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Editorial

Understanding the reality of parental alienation



In recent years, there have been several passionate controversies pertaining to child psychology and psychiatry, such as the claim that practitioners of satanism abuse and murder children, whether recovered memories of adults reliably describe past child maltreatment, whether facilitated communication helps autistic children disclose sexual abuse and whether children always tell the truth when reporting sexual abuse. One of the most important controversies involving children in a legal context has pertained to parental alienation (PA), which some practitioners misunderstand through ignorance or through purposeful denial. The author of this essay believes that parental alienation exists and damages thousands of children and families in the U.S., in France, and in many other countries every year. Thus, it is important to understand that some mental health professionals object to the concept of parental alienation or even deny the reality of parental alienation.

1. Definition

Parental alienation is a mental condition in which a child – usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce – allies himself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent or alienating parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the target parent) without legitimate justification [1]. The child's rejection of the target parent must be without justification for the child to be considered alienated; if a parent has been abusive or severely neglectful, the child's rejection of that parent is understandable and does not constitute parental alienation. Most contemporary writers use *parental estrangement* to describe a child's rejection of a parent for a good reason, such as a history of abuse or neglect; they use *parental alienation* to describe a child's rejection of a parent without a good reason. With that distinction in mind, estrangement is typically caused by the rejected parent's own behaviour; alienation is usually caused by the preferred parent's indoctrination or brainwashing of the child to fear or dislike the rejected parent.

2. Lack of professional training

There are several reasons why the concept of parental alienation is not accepted more widely by mental health professionals, legal practitioners and policy makers. The most basic reason is that the topic of parental alienation is not ordinarily presented during the professional education and training of psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, attorneys and judges. There are two general pathways to include a discussion of parental alienation in the training of

mental health professionals. First, there is almost always education regarding child maltreatment in those training programs; those classes should include an explanation of parental alienation as an example of child psychological abuse. Second, education regarding family dynamics should include a discussion of parental alienation as a vivid example of family dysfunction through triangulation [2].

3. Suppression by professional organizations and journals

It is interesting that there are conflicting attitudes regarding parental alienation in mental health and legal organizations and among the editors of professional journals. The topic of parental alienation has been widely presented in national and international conferences of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (2010, 2012), Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (2010, 2016), American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law (2010, 2014), American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2010, 2012, 2017), American Psychological Association (2011), VI Congreso Nacional de Psicología Jurídica y Forense (Spain, 2011), American Psychiatric Association (2011, 2013), American College of Forensic Psychology (2013), International Congress on Law and Mental Health (The Netherlands, 2013; Czechia, 2017), International Society for Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection (India, 2013; Spain, 2015); World Congress of Psychiatry (Spain, 2014); and International Congress of Psychology (Japan, 2016).

Although history of lectures and symposiums indicates broad acceptance of the concept of parental alienation, on other occasions, a discussion of parental alienation was flatly rejected for reasons that seem arbitrary and frivolous. For example, the American Psychological Association rejected an exhibit regarding parental alienation because the topic was not “supported by an appropriate level of peer-reviewed research”¹. A component of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law rejected a proposal regarding parental alienation because it “represents a topic that is not yet well-settled in practice”². In 2016, the *Journal of Child Custody* published a special section with five articles critical of parental alienation, in which the journal's editor referred to parental alienation as “junk science that can negatively affect traumatized children” [3]. Finally, in France, the *Encyclopédie médico-chirurgicale* deleted an article by Paul Bensussan, which had already been published online³. By looking at the overall pattern displayed here, I

¹ Personal communication, N. Kaslow, April 29, 2015.

² Personal communication, D. Pinals, September 18, 2014.

³ Personal communication, P. Bensussan, April 26, 2017.

conclude there are many gate-keepers in the program committees and journal editorial boards who understand parental alienation and welcome discussion of that topic, but there are a group of influential individuals in these organizations who actively suppress discussion of this topic.

4. Rights of children to make decisions

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* from the United Nations applies to the topic of parental alienation in several ways [4]. Article 9 provides that children of divorced parents have the right “to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis.” However, Article 12 provides that “the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child”. The problem is that in some circumstances children hold strong opinions – based on false beliefs and even false memories – that are mistaken. That happens when children hold false beliefs that they were sexually abused; and also when they have been indoctrinated to believe wrongly that one of their parents is evil or dangerous, as in parental alienation. When those two scenarios occur together – allegations of sexual abuse and possible parental alienation – forensic evaluators must carefully assess the situation to determine the underlying truth [5]. According to Warshak, there are “pitfalls of listening to children,” and he commented, “some evaluators, advocacy groups, and parents. . . assume that children’s words always express their genuine thoughts and feelings, and they equate children’s thoughts and feelings with expressions of their true best interests” [6]. In cases of parental alienation, children should not be taken literally because their opinions and memories may not reflect true reality.

5. Judges with mind made-up

Parental alienation comes to the attention of lawyers and judges in several ways, the most common being child custody or parenting time determinations. When judges make decisions regarding contested custody and visitation schedules, they take a number of factors into consideration including the child’s attachment with his parents. When a child refuses to have contact with one of the parents, the court needs to sort out whether the child’s refusal is justified (as in estrangement) or not justified (as in alienation). This author recently learned of a case in the US in which the judge announced at the outset, “I do not believe in parental alienation”. Perhaps the judge should have recused himself from that case, but he did not do that. There have been legal cases in many countries in which parental alienation was considered an important factor. A comprehensive book, *Parental alienation: the handbook for mental health and legal professionals*, includes summaries of 500 legal cases from the US and Canada in which parental alienation was a consideration. The legislatures of Brazil and of several states in Mexico have recognized that causing parental alienation in a child is a form of psychological abuse. In 2013, the French Court of Cassation recognized parental alienation as “*un élément nouveau*” and, as such, officially recognized the reality of parental alienation [7]. Also, parental alienation has been an important factor in several decisions of the European Court of Human Rights [8].

6. Misinformation and fake news

In professional journals, in newspapers and magazines, and in social media, there is a remarkable amount of misinformation and fake news regarding parental alienation. Critics of parental alienation sometimes say, “parental alienation does not exist,” “parental

alienation has not been recognized by professional associations,” and “parental alienation is junk science”. In a legal journal, for example, Farney and Valente referred to “the scientifically defunct and legally unjustifiable theory of parental alienation syndrome in custody cases” [9]. Also, Meier wrote, “there is actually no empirical research validating the existence of parental alienation syndrome” [10]. None of those statements are true, and they have been systematically debunked by Bernet [11] and Bernet and Baker [12].

7. Fanatical opposition to parental alienation

In an important article, Rand distinguished two groups of critics who oppose some aspects of parental alienation: first, the scholarly writers who agree with the basic concept of parental alienation, but who debate details and nuances; second, individuals who “identify themselves as advocates for abused women and children” [13]. The most strident criticism of parental alienation has come from advocates who support victims of domestic violence and child abuse. Those individuals are concerned that perpetrators of child maltreatment may use parental alienation as a way to avoid responsibility for their behaviour. Several organizations actively oppose the introduction of parental alienation in legal proceedings. The organizations are not secret; they openly announce their opposition to those topics. For example, the Leadership Council on Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence discusses parental alienation syndrome extensively on its website. It refers to parental alienation syndrome as an “unsophisticated, pseudoscientific theory” [14]. The author of this article commends the Leadership Council for educating mental health and legal professionals and the general public regarding child maltreatment and domestic violence; however, I disagree with their pattern of denying the reality and importance of parental alienation.

8. Conclusions

Although there is a vast amount of scientific literature to support the reality and importance of parental alienation, there is also a small group of loud, vocal critics who spread false information about this mental condition. The debate – between advocates concerned about parental alienation and those concerned about domestic violence – has generated both facts and misinformation. I say: domestic violence is a serious problem in many families, but sometimes there are false allegations of domestic violence; and parental alienation is a serious problem in many families, but sometimes there are false allegations of parental alienation. It is incorrect to minimize either issue or dismiss the topic in a pre-emptory manner by saying that it is junk science or lacks empirical evidence. Both mental health clinicians and legal practitioners should take seriously both allegations of domestic violence as well as allegations of parental alienation. Each case must be investigated in enough detail to sort out the truth, the half-truths, and the non-truths. Given the complexity of family life, there are no quick or easy answers [11].

Disclosure of interest

The author has not supplied his declaration of competing interest.

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