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

Janet R. Johnston Ph.D

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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

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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
• Admissability of expert testimony

Empirical Studies
• Allegations & substantiations of abuse in custody disputing families (FCR, 2005)
• Causes and correlates of child’s rejection of a parent (ARA, 2007; SACFC, 2007)
• Psychological functioning of alienated children & their parents (CC, 2005; AJP, 2003)
• Replies to critics (CC, 2006; FCR, 2004)
• Social policy implications (FLQ, 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
• 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 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
- 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
Procedure: Developed coding manual with multiple items measuring each concept
- 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
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 5-12 yrs
- 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, derision, verbal abuse; harassment; vague, unspecific, trivial reasons for dislike; cites family legends, borrowed scenarios to justify dislike of parent

No Enjoyment of Fa/Mo
(6 items) Eg. Looks forward to seeing parent, able to remember good times, able to express love for parent (scores reversed)

Alienation Co-parent
(10 items) Eg. Sabotages other parent/child rel’ship, sends negative messages, expresses anger & models hostile behavior to other parent

Role Reversal with Mo/Fa
(7 items) Eg. Parent has difficulty distinguishing child’s feelings from own; child comforts 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

Lacks Warm/Involvement
with Child (12 items) Eg. Unable to show love, involved in child’s activities, confidence in self as parent, has no difficulty listening & responding to child’s needs (scores reversed)

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 Extensive 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 deficit, & 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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To contact Jan Johnston: johnston@email.sjsu.edu