every 2 weeks). The final custody arrangements resulted in the alienators receiving custody and the lost parents receiving a significant reduction in their visitation schedules from 50% of the original plan to no contact at all. Of interest is the apparent gender bias in the initial custody agreements; specifically, mothers always received primary custody. However, following the alienation, all the lost parents—even the one mother with initial primary custody—had their visitation drastically reduced. Moreover, as expected with a reduction of visitation, the lost parents described limited relationships with their children to whom they often wrote without reply. The only exception were two fathers who related that they probably maintained a relatively steady relationship with their children because the PAS was mild and even one of these fathers was alienated from his eldest child and with whom he had only a limited relationship.

Overall, these findings indicated that there are several possible attributes, such as changes in relationships among family members, the roles of mental health and legal professionals, as well as custody arrangements, which may be precursors or indicators of PAS. All of these factors lend support to several of Lund's (1995) findings. First, Lund (1995) identified separation difficulties which are developmentally inappropriate as contributing to PAS. It is possible that the pattern of the change in custody arrangements (where the alienator received primary custody at the end of the custody dispute) may result in the separation difficulties described by Lund (1995). Second, a characteristic of PAS children is that they exhibit some form of "oppositional" behavior at least to the lost parent, as supported in the present study. Third, Lund (1995) also found that the noncustodians' parental skills deteriorated and contributed to the occurrence of PAS. Such deterioration of the parental skills may be the result of the lost parents' sense of lost power over their situation and, as suggested in the present study, they did not exercise their usual parenting styles. The lost parents reported that they felt that disciplining the PAS child may result in the child becoming angry and retaliating by denying visits with the lost parent. Since there appears to be several factors that may influence the initiation of PAS, a long-term study that examines these singly and in combination may provide a useful insight as to possible PAS indicators.

### What Lost Parents Might do Differently

The results of the current study suggested that armed with the knowledge they now have, each participant would have taken other means in the hopes of preventing the current alienated situation from ever occurring. Examples of the means they would take include never having married, taking different legal routes, or seeking psychological services at an earlier date. Few studies have addressed this issue, however, the importance of preventing PAS is

evident in that all of the participants would never want to repeat the experience.

The research conducted in the present study involved a small sample of participants who described themselves as victims of PAS and, consequently, generalizations can be made only cautiously. Although some predefined criteria were given as a basis for choosing the participants, additional specific criteria are necessary. Interviews were conducted by telephone due to the great distances involved. Such a means of interview may be prone to overlook or minimize important qualitative data from nonverbal cues. Ideally, with a larger sample size, possibly a random sample, and the inclusion of a comparison group (e.g., families involved in amicable divorces) greater generalizability may be attained in future studies. To date there is very little research specifically on PAS; much that is known remains tentative. Further building on the database available to researchers may provide greater information on which to base hypotheses for future research. Mental health professionals, in particular, need to examine PAS further in order to provide both pertinent information to other professionals and help for the families of PAS.

## REFERENCES

- Arditti, J. A. (1992). Factors related to custody, visitation, and child support for divorced fathers: An exploratory analysis. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 17(3-4), 23-42.
- Calabrese, R. M., Miller, J. W., & Dooley, B. (1987). The identification of alienated parents and children: Implications for school psychologists. *Psychology in the Schools*, 24, 145-150.
- Cartwright, G. F. (1993). Expanding the parameters of parental alienation syndrome. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 21(3), 205-215.
- Clawar, S. S., & Rivlin, B. V. (1991). *Children held hostage: Dealing with programmed and brainwashed children*. Chicago: American Bar Association.
- Demo, A. H., & Acock, A. C. (1988). The impact of divorce on children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 50, 619-648.
- Dunne, J., & Hedrick, M. (1994). The parental alienation syndrome: An analysis of sixteen cases. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 21(3/4), 21-38.
- Gardner, R. A. (1991). Psychotherapeutic and legal approaches to the three types of parental alienation syndrome families. In *Family evaluation in child custody mediation, arbitration, and litigation* (pp. 3-10). Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics.
- Gardner, R. A. (1992). *The parental alienation syndrome: A guide for mental health and legal professionals*. Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics.
- Gardner, R. A. (1998). *The parental alienation syndrome: A guide for mental health and legal professionals*. (2nd ed.) Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics.
- Girdner, L. K. (1985). Strategies of conflict: Custody litigation in the United States. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 9(1), 1-15.
- Goldwater, A. (1991). Le syndrome d'alienation parentale [in English]. In *Developments en droits familial* (pp. 121-145). Cowansville, Quebec: Les Edition Yvons Blais.
- Hoffman, M. L. (1971). Father absence and conscience development. *Developmental Psychology*, 4, 400-406.
- Johnston, J. R., Gonzalez, R., & Campbell, L. E. G. (1987). Ongoing postdivorce

- conflict and child disturbance. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 15(4), 493–509.
- Kressel, K. (1985). *The process of divorce*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kurdek, L. A. (1981). An integrative perspective on children's divorce adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 36(8), 856–866.
- Lund, M. (1995). A therapist's view of parental alienation syndrome. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 33(3), 308–316.
- Rand, D. C. (1997a). The spectrum of parental alienation syndrome: Part I. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 15(3), 23–52.
- Rand, D. C. (1997b). The spectrum of parental alienation syndrome: Part II. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 15(4), 39–92.
- Slater, E. J., & Haber, J. D. (1984). Adolescent adjustment following divorce as a function of familial conflict. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 52(5), 920–921.
- Turkat, I. D. (1994). Child visitation interference in divorce. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 14, 737–742.
- Vassiliou, D. (1998). *Parental alienation syndrome: The lost parent's perspective*. Unpublished master's thesis, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Copyright of American Journal of Family Therapy is the property of Brunner / Mazel and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Copyright of American Journal of Family Therapy is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.