

A collective international response to the claim that so-called ‘parental alienation’ is a well-studied ‘gender neutral’ empirical phenomenon which can easily be measured

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On the 4th of June 2024, 13 Swedish academics (including the lead author, who is based at UCL in London, UK) and psychologists raised caution related to the use of the so-called ‘parental alienation’ belief system in Swedish Family Courts through the article ‘Parental Alienation is Pseudoscience’ published in the Swedish magazine directed at psychologists, ‘Psykologtidningen’.¹ This was followed by two rebuttals both published on the 12th of June 2024, one by a Swedish academic and another by a Swedish journalist. We, a group of 105 international academics, health- and legal professionals from 18 countries, have therefore come together to provide a final rebuttal to the two critical responses claiming that the original article ‘Parental Alienation is Pseudoscience’ lacks scientific basis and is misrepresentative. In this response, we outline the scientific evidence that our original statement builds on and meet the criticism in detail.

A wide scientific literature body clearly explains why the so-called ‘parental alienation’ (PA) belief system continues to fall within the definition of pseudoscience (see, for example, Saini et al. 2012, 2016; Doughty et al. 2018, 2020; Milchman 2019; Barnett 2020; Meier 2021; Mercer 2019, 2021a; Trane et al. 2021; An Roinn dli Agus Cirt 2023; Dalgarno et al. 2023). We must not confuse the existence of PA studies, or the number of such studies, with proof of scientific evidence (Mercer 2021a; Meier 2021).

To this day, no credible scientific evidence underpins the way PA is often understood or used in court. PA studies often cite discussion pieces and blogs, build on opinion surveys, over-rely on retrospective accounts, lack longitudinal studies, lack control groups and objective or clinical selection criteria, use small samples, and/or are methodologically weak, non-randomised, and ungeneralisable. They thus lead to unreliable applications of PA concepts or systematic avoidance of alternative reasoning to argue that a child’s legitimate estrangement is the result of ‘alienation’ by the preferred parent (Thomas and Richardson, 2015; Saini 2016; Milchman 2019; Meier 2021). As we noted in our article, PA is not identified as a disorder or condition in either of the major international indices – the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

¹ For an English translation of the Swedish article ‘Parental Alienation is Pseudoscience’ published in ‘Psykologtidningen’ on June 4th, 2024 see: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381731424_Parental_Alienation_is_Pseudoscience, a Swedish summary of this response was published on Psykologtidningen on July 16th, 2024 see: ‘105 experter: Därför fördömer vi användandet av så kallad föräldraalienation’.

Mental Disorders (DSM-V) and the International Classification of Diseases 11th edition (ICD-11). Most fundamentally, the determination of whether a child is exhibiting so-called PA or understandable estrangement due to the disliked parent's own behaviour is entirely without any scientific basis. The claims of proponents that they have tools to distinguish the two are simply not scientifically validated in any way.

Despite decades of research, PA still lacks a universal clinical and scientific definition, as confirmed by the definition proposed in the PA proponents' response to our article. Most PA proponents agree that only a child's 'unjustified' estrangement that has no 'legitimate' justification should be referred to as PA. The problem arises, however, in PA proponents' inability to distinguish between actual abuse, so-called 'alienation', and the boundaries surrounding a child's 'justified' rejection, resistance, and refusal to relate to or spend time with a parent (Meier 2021; Mercer 2021a). 'Justification' remains a subjective decision that allows PA to be identified in every case desired by PA proponents.

As has been carefully elaborated and explained by Milchman (2019), proposed tools and diagnostic tests claiming to detect so-called PA (including PARQ, an instrument that in fact assesses whether children believe they are being rejected by a parent, and PAD) are – at best – sets of criteria which apply equally if not more so to children's reactions to destructive or abusive parents. Many of the 'typical behaviours' listed in the checklists to 'diagnose' PA can equally be associated with numerous childhood adversities (such as negative parenting practices, domestic violence and abuse, extensive parental conflict, excessive litigation, mental health issues, children's realistic fear, lack of parent-child warmth and weak parental attachments with the allegedly alienated parent) (Neilson 2018; Milchman 2022, 2024). Children's alignment with one parent over another can be a normal consequence of child development or a normal reaction to parental separation (Kelly and Johnson 2001; Mercer 2021b).

The unfounded and baseless critiques referenced in the response (as made by Harman and Lorandos 2021 and Harman et al. 2023), entirely mis-state the findings of a single study by Meier et al., and were rebutted in detail in Meier et al. (2022). It is notable, that although ten articles were cited to make a case for the scientific basis of PA, they are all written by the **same** three lead authors or author groups (two if excluding self-citations). It may be that the response authors failed to read our article in detail, where we made clear that successful attempts to use children in custody disputes exist but require '*alternative and well-researched models of understanding*' (Stark 2007; Katz 2016; Harsey and Freyd 2020; Dalgarno et al. 2024a). The PA label ought to be avoided, as we explained, since Gardner's original framing of PA(S) was highly misogynistic while reproducing a belief system where primarily mothers served as so-called 'alienators' (e.g. up to 90%). This came to influence and strongly taint the PA studies following his original ideas, as they largely relate back to his eight symptoms of PA(S), or the more summarised 'five factor model'. Indeed, little has changed in practice in the family courts by changing the terminology from PAS to PA (Meier 2020; Casas Vila 2020; An Roinn Dli Agus Cirt 2023). Some contemporary PA advocates and court instructed 'experts', including in Swedish Family Courts, do not distinguish PA from PAS, use very similar criteria, and/or

continue to advocate for the validity of PAS (e.g. Baker and Verrocchio 2016; Bernet et al. 2018).

Though PA proponents attempt to claim that so-called PA is ‘gender neutral’ (such as in Harman et al. 2016a), they tend to fall back on the same sexist ‘hostile mother’ stereotypes. For example, PA proponents’ studies have concluded that both parents ‘alienate’ but *more mothers* than fathers ‘alienate’ (e.g. 64% versus 34%). Adding to that, *mothers are in fact ‘abusive’* (e.g. 71% of mothers versus 29% of fathers) rather than as they propose ‘alienated’ parents (Harman et al. 2023). Further on studies claim that both fathers and mothers may ‘alienate’, but *mothers’ alienating behaviour* is socially considered more ‘acceptable’ than fathers’ alienation (Harman et al. 2016b), and *mothers* primarily engage in ‘*indirect alienation*’ which is *more harmful* and *leads to more ‘negative’ outcomes* for children than father’s ‘direct alienation’ (Harman et al. 2020).

As empirically proven globally, it is overwhelmingly mothers – particularly mothers alleging abuse - who are accused of PA in family court proceedings (see, Gomide et al. 2016; Meier and Dickson 2017; Barnett 2020; Casas Vila 2020; Doughty et al. 2020; Feresin 2020; Lapierre et al. 2020; Mackenzie et al. 2020; Meier 2020; Rathus 2020). The gendered values surrounding the PA label, and family court proceedings overall, have been showcased across the world, including in and beyond the US (Dallam and Silberg 2016; Milchman 2017; Meier 2020; Mercer 2022; Shaw and Geffner 2022; Avalle et al. 2022), in England and Wales (Doughty et al. 2020; Barnett 2020; Birchall and Choudhry 2022; Grey 2023; Dalgarno et al. 2024b), Canada (Neilson, 2018; Sheehy and Boyd 2020; Zaccour 2020; Lapierre et al. 2020, 2022), New Zealand (Elizabeth 2020; Mackenzie et al. 2020), Australia (Berns 2001; Rathus 2020), Brazil (Rakell and Felipe 2021; Dalgarno et al. 2023; Ayeb-Karlsson et al. 2024), Spain (Casas Vila 2020; Gomide et al. 2016), Italy (Feresin 2020) and France (Prigent and Sueur 2020).

In Canada, Sheehy and Boyd (2020) as well as Zaccour (2018) found that mothers were more than twice as likely to be accused of PA than fathers. It is primarily protective mothers who end up losing custody, residence or contact when PA is counter-alleged to domestic abuse reports in family courts, and particularly in the context of child sexual abuse (Ferguson et al. 2018; Dallam and Silberg 2019; Meier 2020; Dalgarno et al. 2023, 2024c). Neilson’s (2018) analysis of Canadian court judgments found that when courts made definitive PA findings against mothers, they were almost three times more likely to lose custody of their children than when courts made findings of PA against fathers.

The use of PA can result in practices that are contrary to internationally recognised rights of children embodied in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, which ensures that children’s perspectives are considered in legal proceedings that affect them. The priority for all children is their safety and that of their families. It is hopefully entirely unnecessary to voyage into the extended history or current societal structural processes that contribute to the increased risk of violence and abuse experienced by marginalised populations, specific genders, and other lower-status groups, or why we need international conventions and

UN special rapporteurs supporting the elimination of *gender*-based violence, violence against *women* and *children*, *femicide* and *filicide*.

Attempts at proclaiming gender-neutrality in so-called parental alienation and in the perpetration of domestic violence and abuse require an unintentional or deliberate disregard for societal power relations and status, and for empirical and statistical data across a wide range of jurisdictions internationally. Baseless attacks on international efforts to reduce such discrimination, such as through the United Nations or specific UN roles and reports, are inappropriate and counterproductive, and do not deserve further attention.

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