

Is a Critique of Parental Alienation Syndrome/ Parental Alienation Disorder (PAS/PAD) Timely? A Response to Geffner and Sandoval

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Dr. Geffner and Dr. Sandoval's "Critique" (2020, this issue) focuses on Gardner's (1985, 1987, 1992a) articles on parental alienation syndrome (PAS), now more than 30 years old. Theories about parental alienation have developed significantly over these years (Milchman, 2020, this issue). Why focus on PAS now? Is this bias against a "syndrome" often used by political and legal advocates against child sexual abuse (CSA) victims? The answer is "No." Current alienation advocacy is not constrained by current theory development about alienation. This article explains why Geffner and Sandoval's "Critique" of PAS is a timely response to current alienation advocacy.

First, as the "Critique" implies, PAS has been "repackaged" as the parental alienation disorder (PAD) and as parental alienation (PA) *without any change in its presumed behavioral criteria* over the three decades since it was first proposed. By way of contrast, the developer of the Child Sexual Abuse Inventory (Friedrich, 1997), which is the gold standard for differentiating children's normal sexual behaviors from those that are specific to sexual abuse, modified the interpretation of the CSA criteria less than ten years after the test was first developed (Friedrich, 2005). PAD and PA are old wines in new bottles.

Second, there are no reliable empirical research studies that validate the behavioral criteria whether as originally proposed for PAS, as promulgated today for PAD or PA, or even just as a description of a parent-

child relationship problem without conceptualizing the problem as either a syndrome or a disorder or a diagnosis (Milchman, 2020, this issue; Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2012, 2016). Concern about inadequate empirical research is not just a "research geek" concern. The absence of scientific validity studies means that there is *currently no general way to differentiate between alienated children and abused children*. Nevertheless, as the "Critique" reports, proponents advocate severe solutions for cases they presume to be PAS/PAD/PA cases, solutions that give alleged abusers unfettered access to their alleged victims and prevent the children's access to the parent who is trying to protect them.

Third, PA advocacy has been aggressive in promoting political and legal action worldwide (Bernet, 2013; Bernet & Baker, 2013; Sheehan, 2019). Whether acknowledged or not, named as a syndrome, a disorder, a diagnosis, or a description, the concept of PA supports shared parenting presumptions, "friendly parent" provisions, and sanctions against parents reporting domestic violence and communicating children's abuse, especially CSA allegations in court. However, in the absence of validated behavioral criteria for PA, implicit cultural assumptions, not scientific evidence, provide the credibility for these advocacy efforts (Milchman, 2018a). Even though, in theory, mothers and fathers are both known to alienate their children (Fidler & Bala, 2010; Johnston, 2003; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005; Warshak, 2015), and new research shows gender parity in PA allegations in practice (Meier, 2019), as the "Critique" describes, accusations of PA are more likely to be used

as a defense, and a successful one, by fathers against CSA allegations communicated by mothers in custody cases (Meier, 2019; Meier & Dickson, 2017; Milchman, 2018b).

Lending further support to the equation in the “Critique” between PAS practice then and PAD/PA practice now, the cultural assumptions, be they implicit or explicit, underlying the legal response to this defense are often misogynistic, just as they were when PAS was first proposed (Meier, 2009, Milchman, 2018a). The assumption that a father, even though rejected, is a safe and competent parent lends credibility to equating unsubstantiated CSA allegations with false ones (Milchman, 2018b). The assumption that a mother who communicates the CSA allegations is malicious or psychologically disturbed lends credibility to concluding that she is an unfit parent (Milchman, 2018b). The assumption that false CSA allegations are common in divorce cases lends credibility to skepticism about them, which, as asserted in the “Critique,” “overshadows any kind of critical thinking or comprehensive investigation (Geffner & Sandoval, 2020, this issue).” These assumptions obfuscate the biases embedded in current PA advocacy, in and out of the courtroom (Meier & Dickson, 2017; Milchman, 2018a, b).

However, scientific evidence and reasoning rebuts these cultural assumptions, revealing that they actually confuse the issues. Unsubstantiated allegations are not false allegations. They haven’t been disproven. They are allegations for which there is insufficient evidence to make a determination. As reported in the “Critique,” deliberately false CSA allegations are rare (2%–14%), even in high-conflict custody cases. The absence of evidence in unsubstantiated cases isn’t affirmative evidence of the absence of abuse. It is well known that some abused children are unable or unwilling to disclose their abuse, especially if parents are the abusers (Hershkowitz, Horowitz, & Lamb, 2005). Moreover, even non-abusive parents can be incompetent or harsh and unattuned parents (Teti, Cole, Cabrera, Goodman, & McLoyd, 2017). Relying on biased cultural assumptions leads to mistakes regarding evidentiary issues, trust in misinformation, and disregard for important distinctions in parenting behavior. There is no scientific basis for the

assumptions on which PA advocacy is based, today or in Gardner’s (1985, 1986, 1987, 1992a,b) day. Changes in nomenclature from PAS to PAD or PA do not correspond to changes in practice.

As the “Critique” asserts, agreeing with PA advocates, PA is a serious parent–child relationship problem. There is little meaningful dispute about that. The dispute is about the accuracy of the behavioral criteria used to identify it and, more precisely, whether that accuracy has been established scientifically. It has not. Assessment criteria for PA, abusive parenting, harsh or insensitive and unattuned parenting, and incompetent parenting must be specific to each cause and differentiate that cause from the other causes. Furthermore, since the criteria are different, evidence for one does not prove or disprove any of the others. Each must be assessed and proven independently (Milchman, 2019). The claims of target parents are insufficient to identify PA cases, even if those claims are buttressed by expert or legal opinions. Until there are scientifically valid studies using independent measures of parenting quality that can distinguish between children who rationally and irrationally reject a parent, PA advocates cannot claim scientific support for identifying alienated children. Recognizing the need for specific assessment criteria and evidence in practice could go a long way toward decreasing polarization in the field.

About the Author

Madelyn S. Milchman, PhD, has practiced clinical and forensic psychology in New Jersey since 1986. Her expertise is in trauma, including child sexual and emotional abuse, incest survivors, domestic violence, rape, recovered memory, sexual harassment, PTSD, divorce/custody, parental alienation, and other types of trauma. She won the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children 2019 Outstanding Frontline Professional Award for her work on the relationship between child abuse allegations and parental alienation allegations. She has served as an expert witness in child custody cases, relocation cases, reunification cases, criminal child sexual abuse cases, and psychological injury cases involving trauma-related issues. Dr. Milchman has presented and published articles nationally and internationally in these and related areas including principles and methods for forensic evaluations and working with psychological experts. She serves as an evaluating expert, a scientific expert, a consulting expert, and a rebuttal expert.

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