

The Psychological Functioning of Alienated Children & Parents in Custody Disputing Families

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The Problem

- Despite loyalty conflicts, anger & upset, most children of divorce are eager to have contact with both parents
- *About 1/5 of children from custody-disputing families develop strong negative attitudes towards one parent & may resist/refuse to visit*
- Ideological debate between PAS proponents and victims of DV
 - Causes of problem (*Is it an alienating & enmeshing aligned parent OR is it DV & child abuse by rejected parent?*)
 - Appropriate response to problem (*Enforced visits, change custody, enforced treatment OR leave them alone to grow out of it?*)

Outline of Presentation

- Background
 - Critique of PAS theory (Gardner)
 - Reformulation of “Alienated Child” (Kelly & Johnston)
- Overview of Research Program
 - Causes & correlates of child’s rejection of a parent
 - Findings on child & parent functioning
- Social policy implications
 - What is nature & purpose of treatment/intervention
- Research in progress

Gardner’s Parental Alienation Syndrome

- A child who
 - Exhibits obsessive hatred of target parent & animosity towards extended family
 - Gives weak, frivolous, absurd complaints, quotes borrowed scenarios
 - Lacks ambivalence & guilt towards hated parent
- A parent who is involved in consciously or unconsciously brainwashing child
- False allegations of abuse

Problems with Gardner’s PAS

- Assumes child’s rejection is singularly determined by alienating parent & rejected parent is innocent victim – overly simplistic & tautological
- “Syndrome” implies a psychiatric condition
 - but it is a family systems pathology
- At best, PAS is a “non-diagnostic syndrome”
 - sheds no light on cause, prognosis, nor treatment
- Little empirical research; much self-published

Reformulation: Definition of an Alienated Child

- An alienated child expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection and or fear) towards a parent that are disproportionate to the child’s actual experience with that parent
 - Kelly & Johnston, 2001

Summary of Program of Research

Early Work by Task Force

- Reformulation of PAS -> Alienated child
 - as distinct from normal & realistic reactions
- Assessment of alienation
- Case management of alienation
- Therapeutic interventions
- Admissibility of expert testimony

• *Family Court Review, 2001.*

Empirical Studies

- Allegations & substantiations of abuse in custody disputing families (FCR, 2005)
- Causes and correlates of child's rejection of a parent (JEA, 2005; JAACPL, 2003)
- Psychological functioning of alienated children & their parents (JCC, 2005; AJFP, 2005)
- Replies to critics (JCC, 2004; FCR, 2004)
- Social policy implications (FLO, 2005)

Alienated children to be distinguished from:

- **Developmentally expectable reactions**
 - Familiarity & comfort with primary caretaker
 - Primary attachment to one parent
 - Separation anxieties in infants/young children
- **Common reactions & preferences for one parent**
 - Gender identification with one parent
 - Affinity in temperament & interests
 - Means-oriented alliances

Aligned Children to be distinguished from Alienated

- **Alignments are due to high conflict divorce**
 - Anger & hurt re manner of parent's leaving
 - Moral indignation re parent's behavior
 - Worry, sympathy for left-behind parent
 - Loyalty binds & guilt in middle of conflict
- Disruptions in peer activities
- Boredom visiting a parent
- Jealousy & resentment towards step-parent & step-sibs

Aligned kids are conflicted & ambivalent about rejected parent

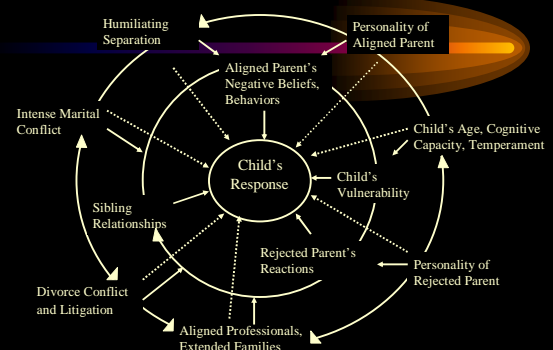
Estranged Children must be distinguished from Alienated

- **Realistic estrangement due to**
 - Violent, abusive, endangering, neglectful, terrorizing parenting
 - Witness to family violence
 - Parental abandonment

First two studies tested competing theories of why children reject a parent

- **PAS Perspective:** Primarily a brainwashing parent who indoctrinates the child in a campaign of denigration of a good, loving parent
- **Abuse Perspective:** Child abuse & family violence perpetrated by the rejected parent
- **Family Structure Perspective:** Role reversal, parent-child boundary diffusion & enmeshment
- **Multi-factor Perspective:** Combination of all of above (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: MODEL OF MULTIPLE FACTORS PREDICTING CHILD ALIENATION (Kelly & Johnston, 2001)



Research Designs

Sample: Clinical & research records of custody-litigating & community families

Procedure: Developed coding manual with multiple items measuring each concept

- Referred by family courts & retrieved from divorce filings in SF Bay Area 1981-91 & 89-02
- Total Ns = 215 & 125 families
 - eldest or only child under 13 years
- 2 experienced clinicians rated cases independently
 - ICC ranged .69 to .83
- Data reduced by factor analysis producing scales for each concept
 - Alpha ranged .84 to .94

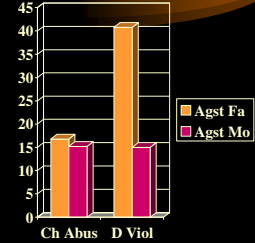
Demographics & Substantiated Abuse

Parents

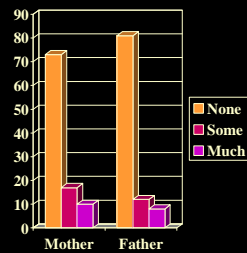
- Socio-economically diverse; White (80%+)
- Separated 3-4 years

Children

- average 8-9 yrs old
- Physical custody
 - Mother (50%+)
 - Father (10%+)
 - Joint (30%+)



Extent of Child Alignment with Parent



- 15% of community sample aligned
- 21% of family court sample aligned
 - Twice as likely to be aligned with mother in custody litigating families
- High Rejection of Parent:
 - 10% rejected father
 - 8% rejected mother

FIGURE A: PREDICTORS OF CHILD REJECTION OF FATHER AFTER DIVORCE: Significant Beta Coefficients from Multiple Regression Analysis

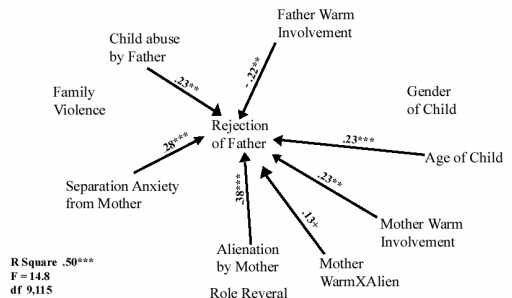


FIGURE B: PREDICTORS OF CHILD REJECTION OF MOTHER AFTER DIVORCE: Significant Beta Coefficients from Multiple Regression Analysis

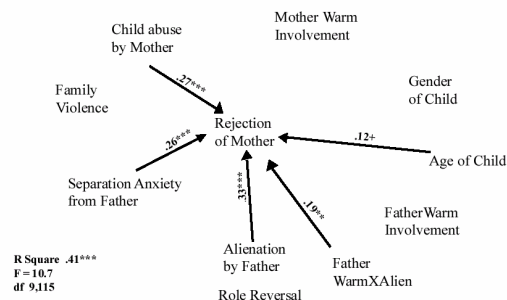


FIGURE C: PREDICTORS OF CHILD REJECTION OF FATHER AFTER DIVORCE: Path Model of Significant Beta Coefficients

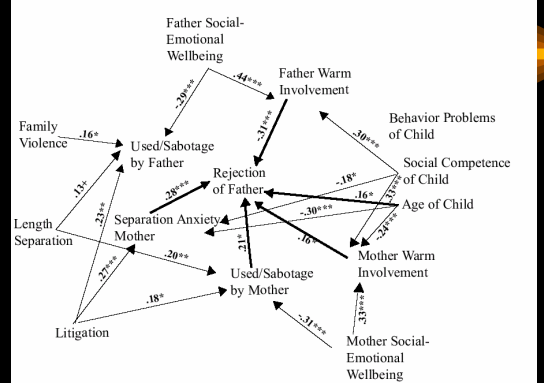
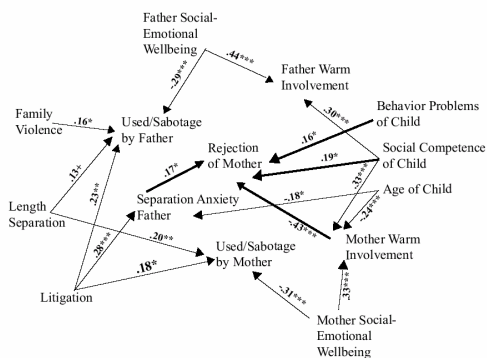


FIGURE D: PREDICTORS OF CHILD REJECTION OF MOTHER AFTER DIVORCE:
Path Model of Significant Beta Coefficients



Findings: Rejection of a parent is multi-determined:

- Alienating behavior by the aligned parent
 - poor functioning; uses child for own emotional support & sabotages other parent's involvement
- Deficit parenting by the rejected parent
 - poor functioning; lacks warm-involvement, & perpetrates critical incidents of child abuse

Findings (continued)

- A vulnerable child (in role reversal with aligned parent)
 - Older age, emotionally more disturbed (esp boys), socially less competent or problematic self-esteem; separation anxieties
- Chronic litigation (lengthy separation & custody disputes)
- DV not directly related to child's rejection, but:
 - Male DV perpetrators are more likely to attempt to alienate their child from the mother
 - Female victims of DV, as a group, do not alienate their child from an abusive father

Research Questions for Studies 3 & 4

- To what extent are alienated children emotionally disturbed and at-risk for psychological problems, or relationship difficulties later in life?
- Are aligned or rejected parents psychologically impaired?
- Should treatment be court-ordered for children and their parents?

Design of Research Studies 3 & 4

Samples:

- Clinical & research records of families disputing custody
- Referred by family courts in SF Bay Area 1989-2002
- N = 74 children
 - eldest or only child 5-12yrs
- N=98 parents

Procedure:

- Looked at correlations between
 - Clinicians' ratings of child alienation, degree of alienating & abusive parenting behaviors etc.
 - ICC = .83-76
 - Alpha .95-84
- And
- Measures of child's & parents' psychological functioning

Measures of Psychological Functioning

- CBCL Total T scores & sub-scales for
 - Externalizing
 - Internalizing
 - Depression
 - Withdrawal
 - Somatic Complaints
 - Aggression
 (for child only)
- Rorschach variables (scored by Exner Comprehensive System)
 - Perceiving & information processing
 - Coping capacity & style
 - Self & other representation
 - Affective functioning
 (for child & parents)

Measures of Child Alienation

Child Rejection of Fa/Mo

(13 items) Eg. Expresses overt hatred, strong dislike; Overt scorn, denigration, verbal abuse, harassment; Vague, unspecific, trivial reasons for dislike; Cites family legends, borrowed scenarios to justify dislike of parent)

No Enjoyment of Fa/Mo

(5 items) Eg. Looks forward to seeing parent, able to remember good times, able to express love for parent (scores reversed)

Role Reversal with Mo/Fa

(7 items) Eg. Parent has difficulty distinguishing child's feelings from own; child comfort's parent; Child is confidante to parent's adult interests & concerns

Separation Anxieties M/F

(2 items) Whiny, crying fretful, weepy at times of leaving parent for visits; experiences separation anxieties from parent

Measures of Parenting Behaviors

Alienating Co-parent

(10 items) Eg. sabotages other parent/child relationship, sends negative messages, expresses anger & models hostile behavior to other parent.

Role-reversal with Child

(7 items) Eg. Parent has difficulty distinguishing child's feelings from own; child comfort's parent; Child is confidante to parent's adult interests & concerns

Lacks Warm/Involvement with Child

(12 items) e.g. able to show love, involved in child's activities, confidence in self as parent, has no difficulty listening & responding to child's needs (scores reversed)

Substantiated Child Abuse:

e.g. incident(s) of child neglect, verbal, physical, sexual abuse

Clinical Observations of Alienated Children

- Poor reality testing (e.g. idealize or demonize parents & associates)
- Low or defensively high self-esteem
- Prone to splitting in relationships with others
- Emotional constriction coupled with outbursts of aggression (mostly against hated parent)
- Overall emotionally troubled, dependent & more vulnerable

Can these clinical observations be supported by data from standardized tests?

Findings: Compared to non-alienated children

Alienated children in high-conflict custody disputes have significantly more emotional & behavioral problems

- *Alienated children are rated by their aligned parent (mother or father) on CBCL as having more internalizing & externalizing problems of clinically serious proportions including:*
 - Depression
 - Withdrawal
 - Somatic Complaints
 - Aggression

According to the Rorschach:

- **Father-Alienated Children are more likely to**
 - perceive inaccurately & reason illogically
 - lack good Human Representation
 - have a Coping Deficit
 - have an Extratensive problem solving style
 - have more intense affect, internalized anger & emotional outbursts
- **Mother-Alienated Children are more likely to**
 - lack good Human Representation
 - be more self-preoccupied & have inflated self-esteem
 - have more intense affect, and internalized anger

Comparing Alienated & Non-alienated Children in Custody-Disputing Families

Non-alienated Children are more likely to

- have an Introversive problem-solving style
- be Hypervigilant
- be emotionally constricted
- simplify their perceptions

All of these strategies are good survival skills in the "cold war" or "war zone" between parents

Alienated Children are more likely to

- have an Extratensive problem-solving style
- have fewer coping skills
- struggle with confusing & more intense emotions
- distort their perceptions

All of these make alignments with one parent a defensible strategy

Findings on personality profiles and parenting behaviors :

- Persistent alienating behavior & role reversal (more common in aligned parents) correlated
 - mostly with object relatedness (narcissistic personality traits & disordered thinking) & somewhat with poor coping skills.
- Abusive incidents &/or lack warm-involvement, (more common in rejected parents) correlated
 - mostly with affective functioning (depression, anxiety, coping deficits, & difficulty modulating emotions) & somewhat with narcissistic features.

Limitations of Study

- New parent-child relationship measures, mostly clinical ratings
- Exploratory study, relatively small sample, not randomly selected
- Aggregate or common patterns, not necessarily applicable to individual children
- Cannot distinguish causal directions
 - Is poor parenting by rejected parent a cause or a result of the child's rejection?
 - Is alienating parenting by aligned parent a cause or a consequence of child's rejection/resistance to visit?
- Findings should not be generalized to all children who reject a parent for normative reasons.

Conclusions

- Alienated children are likely to be significantly emotionally troubled within an already high-risk population of high conflict divorce
 - their difficulties are rooted in pre-separation & divorce dynamics of their families & individual vulnerabilities
- Treatment should be focused on remedying child's developmental deficits, restoring appropriate co-parental & parent-child roles, & reinstating child's access to "good parts" of both parents
 - include all relevant family members (not nec. conjoint)
 - re-unification with rejected parent is not primary goal

Conclusions (continued)

- Legal strategies alone are unlikely to solve the problem of child alienation
 - (like change of custody, enforced visits, sanctions for non-compliance)
- However, case management and treatment contracts between all parties that are ordered by family court may be needed to
 - define goals & nature of intervention,
 - clarify roles of all treatment agents,
 - protect therapist's relationship with child and family
 - guard civil rights of family members from unwarranted, ineffective costly interventions

Future Research: Work in Progress

- Long-term studies of alienated children & families compared to non-alienated controls are needed (with & without treatment).
- Current research: 15-20 year follow-up of children from our high-conflict, custody disputing families as young adults (now 20-30 years old).
 - Examines history of relationships with parents and with intimate others
 - Current psychological functioning

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