

## **Parental Alienation Gradient: Strategies for a Syndrome**

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*Two factors were analyzed in 72 divorced couples: the fact of having custody of the children or not, and the sex of the parent granted the custody. These factors influence the use of 27 different alienation strategies selected for study by the authors. The results show that the fact of having custody or not affects the number and type of alienation strategies used, whereas sex of the parent with custody only appears to affect the kinds of strategies used. This marks a qualitative difference between custody-holding men and women in relation to the way they exercise alienation.*

### INTRODUCTION

Gardner (1985) coined the term *Parental Alienation Syndrome* (PAS) to define the difficulties that emerge in the relationship between children and one of the parents in high-conflict situations of couple break-up, or where there is a custody dispute. The person who alienates initiates and maintains over time a campaign of denigration toward the other with the aim of inducing unjustified rejection in the children.

Although in the psychiatric and psychological literature there were references to this phenomenon much earlier than 1985 (Bernet, 2008; Vilalta, 2011), the introduction of the identifying label of PAS has brought about, on the one hand, its recognition as a type of psychological maltreatment (Escudero, 2000) that must be dealt with urgently, and on the other, the promotion of research on this issue. As regards the first point, some procedural

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handbooks for the Child Protection Services of different autonomous regions of Spain (Arruabarrena, 2011; IAASIFA, 2008) define the instrumentalization of children in marital conflicts as emotional maltreatment. As a form of psychological maltreatment, it has highly negative effects on the health and wellbeing of children that are as strong as or stronger than other types of child maltreatment (e.g., Arruabarrena, 2011; Baker, 2005b; Tovar, 2008).

Research on PAS has advanced in different directions, one of them being the study of the characteristics of people involved in conflictive relationships. For example, Gardner (1998b), Warshak (2001), and Weigel and Donovan (2006), among others, have analyzed the characteristics of the alienating parent (AP); Gardner (2001), Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001), and others those of the rejected parent (RP); and Baker (2005a, 2005b), Tovar (2008) and others those of the children who are the object of the alienation. Another research line is that revolving around the study of *which* strategies are used by the “indoctrinating” parent for manipulating his or her children (e.g., Baker, 2005a, 2005b; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001).

It is important to consider the context in which this phenomenon began to be studied. In the 1980s, when Gardner described it for the first time, the principle of the *best interests of the child* was becoming consolidated as a criterion in the granting of custody, in substitution of the principle of *the tender years*. Therefore, in the initial development of research on PAS the alienating parent was in most cases considered to be the woman (85–90% of cases, see Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Gardner, 2001). PAS was considered to appear as a response to the abolition of exclusive attribution of custody to the woman (see Gardner, 1998a). There even emerged terms such as Medea Complex (Jacobs, 1988) or Malicious Mother Syndrome (Turkat, 1994). In the mid-1990s researchers began to appreciate an increase in the number of men who were inducing PAS, which led to the consideration that sex does not determine who is going to be the instigator of this syndrome (Gardner, 2001, 2002; Kopetski, 1998). More decisive than sex, in Gardner’s opinion (2001, 2002), is the exercise of the custody, since the one who has it has more time to indoctrinate the children. It is precisely this last aspect that has gained most momentum recently, and is the central research theme we deal with here. Thus, continuing along the lines of the research referred to above, and with a view to improving our knowledge and understanding of PAS, we carried out this study with the global aim of exploring, evaluating, and quantifying the strategies used by APs for inducing the rejection of their children toward the other parent in circumstances of conflictive couple separation. Specifically, we propose the following objectives:

1. To analyze how many of the strategies of those selected for this study the Alienating Parent is capable of using.

2. To observe the extent to which each one of them is being used by the alienators regardless of their sex and of whether or not they have custody.
3. To verify whether there are differences between men and women and between those with and without custody in the quantity and type of strategies used.

Consequently, we tested the following four hypotheses:

1. There is no difference between men and women in the number of manipulation strategies used on their children.
2. There is no difference between men and women in the type of manipulation strategies used on their children.
3. Parents with custody use more strategies than those without custody.
4. Parents with custody and those without custody differ in the types of strategies they use.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample is made up of 72 couples who in the period 2001 to 2009 were in the process of separation or divorce, and in which at least one of their children was experiencing parental alienation (that is, at least one of the children was unjustifiably rejecting relations with one of the parents as a consequence of alienation strategies by the other parent). All belonged to the judicial districts of Asturias (northern Spain) covered by the Oviedo Family Court Psychosocial Team, and had been through a conflictive period leading to an application for a psychosocial expert assessment.

Selection method: two of this study's authors (both experts in the assessment of intimate partner conflict and its consequences for the children) were responsible for the sample selection, which was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, and with a view to guaranteeing independence in the decision, each author made her own selection separately. In the second stage, the level of agreement between the classifications made by the two authors was assessed, as was the reliability of the selection. Agreement was absolute for all 72 couples making up the sample.

The sample size is not very large, though it is slightly larger than those used in other research on this same issue (e.g., Baker, 2005a, 2005b; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Nevertheless, these 72 couples constitute a representative sample in the sense that they cover all those cases in which at least one of the children was experiencing parental alienation in the judicial districts referred to above in this specific period of time. Clearly, this is not the ideal situation (non-random

sample and small sample size), so that the results of the analyses reported below should be treated with caution.

## Instruments

We drew up *ad hoc* record sheets for taking note of variables grouped in two broad thematic blocks, one referring to the social and personal circumstances of the couples and the other, that which constitutes the core part of the research, referring to alienation strategies.

We examined 27 alienation strategies carefully extracted from relevant studies in this area (Baker, 2005a, 2005b; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Gardner, 1998a; Turkat, 1994; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001) (see Table 1). In the forensic assessment process for determining whether these alienation strategies were present or not in each one of the cases, we used the same two-stage approach as used for the selection of the couples. In the first stage, each expert considered and analyzed the presence or absence of each of the 27 strategies in the sample selected. In the second stage, we carried out a joint assessment with a view to establishing a consensus in all cases. In the few cases where agreement could not be reached we turned to a third professional until arriving at a consensus.

## Procedure

The information about the families was obtained through a forensic assessment process involving two or more individual semi-structured interviews with each parent and with the children aged 5 and over. We also used other sources of information pertaining to the forensic assessment process, such as examination of the judicial rulings, visits to schools, and interviews with members of the extended family or with the parents' new partners. Finally, it was of great interest to observe the children's interactions with both their father and their mother.

## Design

The methodology used in this study is "Mixed Research" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). First, we conducted an observational qualitative research, a *multiple-case study* (Montero & León, 2007). It is the most laborious stage. The most notable aspect of this type of study is the in-depth observation of the verbal and non-verbal behavior (of the above-mentioned variables so as to record them in objective fashion) of all members of the family (children, parents, and extended family) and the classification of those behaviors in previously defined categories. This task was carried out independently by each of the observers, and subsequently the degree of agreement in their

**TABLE 1** Alienation Strategies Used by the Alienating Parent; Some Descriptive and Inferential Statistics

| Alienation Strategies Used by the Alienating Parent                           | R               | Cust. n = 60 |              | No Cust. n = 12 |              | Statistics Cust. - No Cust. |              | Women n = 51 |              | Men n = 21 |              | Statistics Women - Men |              |
|---|-----------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|--------------|------------------------|--------------|
|   |                 | n            | %            | n               | %            | Phi                         | p            | n            | %            | n          | %            | Phi                    | p            |
| Failure to give information about the children                                | <b>90%–100%</b> | <b>58</b>    | <b>*96,7</b> | <b>10</b>       | <b>83,3</b>  | <b>-0,217</b>               | <b>0,066</b> | 49           | 96,1         | 19         | 90,5         | -0,111                 | 0,346        |
| Rewarding disrespectful behaviors in the child (of rejection toward the RP)   |                 | 55           | 93,2         | 12              | 100,0        | 0,11                        | 0,353        | 47           | 94           | 20         | 95,2         | 0,025                  | 0,836        |
| Insulting or belittling the RP toward the children                            |                 | 55           | 91,7         | 12              | 100,0        | 0,122                       | 0,3          | 46           | 90,2         | 21         | 100          | 0,175                  | 0,137        |
| Making decisions without consulting the RP                                    |                 | <b>59</b>    | <b>*98,3</b> | <b>7</b>        | <b>63,6</b>  | <b>-0,491</b>               | <b>0</b>     | 49           | 96,1         | 17         | 85           | -0,195                 | 0,101        |
| Preventing visits (arguing that the child is sick, does not want to go, etc.) |                 | <b>57</b>    | <b>*95,0</b> | <b>9</b>        | <b>75,0</b>  | <b>-0,27</b>                | <b>0,022</b> | 48           | 94,1         | 18         | 85,7         | -0,138                 | 0,241        |
| Interrogating the child after visits to the RP                                | <b>80%–90%</b>  | 50           | 87,7         | 10              | 90,9         | 0,036                       | 0,764        | 44           | 91,7         | 16         | 80           | -0,165                 | 0,174        |
| Sharing personal/judicial information with the child                          |                 | 50           | 86,2         | 11              | 91,7         | 0,061                       | 0,607        | <b>41</b>    | <b>82</b>    | <b>20</b>  | <b>*100</b>  | <b>0,243</b>           | <b>0,042</b> |
| Interfering in the child's symbolic contact with the RP                       |                 | 44           | 83,0         | 7               | 77,8         | -0,048                      | 0,704        | 37           | 86           | 14         | 73,7         | -0,149                 | 0,249        |
| Hindering children's telephone contact with RP                                |                 | 51           | 85,0         | 8               | 66,7         | -0,178                      | 0,132        | 43           | 84,3         | 16         | 76,2         | -0,096                 | 0,415        |
| Seeking caregivers for the child alternative to the RP                        |                 | <b>54</b>    | <b>*90,0</b> | <b>5</b>        | <b>41,7</b>  | <b>-0,468</b>               | <b>0</b>     | 44           | 86,3         | 15         | 71,4         | -0,175                 | 0,137        |
| Seeks accomplices for alienating (new partner, extended family, etc.)         |                 | <b>51</b>    | <b>*85,0</b> | <b>7</b>        | <b>58,3</b>  | <b>-0,251</b>               | <b>0,033</b> | <b>44</b>    | <b>*86,3</b> | <b>14</b>  | <b>66,7</b>  | <b>-0,225</b>          | <b>0,056</b> |
| Inducing the children to reject the RP's extended family                      | <b>70%–80%</b>  | <b>50</b>    | <b>*83,3</b> | <b>7</b>        | <b>58,3</b>  | <b>-0,229</b>               | <b>0,052</b> | 42           | 82,4         | 15         | 71,4         | -0,122                 | 0,3          |
| Deteriorating the image of the new couple of RP toward the children           |                 | 22           | 71,0         | 6               | 85,7         | 0,13                        | 0,424        | 20           | 74,1         | 8          | 72,7         | -0,014                 | 0,932        |
| Rebuking the children if phoning to PR  |                 | 35           | 74,5         | 7               | 63,6         | -0,095                      | 0,469        | 29           | 72,5         | 13         | 72,2         | -0,003                 | 0,983        |
| Encouraging the children to challenge or defy the RP's rules and authority    | <b>60%–70%</b>  | <b>38</b>    | <b>63,3</b>  | <b>11</b>       | <b>*91,7</b> | <b>0,226</b>                | <b>0,055</b> | <b>31</b>    | <b>60,8</b>  | <b>18</b>  | <b>*85,7</b> | <b>0,243</b>           | <b>0,039</b> |
| Ridiculing the child showing affection towards PR                             |                 | 20           | 69,0         | 3               | 60,0         | -0,068                      | 0,692        | 18           | 69,2         | 5          | 62,5         | -0,061                 | 0,722        |
| Inducing a reversal of roles, promoting parentification                       |                 | 36           | 60,0         | 9               | 75,0         | 0,115                       | 0,327        | 31           | 60,8         | 14         | 66,7         | 0,055                  | 0,639        |

(Continued on next page)

**TABLE 1** Alienation Strategies Used by the Alienating Parent; Some Descriptive and Inferential Statistics (*Continued*)

| Alienation Strategies Used by the Alienating Parent                                  | R              | Cust. n = 60 |              | No Cust. n = 12 |              | Statistics - No Cust. Cust. |              | Women n = 51 |              | Men n = 21 |             | Statistics Women - Men |              |
|--|----------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------------|-------------|------------------------|--------------|
|  |                | n            | %            | n               | %            | Phi                         | p            | n            | %            | n          | %           | Phi                    | p            |
| Frightens the children by telling them that the RP will cause them some kind of harm | <b>50%–60%</b> | 35           | 59,3         | 6               | 50,0         | -0,071                      | 0,551        | <b>33</b>    | <b>*64,7</b> | <b>8</b>   | <b>40</b>   | <b>-0,225</b>          | <b>0,058</b> |
| Attributing the parental role to one's new partner                                   |                | 19           | 57,6         | 2               | 40,0         | -0,119                      | 0,461        | 15           | 60           | 6          | 46,2        | -0,132                 | 0,415        |
| Blaming the RP for the children's bad behavior                                       |                | <b>29</b>    | <b>49,2</b>  | <b>9</b>        | <b>*75,0</b> | <b>0,194</b>                | <b>0,102</b> | 25           | 50           | 13         | 61,9        | 0,109                  | 0,359        |
| Seeks medical and/or psychological reports as "evidence"                             |                | 33           | 55,0         | 4               | 33,3         | -0,162                      | 0,17         | <b>30</b>    | <b>*58,8</b> | <b>7</b>   | <b>33,3</b> | <b>-0,232</b>          | <b>0,049</b> |
| Frequently telephones the children during their stay with the RP                     | <b>20%–40%</b> | 22           | 36,7         | 3               | 25,0         | -0,091                      | 0,438        | <b>21</b>    | <b>*41,2</b> | <b>4</b>   | <b>19</b>   | <b>-0,211</b>          | <b>0,073</b> |
| Offering activities alternative to the visiting regime                               |                | 17           | 28,8         | 3               | 25,0         | -0,032                      | 0,789        | 15           | 29,4         | 5          | 25          | -0,044                 | 0,71         |
| Offering activities incompatible with the visiting regime                            |                | 17           | 28,8         | 2               | 16,7         | -0,103                      | 0,386        | 15           | 29,4         | 4          | 20          | -0,096                 | 0,42         |
| Calling the police during the RP's visits  |                | 15           | 25,0         | 2               | 16,7         | -0,073                      | 0,535        | 13           | 25,5         | 4          | 19          | -0,069                 | 0,558        |
| Changing address to keep the child away from the RP                                  | < <b>20%</b>   | <b>12</b>    | <b>*20,0</b> | <b>0</b>        | <b>0,0</b>   | <b>-0,2</b>                 | <b>0,09</b>  | 10           | 19,6         | 2          | 9,5         | -0,123                 | 0,297        |
| Attempting to change the child's surname   |                | 6            | 10,0         | 0               | 0,0          | -0,135                      | 0,253        | 5            | 9,8          | 1          | 4,8         | -0,083                 | 0,482        |

Note. Cust. = custody; No Cust. = no custody; RP = rejected parent; R = percentages range; n = number of subjects; % = percentage of subjects; Phi = phi coefficient; p = probabilities of the data assuming that the Ho is true, associated with the  $\chi^2$  statistic, when p is less than 0.10, are in bold type; \* = indicates strategies used to a significant extent by the sample group reported in the column associated with the Z statistic.

classifications was rated by means of the Kappa coefficient, which attained its maximum value.

Following this, we carried out a *simple-group retrospective ex post facto* (op. cit.) empirical study with quantitative non-experimental methodology, by means of which we tested the hypotheses described above.

## Data Analysis

Initially, we carried out a univariate descriptive study of the socio-demographic characteristics and features of the families in the study sample. The hypotheses related to study objectives were tested by means of different inferential statistics. Differences of means between groups, once the satisfaction of the parametric assumptions had been checked, were examined by means of Fisher's F statistic. We also found the effect size ( $\eta^2$ ) and the statistical power ( $1 - \beta$ ).

The relation between two categorical variables was examined by means of the  $\chi^2$  statistic (Fisher's exact probability), and the magnitude of the association by means of the Phi statistic, using Contingency Tables in either case.

One of the fundamental objectives in this research was to examine whether the percentage of use of strategies was higher in men or in women, or whether it was higher in parents with custody or in those without it. The Z statistic (using the Bonferroni correction) provided by the SPSS *Personalized Tables* made it possible to carry out this analysis.

The significance level established *a priori* was 5%. Given the smallness of the sample size and the importance of the hypotheses tested, we also considered it appropriate to note the probabilities of the data assuming that the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) is true  $\leq .10$  (Cohen, 1988). Data analysis was carried out with the IBM SPSS Statistics 19 package.

## RESULTS

### Some Socio-Demographic Characteristics

The Alienating Parent (AP) is the woman in 70.83% ( $n = 51$ ) of cases, and the man in 29.16% ( $n = 21$ ). Age ranges from 22 ( $M_n$ ) to 57 ( $M_x$ ) years, with a mean ( $M$ ) of 38.38 and standard deviation ( $SD$ ) of 6.93. Age of Rejected Parents (RPs) has similar descriptive characteristics [ $M_n = 24$ ;  $M_x = 60$ ;  $R = 36$ ;  $M = 39.63$ ;  $SD = 6.53$ ].

In 83.3% of cases ( $n = 60$ ; 48 women and 12 men) the custody was being exercised by the AP. In only 16.66% of cases was custody held by the RP ( $n = 12$ ; 9 women and 3 men).

The majority of the couples have only one child ( $n = 44$ ; 61.1%), 33.3% ( $n = 24$ ) have two, and just four couples have more. The total sample of minors is 100 (56.4% girls and 43.6% boys).

## Analysis of Alienation Strategies

FREQUENCY OF USE, DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SEXES, BY CUSTODY/NO-CUSTODY, AND ACCORDING TO THE COMBINATION OF THESE TWO VARIABLES

The first column of Table 1 shows the 27 alienation strategies observed, organized according to the percentage of APs that use each one of them (from higher to lower), regardless of the variables sex and custody. The second column shows the intervals of percentage use for the whole set of APs. The two columns show that five strategies are used by over 90% of the sample: *failure to give information about the children*, *rewarding disrespectful behaviors in the child (of rejection toward the RP)*, *insulting or belittling the RP toward the children*, *making decisions without consulting the RP*, and *preventing visits*. These strategies, together with *interrogating the child after visits to the RP*, *sharing personal/judicial information with the child*, *interfering in the child's symbolic contact with the RP*, *hindering telephone contact*, *seeking caregivers for the child alternative to the RP*, and *seeking accomplices for alienating (new partner, extended family, etc.)*, are used by more than 80% of the sample. However, the strategies *offering activities alternative to or incompatible with the visiting regime*, *calling the police during the RP's visits*, *changing address*, and *attempting to change the child's surname* are scarcely used at all. We have called this scenario indicated by the joint consideration of these first two columns the *Parental Alienation Gradient*.

It is notable that, regardless of sex and custody/no-custody condition, the number of strategies alienators are capable of using ranges from 9 to 24, with a  $M = 16.50$  and  $SD = 3.41$ . This variable is normally distributed [Asymmetry ( $\gamma_1$ ) =  $-0.052$ ; Kurtosis ( $\gamma_2$ ) =  $-0.716$ ; Kolmogorov-Smirnov Statistic ( $K-S_L$ ) =  $1.048$ ;  $df = 72$ ;  $p = .222$ ], and there are no alienators using a number of strategies that exceeds 1.5 times the inter-quartile range (outliers). It could be said that the distribution is almost *rigorously normal* if we also take into account the following descriptive statistics [Median (Me) =  $16.50$ ; Mode (Mo) =  $14$ ] with percentiles [ $P_{25} = 14$ ;  $P_{50} = 16.50$ ;  $P_{75} = 19$ ].

In the following columns of the Table we present the results of the analysis of the  $2 \times 2$  Contingency Tables (rows = uses the strategy, yes or no; columns = exercise of custody first, and sex second). We present only the frequencies and percentages referring to the category of those who "use the strategy." The results of these analyses reveal that five strategies are linked to sex differences. Women are more likely to use four of them, namely: *frequently telephoning the children during their stay with the RP*,

*seeking accomplices for alienating, frightens the children by telling them that the RP will cause them some kind of harm, and seeking medical and/or psychological reports as "evidence."* Men, on the other hand, are more likely to use the strategy of *encouraging the children to challenge or defy the RP's rules and authority*. Examination of the results according to the custody/no-custody condition reveals that 7 strategies are associated with this variable. Parents with custody make more use of 5 of them: *making decisions without consulting the RP, preventing visits, seeking caregivers for the child alternative to the RP, seeking accomplices for alienating, and encouraging the children to reject the RP's extended family*. Those without custody make more use of *encouraging the children to challenge or defy the RP's rules and authority* and *blaming the RP for the children's bad behavior*. It is noteworthy that the Phi Coefficient is more often higher when the relation is observed with the custody condition than when it is observed with the sex variable.

If we consider, on the one hand, the number of strategies men and women use for alienating their children, and on the other, which strategies are used by APs with and without custody, the following results emerge. Ignoring the fact of having custody or not, the descriptive statistics of the variable *number of strategies used* when the AP is a woman [ $M_n = 9$ ;  $M_x = 24$ ;  $R = 15$ ;  $M = 16.56$ ;  $SD = 3.37$ ] and when it is a man [ $M_n = 10$ ;  $M_x = 21$ ;  $R = 11$ ;  $M = 15.09$ ;  $SD = 3.34$ ] do not differ from those found for the total of APs. There are no statistically significant differences between sexes. On the other hand, the previous results are not maintained when the custody/no-custody condition is taken into account. The quantity of *strategies used* by APs with custody [ $M_n = 9$ ;  $M_x = 250 = 24$ ;  $R = 15$ ;  $M = 16.50$ ;  $SD = 3.31$ ] is higher than that corresponding to parents without custody [ $M_n = 10$ ;  $M_x = 251 = 22$ ;  $R = 12$ ;  $M = 14.47$ ;  $SD = 3.47$ ], and this difference is statistically significant [Levene's test ( $Lev$ ) = .002;  $df = 1,70$ ;  $p = .962$ ]; [Fisher's  $F$  ( $F$ ) = 4.21;  $df = 1,70$ ;  $p = .044$ ;  $\eta^2 = .057$ ;  $1 - \beta = .526$ ].

Going deeper into the analysis of APs holding custody ( $n = 60$ ; 48 women and 12 men), there are no statistically significant differences between men and women in the quantity of strategies employed, the descriptive statistics for men being [ $M_n = 12$ ;  $M_x = 21$ ;  $R = 9$ ;  $M = 16.5$ ;  $SD = 3.20$ ], and for women [ $M_n = 9$ ;  $M_x = 24$ ;  $R = 15$ ;  $M = 16.5$ ;  $SD = 3.37$ ]. However, the  $Z$  statistic provided by the Personalized Tables shows that *seeking accomplices for alienating* (42 women, 87.5%, versus 12 men, 75%) and *frequently telephoning the children during their stay with the RP* (20 women, 41.7%, versus 2 men, 16.75%) are used to a greater extent by women.

Nevertheless, statistically significant differences between sexes are indeed found in the number of strategies used when we consider only the no-custody APs [ $Lev = .522$ ;  $df = 1,10$ ;  $p = .486$ ]; [ $F = 5.03$ ;  $df = 1,10$ ;  $p = .049$ ;  $\eta^2 = .335$ ;  $1 - \beta = .527$ ]. In this case, women use more alienation strategies [ $M_n = 14$ ;  $M_x = 22$ ;  $M = 17.66$ ;  $SD = 4.04$ ] than men [ $M_n = 10$ ;  $M_x = 17$ ;  $M = 13.22$ ;  $SD = 2.63$ ]. Even

so, this last-mentioned analysis should be considered with care, given that there are only 9 men without custody in the sample, but even fewer women without custody ( $n = 3$ ). It should also be stressed that up to now we had not observed such a distance between the SDs of men and women.

The effect exerted by the fact of having custody or not when the AP is a woman cannot be taken into account, since 48 have it and 3 do not. The results would be statistically invalid. Nevertheless, the effect of this variable in the men can indeed be studied (12 of them have custody and 9 do not). Six strategies are used more by men with custody than by those without, namely: *hindering telephone contact* ( $n = 11$ ; 91.79% with custody, versus  $n = 5$ ; 55.6% without custody), *frequently telephoning the children during their stay with the RP* ( $n = 9$ ; 90% with custody, versus  $n = 4$ ; 50% without custody), *failure to give the RP information about the children* ( $n = 12$ ; 100% with custody, versus  $n = 7$ ; 77.8% without custody), *preventing visits* ( $n = 12$ ; 100% with custody, versus  $n = 6$ ; 66.7% without custody), *making decisions about the children without consultation* ( $n = 12$ ; 100% with custody, versus  $n = 5$ ; 62.5% without custody) and *seeking caregivers for the child alternative to the RP* ( $n = 12$ ; 100% with custody, versus  $n = 3$ ; 33.3% without custody).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to reveal the extent to which parent's sex and the fact of holding custody or not determine the number and type of strategies used for turning children against the other parent.

Some authors had made theoretical descriptions of these strategies (Darnall, 2011; Waldron & Joanis, 1996; Walsh & Bone, 1997; Warshak, 2001), while others had carried out fieldwork to learn about them, collecting information from the children (Baker, 2005a) or from the RPs (Baker & Darnall, 2006). However, this is the first study in which the information comes from the complete assessment of the family situation in a forensic context. In contrast to the cases of the two studies *op.cit.*, in this case participants were not asked to give a free account of the alienation strategies they felt they were subject or had been subject to; rather, we analyzed the presence or absence in our sample of 27 strategies previously selected from the scientific literature by two professionals.

We found that the variable number of alienation strategies is distributed extremely normally for the set of alienators, regardless of their sex and the fact of holding custody or not [ $M = 16.50$ ;  $Me = 16.50$ ;  $Mo = 14$ ;  $R = 9-24$ ]. Baker and Darnall (2006) found similar mean and range. Seventeen strategies are used by more than 60% of the APs. However, it was very interesting to learn that 5 of them were employed by over 90% of the parents who succeeded in establishing PAS in their children (*failure to give information about the children, rewarding disrespectful behaviors in the child [of*

rejection toward the RP], insulting or belittling the RP toward the children, making decisions without consulting the RP, and preventing visits). At the same time, another six strategies (*interrogating the child after visits to the RP, sharing personal/judicial information with the child, interfering in the child's symbolic contact with the RP, hindering telephone contact, seeking caregivers for the child alternative to the RP and seeking accomplices for alienating [new partner, extended family, etc.]*) are used by between 80% and 90% of alienators. Therefore, the core activity of the AP appears to revolve around the 11 strategies that are used by more than 80% of them, whilst other strategies, such as *changing address* and *attempting to change the children's surname* are employed by less than 20% of the sample, so that they appear to play only a marginal role in the activity of turning children against the rejected parent.

The possibility of putting the strategies in order according to the percentage of persons using them, and the fact of having detected a gradient in the frequency with which they are used, have led us to call this phenomenon Parental Alienation Gradient. For those who have to make therapeutic or forensic decisions in situations that could be described in terms of parental alienation syndrome, it is useful to know which alienation strategies are most frequently used, with a view to their more rapid identification and the possibility of taking immediate measures to protect the children. It is not so much a case of using the alienation gradient for detecting or excluding the presence of a parental alienation syndrome, but rather simply of using it for identifying whether or not the alienation is being carried out via the strategies most frequently used.

We obtained results similar to those of Baker and Darnall (2006), 16 of the alienation strategies we examined appearing among the 66 they considered. Moreover, there was agreement on some of the strategies considered to play a central role in the alienation process (i.e., *insulting or belittling the RP in front of the children, sharing information with the children, frightening the children by telling them that the other parent will cause them some kind of harm and offering activities alternative to or incompatible with the visiting regime*). There was also coincidence on the fact that the strategies *changing address* and *attempting to change the children's surname* are used by less than 20% of APs. However, in our study the frequency of use of the core strategies was higher than in Baker and Darnall's work, with agreement only as regards the high rate of use of the strategy *insulting or belittling the RP in front of the children*. We believe these discrepancies may be related to the way in which the presence of the strategies was assessed. In both studies it was retrospective, but we consider the results obtained in the *op.cit.* study to have been wholly dependent on the participants' memory, so that the presence of some strategies may have been underestimated. In contrast, in our study we carried out a global forensic assessment of the family situation that permitted us not only to check the information provided by the parents and

by the children, but also to record the presence of the strategies throughout the entire assessment process.

In the general population today, more women than men have custody of their children, and our sample reflects this aspect. We have been able to observe, in the same way as other researchers (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Gardner, 2002; Kopetski, 1998), that men and women do not differ statistically in the number of alienation strategies employed. However, we have found some very interesting aspects in relation to the way men and women exercise alienation, since they differ in the types of strategies they use. Whether they have custody or not, women make more use of the strategies *attributing the parental role to one's new partner*, *seeking medical and/or psychological reports as "evidence"* and *seeking accomplices for alienating*. Men, on the other hand, *encourage the children to challenge or defy the other parent* much more than women, regardless of whether they have custody or not. This appears to indicate a clear difference between the two sexes: in contrast to men, women tend to seek help from third parties to exert more pressure, whilst men tend to focus their alienation activities on diminishing or annulling the mother's authority over her children.

On the other hand, the fact of exercising custody is indeed a determining variable of alienation activity. It is more likely that children will be alienated by the parent with custody of them than by the parent without custody. We do not believe that having custody of the child encourages or motivates the parent to turn them against the other; it simply facilitates it (Gardner, 2001, 2002, already proposed this). In support of this view is that there are non-custody parents who also alienate their children. Nevertheless, the parent with custody of the children, as well as being able to spend more time with them, is the one who can actually make decisions about everyday life, giving him or her more opportunity to distort the children's view of the other parent. All of this means that they have more chance to control the real and symbolic access of the non-custody parent to the children and to information about them.

Therefore, it does not seem to be the case that parental alienation is exercised exclusively by parents with custody. Rather, it appears that, for parents with intention to alienate, the fact of having custody offers them more opportunities to use a larger number of strategies than they would have if they did not hold custody. Thus, the data indicate that parents with custody use significantly more alienation strategies (20 are used by over 50% of the sample) than those without custody (16 are used by over 50% of the sample).

There is also a qualitative difference in the type of alienation strategies employed by custody and non-custody parents, regardless of sex. APs with custody use strategies aimed at:

1. Interrupting the child's contact with the rejected parent.
2. Substituting the parental figure with someone new.
3. Seeking support for his/her intentions and plans from external sources (accomplices and medical, psychological or school reports).
4. Keeping the child away from the extended family.
5. Blocking the participation of the other parent in decision-making or in care of the child.

On the other hand, APs without custody make significant use of strategies aimed at:

1. Encouraging defiance and disobedience in the children and blaming their bad behavior on the other parent.
2. Disparaging the children's image of the other parent or his/her new partner.
3. Sharing excessive information with the child and promoting parentification (i.e., role-reversal whereby a child is obliged to act as parent to their own parent).

As they cannot control the children's contact with the custody-holding parent (because, obviously, he or she spends more time with the children), non-custody parents attempt to damage this relationship by disparaging the custody parent and rewarding the child's rejection of that parent, at the same time making the child responsible for their (the non-custody parents') own emotional stability.

Therefore, the fact of holding custody or not appears to mark the style of the AP: while custody-holding parents tend to distance the children from the other parent and their extended family and block his or her participation in the children's life, non-custody parents tend to alter the children's relationship with the custody holder by encouraging them to challenge his or her authority.

Indoctrinating children in the ways described here is a complex, deliberate process that requires considerable persistence, involving the application of a group of premeditated and organized strategies applied with perseverance to achieve an aim. The results of this research have helped to clarify somewhat the ways in which custody and sex influence the forms of alienation, as well as contributing to identifying more easily the specific strategies being used in a particular case by means of the Parental Alienation Gradient tool. We believe the Parental Alienation Gradient can be of great utility so that both professionals and affected parents can rapidly identify the alienation strategies and try to counteract them at the earliest possible opportunity.

In our study it was possible to analyze the differences between men with and without custody (despite the small sample size, the groups are

more balanced), but it was not possible to carry out such an analysis in the case of women, given the smallness of the sample (there is a strong imbalance between the sample sizes of custody-holding and non-custody-holding women), so that there is a need for studies in which the number of participants is greater and more balanced. The Parental Alienation Gradient would be more useful if it were related to the seriousness of the manipulation affecting the children. We need to know whether the strategies most frequently used are associated with greater severity of the alienation experienced by the children. It is also important to know whether the seriousness of the alienation is determined by the number or type of strategies used. Indeed, we are already doing work in this direction.

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