



Parental Alienation as an Outcome of Paternal Discrimination

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Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) in children is studied using a case study of a father, mother and daughter and the restoration of a child-father relationship after PAS. Three in-depth interviews provide insight into the dynamics of parental alienation and the way they can be further investigated. Paternal discrimination is seen as a critical variable.

Keywords: Parental alienation syndrome; parental alienation disorder; fatherhood; paternal discrimination; children



Introduction

In 2002 and the years following, the author interviewed a father, mother and daughter who had been living in a situation of ongoing alienation since 1985. In 2004, the interviews together with an analysis of the case were published in Dutch (Zander, 2004) as a study of the restoration of a child-father relationship. This study is built around three in-depth interviews with a grown up daughter, her mother and her father. That all involved parties were willing to speak out so candidly was quite unique.

The initial publication played an important role in the discussion of parental alienation syndrome (PAS) in the Netherlands. In 2011, the syndrome was presented in the perspective of paternal discrimination as well as paternal care and responsibility (Zander, 2011). This Dutch research has implications for fathers throughout the world.

It is important to analyze the dynamics of PAS without prejudice to either parent. Accordingly, where we see discrimination against fathers as a cause of parental alienation we should not deny it. It is true that mothers also often find themselves as alienated parents. Here we will focus on the experience of fathers.

Gardner (1998) was the first to describe PAS as a pattern of emotional abuse leading to severe problems for children. Related phenomena had already been described by the mid-20th century (Bernet, 2008). Gardner's definition of PAS is as follows:

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a disorder that arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of programming (brainwashing) of a parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent.

When true parental abuse and/or neglect is present the child's animosity may be justified, and so the parental alienation syndrome explanation for the child's hostility is not applicable. (Gardner, 1998, p. xx).

Gardner described eight important symptoms of PAS that appear in the child. They include a campaign of denigration and hatred against the targeted parent. Weak, absurd or frivolous rationalizations for this deprecation and hatred are used. There is a lack of the usual ambivalence about the targeted parent. Strong assertions are made that the decision to reject the targeted parent is the child's alone (the "independent-thinker phenomenon"). There is reflexive support of the favored parent in the conflict. Lack of guilt over the treatment of the alienated parent is typical. The child makes use of borrowed scenarios and phrases from the alienating parent. Denigration of the targeted parent extends to that parent's family and friends.

When Gardner described PAS, he originally made a clear distinction between the role of fathers and mothers. He tended to prefer the assignment of custody to the mother, despite the fact that, in his opinion she was most often alienating parent. Much later he tended to emphasize the equal contribution to the problem by both parents. This view seemed to be inspired by a strategy to convince powerful organizations supporting mothers that it was in their best interests to acknowl-

edge PAS.

In the aforementioned article (Zander, 2011), the author tried to design a vision of PAS as not only being a question of one parent opposing the other, but rather of a more structural matter. Gardner (Gardner, 1992, p. 1) had already emphasized the role of the judicial adversary system in the pathogenesis of parental alienation. He also points to the tender years presumption¹ as a part of the sociological and historical embedding of the problem. He also argued against equal parenting, thinking that this invokes conflicts since it has the potential to threaten the primary position of the mother.

The main elements of PAS have been proposed for inclusion in *DSM-V* and *ICD-II* as Parental Alienation Disorder (PAD). The definition of PAD contains a wider vision of pathogenesis. In that case, it is less necessary to attribute the cause of parental alienation to just one parent. The diagnosis is based on the manifestation of the syndrome in the child (Bernet, 2008, p. 362).

In one sense, this can be seen to support the views of those who still refuse to acknowledge the syndrome even exists and who often state that it is not always one parent who is the victim (often taken to be the father). The situation is sometimes not what it appears to be.

On the other hand, this leaves room for socio-judicial dynamics to be seen as a main cause of parental alienation. First is the discrimination against fathers by existing legislation and among the legal and social work professions (Baskerville, 2002). Second is the principle of “the most fit to fight parent can win,” a principle that goes against the wisdom of the Solomon verdict which rejects the concept of “owning a child.” The combined effect of those two dynamics often causes a father who is desperately trying to stay in touch with his children to adopt the compensatory tactic of choosing to “fight to win.” Although both parents have responsibility for the means they use to retain closeness with their children, this reaction can well be an effect of discrimination against fathers.

We should not ignore that discrimination in general has many side effects such as creating negative behavior by those discriminated against (Dion, Earn, & Yee, 1978). Self-fulfilling effects of discrimination are mostly studied starting from the hypothesis of the stigmatization of woman, but it is reasonable to believe that gender-stigmatization can occur in men as well (Heatherton, 2003, p. 382). The perspective of losing one’s children feels like an upcoming amputation for most parents. Some children use that metaphor when looking back at the loss of their father. In the dynamics of family law, it is quite understandable desperate contests occur.

When the mother becomes an alienated parent this often originates with understandable fear of the father who took extra measures to prevent himself from being alienated. Sometimes the alienation of the mother is secondary and starts with a real threat from her. That being the case, it might be useful to consider PAS in the context of a paternal discrimination system. This also applies in cases where the mother has lost her children to the father.

Insofar as PAS is acknowledged (and it is quite widely), the discussion about the mutuality of “programming” the child is important (Darnall, 2011). Is it both parents who contribute? This differs in various cases and situations, but often one parent is still in the position to influence the child

and the other is no longer. Blaming one of the parents for quarreling is often the adopted position of institutions and politicians since it is an easy way to bypass their own responsibility, which is to create a healthy climate for both parents and children.

Denigration and discrimination of fatherhood can be a factor in the onset of PAS with the loss of fatherly care. Children need unconditional parental love and care to grow and to gain trust in their social environment. The occurrence of PAS in the Western world seems to fit in with a history of fading fatherhood, including the diminishment in general of parental status and responsibility, which seems to have been gradually replaced by the growing importance of “the best interests of the child” as determined by institutions and the state. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of recognizing and responding to the immediate needs of the child, their needs are in fact apparently being neglected, especially in situations where the child loses contact with one of his or her parents.

Paternal Discrimination

It goes beyond the scope of this article to highlight all elements of paternal discrimination. However, it will be useful to indicate all the social elements that are included in it. Some extreme samples of discrimination within the judicial have to be recognized. Some have been acknowledged for more than a century, but they have not been eliminated (Zander & Smulders, 2006).

Discrimination of fathers occurs in all countries (Zander et al., 2009). Many of the examples that follow are based on European situations, but it can be assumed that it happens everywhere:

Judicial Discrimination and Prejudice

Several courts used standard preprinted forms that determined mothers should always get custody. Others provided forms indicating that fathers could get joint custody if mothers agreed, but not the other way around. The father’s agreement was of no importance.

“The Best Interests of the Child”

Embedded in the law is the pseudo-scientific presumption that it might be best for children in cases of conflict with the mother that the father would humbly disappear in the dust. This was advised in public and in scientific publications (Duindam & Vroom, 2001, p. 105; Spruijt, 2011)

Stigmatization by Language

There exist many definitions of fatherhood that exclude the emotional and social aspects of fatherhood, definitions that fit seamlessly into the practices of law (Zander et al., 2009, p. 140).

Motherhood Ideology

Questions are raised whether there are emotional ties between fathers and children. Can fathers love their children? This is given as a reason to deny contact between father and his child. (Zander

& Smulders, 2006, p. 101; Nathanson & Young, 2012, p. 73).

The “Tender Years Presumption”

Questions are raised whether fatherhood is needed at all. Fathers are asked to justify their role, with the need of the mother being assumed (Zander, 2011, p. 109).

(Baker & Darnall, 2006) already summarized behaviours and strategies that are employed in Parental Alienation. Goudard constructed a model based merely on those social psychological mechanisms (Goudard & Université Claude Bernard (Lyon), 2008). One could give such a model a multidimensional character by adding along with those micro-strategies (inter-personal) their meso (institutional) and macro (political) counterparts.

Strategy Baker&Darnall	Strategy Godard	micro-behaviour	meso mechanisms	macro mechanisms
Interfering with information	Almight (exclusion)	Give no information about child	School refuses to give information, no entrance	School is not informed on law
Badmouthing	Negative messages	Warning: “He might beat you”	Involvement cops, handling false accusation	Wrong information on domestic violence prejudiced against men
Unhealthy alliance	Cohesion symbioses	Child demanded to support parent in procedures	Mother victim appeal at environment, care institutes	Support care-structures for mothers
Symbolic interfering	Almight (contempt)	Not using word daddy for him	Courts name father 'ex spouse' instead of 'father' in child cases.	Exclusively use “mother” for parenting positions

Case Study

Three interviews and their analysis follow to illustrate the occurrence of PAS. A more elaborate and systematic analysis of multiple cases is needed, but this will serve as an example of triangulation², using multiple and diverse kinds of data sources, methods and observers engaged in social research (Yin, 1987, p. 99).

The interviews with mother, child and father were held separately. The author tried to prevent any interaction and did not confront the interviewees with what any of the other two had said. However, the author did sparingly share with them contents of the case files of the mother and the father.

The interviews were held during multiple sessions with both father and daughter, and one session with the mother. The sessions were recorded only for the father and daughter. The tapes were transcribed. The transcriptions were checked by the interviewees. The story of the mother was also confirmed by a letter from her. The stories are summarized in English.

The Father ("Peter")

Peter is a 56-year-old surveyor in municipal service. He lost contact with his five children after divorce, but in his view that process started during the marriage³. The mother did not allow him to be more active in the rearing of the children. It was painful for Peter to be interviewed and to be confronted with the old pain of losing the care of his five children.

The marriage was not really his preferred choice, but he chose the opposite of what his parents liked. During the marriage many quarrels became unbearable, so he decided to initiate divorce. Hearing of this, his spouse urged him to leave immediately. She would not let him say goodbye to the children; however, he managed to do so, notwithstanding. She blackmailed him with the children. Her children were used as a weapon against him. She said she wanted to have peace and quiet without him around and that meant breaking contact with his children.

With difficulty, the children visited him in the first months after the divorce. After he found a new relationship, the older children (then aged 13 and 15) no longer visited him. For a year and a half more, he had contact with the younger ones (then aged 5, 9 and 10) but never for a holiday or an overnight stay.

They were not allowed to call him "Daddy." The mother feared losing contact with the children, in case they might also want to live with him. Two years after the physical divorce, the mother's lawyer declared the end of visitation rights. The reason given was that he showered together with his children as he used to before the divorce. This was put forward as a kind of accusation against him.

There was a judicial procedure in which only the youngest child declared that he still wanted to visit his father. The other children refused, which hurt the father badly. After that he was threatened with a restraining order. child protective services said they saw this as unjust, but refused to change. "You remain dependent on the kind of judge and the mood he is in," he was told.

He could not accept what happened. Sometimes he saw his children by coincidence. He had a contact with a group leader of the child care institution to which his daughter was assigned because the mother could not handle her. The father expressed his astonishment that he himself was never considered instead of the institution. Much later this daughter was also surprised: "I could have stayed with you then?" she asked.

Some contact with Karel, his eldest son, was restored after a court fight regarding alimony. This court session took an unexpected turn because of a compassionate, interested judge. Nevertheless, the mother's lawyer tried to restart the conflict by writing a new demand. Peter added: "Lawyers have obvious interests in keeping the conflict going." Two other children restored contact

during the two years afterward.

The contact with Ans (then 28), his oldest daughter restored after she read the first Dutch book on PAS (Zander, van Altena, & Theunissen, 1999) and had an interview about this in a national newspaper. It was not easy. Peter first thought he would not be able to cope with his daughters' efforts, being afraid of further disappointment. His new partner insisted he try. He set some demands going into the new confrontation. "You are my daughter; I can't just act as if this is not the case. I talk to you as a father, after all, I am your father." She wanted open, unrestricted contact with him.

Despite the difference of their goals, contact restored and the daughter was even able to call him "Papa" once in an email. He now has three grandchildren.

Peter does not want to be confronted again with the kind of distress he felt in those times. He expects that all will turn out well. Nevertheless, it remains a negative life experience for him with much pain and negative effects on his psychological and physical health.

Asked for the lessons he learned from those experiences, Peter emphasizes the role of the social environment. Such estrangement from one's children is unacceptable. Society should not accept it. He states that it is also important that grown-up children read about the experiences they have had. In Peter's opinion, society committed a crime in the enforced estrangement from his children.

The Mother ("Elly")

It took some time to convince her to agree to being interviewed. It takes courage to look back in a critical way. She hopes this will make others look at the problem and that it will provide some relief to all involved.

When heading for proceedings or court sessions she was always extremely stressed and used many sedatives. "I was not really aware of what was happening. My lawyer supported me very well; I relied on him".

The marriage was not really one of her free choice. Her husband was busy a lot of time studying, and so he did not have much time left for his children. Her husband left suddenly, and there was no way back. It felt disastrous. "Now my focus is on the upbringing of my children."

There was a great deal of unrest in her children's behavior. "I just wanted things to be quiet." She then told her children that a father is not really a necessary person. The procedures, court, child protective services were too much. "I just could not handle it."

Only her general practitioner and the school refused to take a position. The rest of the world chose to support her. It would have been better if they had not done that. "It might have been better if they told me the truth instead of repeating bad things about my ex. Perhaps that is what I hoped in my heart. But I shut off such thoughts." She never knew what her children said in the proceedings about visiting their father.

The rearing of one child, “Trude” (age 10 at the time of divorce) was quite problematic. The child care institution helped her and the daughter, who was in a bad physical and psychological condition. She tried to press her daughter to see her father. However, she admits that “to be honest, this was more an angry reaction to the child.” She did not want the child to be around.

Karel, the oldest son (age 15 at the time of the divorce) had always been the scapegoat of his father. She always had to back him up. It was shocking to her that he was the first to return to his father when he was 25.

After the restored contact between the children and their father, she neither avoids nor seeks him. “He was not even interested in me when I was very sick in the hospital.” The return of the oldest son to his father, seemed a bit sneaky to her in contrast with the open maneuvers of Ans.

She thinks it might have been better if she had been forced to let the children remain in contact with the father. The child protective services did not push for that and just let it go. “If I had been forced to, I would have arranged for the children to see their father.” She recently tried to change another mother’s mind about this: “You might regret it later on.”

The Child (“Ans”)

She is 30 years old. She was estranged from her father for more than fifteen years. After reading a book (Zander et al., 1999) on this subject, she discovered that she was a victim of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). She recognized the symptoms and got in touch with the editor of this book. The book played an important role in recovering from PAS and restoring the relationship with her father. Ans made notes in her copy of the book in which she highlighted the relation between her own story and the general dynamics of PAS pathogenesis. She considers herself a moderate case of PAS.

Ans thinks that “of course” her parents once loved each other. Her father had great authority in the family. In case of problems with the children, her mother often passed the matter on to her father. Her father kept a warm and active relationship with his children. She felt that when she was nine years old the tensions between her parents intensified. Seeing the pain on her mother’s face made her immediately choose to support her mother. Her father just left the scene temporarily during those moments. So it was not discussed with him. “I was made responsible for my mother’s well-being.” At times she advised her parents to divorce, so it was not really a surprise that this happened at a certain moment. When her father left, he promised her youngest brother (then age 4) to come back. However, he could not keep that promise because his mother wanted him to stay out and keep a distance of three streets away from her house after his decision.

In the beginning, Ans made some visits to the father. It made her feel to be “siding with the enemy,” though, because it hurt her mother when she told her about a nice weekend with him. “He has left us,” her mother said. Then her father entered into a new relationship. He would have done better to wait longer. “After all, this was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Finally, I stopped the contact with my father”.

After that she had almost no contact with her grandparents on her father's side. Granddad thought it might be better to first make contact with her via her father. Grandma regretted that. When she sent gifts, Ans returned them, although Ans knew that even just the act of unwrapping the parcel itself would have given her great joy. She visited them one time when she was 16. Grandma was quite nervous.

Her mother's mother was critical about her daughter. "Both have issues," she is reported saying.

The child protective services, school, the general practitioner all said it was all right this way. She should leave things alone. Consequently, she did so: "I was convinced that the resistance against my father was my own."

She became subject to parentification⁴. She helped her mother read the long texts from judges and lawyers, and even was a spokesman for her. After a court session, she needed some care. All the children, were invited to the child protective services office and asked, if they would like to meet their father again. They were forced to betray him and acted as a group. She saw her proud father crying about it. The child protective services somehow expected Dave, the youngest child (then 6) to visit his father, but the older children blocked that. "We were afraid that he wanted to take Dave away from us." The children no longer used their father's family name.

"Deep inside, my father was not absent. Otherwise, it would not have been possible to get back to him." She thinks her father never knew that her sister was in a childcare institution for some time. Her father could have helped her, but he did not stand a chance.

The first crack in the alienation "shield" was when her mother mourned about the death of her grandfather. "I felt I had a father, too, but I had no chance to mourn for him. And he was still alive!"

Ans decided she did not want to live with hate anymore. Her mother had not been aware of the importance of this black hole for her. She therefore blames the social workers for not having made that point in the past.

When she met her father again, it first felt as if she would thereby choose against her mother. At a certain moment she had the feeling that she had no parents at all. On the surface, her mother accepted that she was in touch with her father again, but at the same time Ans felt an icy disapproval from her mother. She and her father had three meetings in which anger and other feelings were dealt with. He coped with the old grief, and she tried to find her present feelings. She is afraid that full normal contact will remain problematic although she feels no hate toward father anymore. "He did not know me from my adolescence, from my growing up. He has not met my first love." She is afraid to hurt him again.

Finding truth is an important issue in the meetings with her father. However, it will remain quite difficult to agree upon what really happened just before the divorce decision took place.

After two years, the relationship with her father improved. He got in touch with his grandchildren. However, using the word “Papa” is still a problem. What she misses is the blood tie, and the unconditional parental responsibility. “The natural way is blocked.” “My father needed therapy to deal with his powerlessness, but my mother should have had that therapy for her behavior.”

If she would be estranged from her own children, she would react hysterically. That is her main reason for giving this interview: to bring awareness and to prevent this from happening to others. “First, I was angry with both of them; later on, I blamed the social workers for it.”

When she moved out of her mother’s house, her mother felt like her daughters’ partner took her away from her. Her mother cried. Her father finally cried, too. “I myself was never allowed to cry, I had to stay strong.” “How could this happen in the so-called best interests of the child?”

She hopes other children in a similar position will seek help when they read her story. “Free yourself from hate. Take your time, open your heart.”

The Case Files

The case files for the father and mother were analyzed for the presence of known dynamics of alienation and other notable details.

The files cover a four-year-long “jurisdictional” debate. There is too much information to make an adequate comprehensive summary of them here. Some details of interest to an international audience are given, however.

In general the files show that the lawyers in this case sometimes did not hesitate to bring to the case more conflicts than there really were. Just at the moment the father agreed to a view on visitation as suggested by the mother, the lawyers tried to give new fuel to the conflict by misinterpreting the viewpoints of their clients, ridiculing and even inverting them. At certain moment, the clients mediated for their lawyers.

The lawyers’ self-promoting and fire-fueling started with advice from the father’s lawyer to the mother to seek her own lawyer. This irritated the mother. The mother’s lawyer attacked the father for not leaving her and the children alone by writing letters and making phone calls. The lawyer stated that this led the two oldest children Karel (age 15) and Ans (age 13) choosing to avoid further contact with their father. After the visit of Dave, the youngest child (6), his behavior is described as very difficult, for which the father is blamed. He is accused of intentionally creating two different worlds for the child.

The children were asked to give their opinion about visitation twice. First, the four eldest were invited to court and one year later they visited child protective services.

Statements were made in the name of the mother that she encouraged her children to go to their father but that the children themselves did not want to go. She did not want to force the chil-

dren. On the other hand, she refused to give permission to Dave, the one child who wished to continue his visitations. The latter was not allowed by the mother however because, she said the child was spoiled by the father. This would make the other children jealous, although they themselves refused to go to the father.

Although the child protective services, after much delay, came to the conclusion the children had a right to meet their father (notwithstanding that there was no such legal right enshrined in Family Law at that time), the mother refused to cooperate with an “enforced” visitation. Finally, the services were not active and in the end the court rejected visitation rights and a request for changing the custody arrangement.

In general, there is not too much confusion about the dynamics of what happened during the four years of judicial fights. All actors emphasized different elements and causes of problems. The description of the basic dynamics and elements of the case are coherent and meet the standards of triangulated case research.

Discussion

The interviews provide a clear description of the pathogenesis of PAS, confirming what has already been described by other researchers. The stage can be set early in a marriage. That is the way the father Peter sees it. Denying the father autonomy in a marriage can play a role in creating and increasing conflicts. In this case, the father had his own parenting style that might have been quite appropriate for the children. The mother was not able to handle the situation without his contribution, and the unexpected return of the oldest son to the father makes clear what he missed.

The case occurred during a time when there was no explicit law on maintaining of visitation rights in the Netherlands. The theoretical but half-hearted improvement of the law since then may not have changed things very much but may have made them worse when it legalized exceptions in general terms.

The slight remorse shown by the mother gives some insight into the importance of the social setting and institutions, which might have prevented her from alienating the children from their parents. Although the mother states that the school stayed neutral, that was not what the father claimed.

The strategies of the mother described in the interviews can be recognized in Goudard (2008) and Baker & Darnall (2006). They include “interfering with information”, “bad-mouthing,” forming an “unhealthy alliance” with a child, and symbolic interfering. Those mechanisms correspond with components on the meso-level (where mothers appeal as victims at childcare institutions) and at the macro-level (prejudice against men).

Further Research

Follow-up work was done, including more interviews with the family members and with newer cases. Recent cases suggest even harsher battles and much more judicial inconvenience. New laws on vis-

itation and custody are more detailed and provide more opportunity for struggles as well. Many of the laws are openly opposed by judges and judiciary institutions so that cases often become even more complicated and difficult to interpret.

It is important to try to get all parties in such conflicts to describe their point of view properly. Sometimes it can help parties to step off the treadmill of a conflict that not only takes too many years of one's life but can obsess generation after generation. What makes this research quite difficult is how to reach people who are so frustrated they just do not want to be reminded of the case (Kodjoe & Wiestler, 1994). This kind of coping is often advised by psychiatrists, psychologists and other caregivers.

Much quantitative research has the major problem of reaching fathers, who are neither well organized nor have much motivation to cooperate with researchers. Mothers are perhaps afraid of criticisms. It must be made very clear that looking back critically is difficult, and should be rewarded by researchers. Reconciliation (Gardner, 2001, p. 407) should be the goal.

Case research such as this gives rejected parents some relief and helps them to be heard. But extreme cases will be difficult to reach. Among them are those men who dealt with rejecting their own father and are now confronted with being a rejected parent.

Often, researchers have no interest in digging that deep but such research prevents the possibility of finding solutions. Researchers are often not capable of seeing the case in depth and make statements that hurt fathers unnecessarily (Zander, 2003).

The reality of alienation and paternal discrimination is not only hidden behind the lace curtains (Farrell, 2001) but is sometimes buried away in deep cellars of our society and our minds.

Conclusion

More understanding of structural matters such as paternal discrimination leads us to more knowledge of PAS. Personal conflicts between mothers and fathers can be understood. Negative attitudes towards fatherhood in media, science and politics affect fatherly care. It is therefore important to examine PAS not just in a context of patterns between parents in conflict, but also as a result of the denigration of the parental, especially paternal, responsibility in society. We should not avoid controversial research.

Footnotes

¹The tender years presumption (or doctrine) is a legal principle that has existed since the late nineteenth century. Under the tender-years presumption, the assumption is made that mothers, by virtue of the fact that they are female, are intrinsically superior to men as child rearers. (Gardner, 1992, p. 30)

²By combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and empirical materials researchers can

hope to overcome the weaknesses or intrinsic biases and problems of single method, single-observer and single-theory studies.

³Farrell uses this word in a double sense implying a bad kind of mothering (Farrell, 2001).

⁴Parentification is misuse of parental authority (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986, p. 124). A role shift occurs between parent and child in which the child is burdened with responsibility for adult tasks in a destructive way, effectively taking over the positions of the other parent. Minuchin (1974) uses the term “parental child.”

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