



**November 2023  
VOL. 18 No. 11**

## **Parental Alienation Theory Is Frequently Misunderstood**

William Bernet, MD, and Alan D. Blotcky, PhD

The concept and the name of “parental alienation” (PA) was introduced by Richard A. Gardner in a newsletter article in 1985. Since then, there has been a remarkable proliferation of qualitative research (e.g., descriptions of PA from about 50 countries) and quantitative research (e.g., prevalence of PA in U.S. and Canada; psychological tests to distinguish alienated from non-alienated children; frequency of acceptance of the PA concept in trial and appellate courts). The basic premise of PA theory has been widely accepted for many years. At the AFCC conference in Denver in 2010, nearly 98% of survey respondents (who attended a plenary session) endorsed the question, “Do you think that some children are manipulated by one parent to irrationally and unjustifiably reject the other parent?” (Baker, Jaffee, Bernet, & Johnston, Brief report on parental alienation survey, *AFCC eNews*, 2011).

PA theory is generally understood and accepted by mental health professionals and legal practitioners, i.e., that alienating behaviors by a favored parent can influence a child to avoid and reject a relationship with the other parent. However, there has been an unusual level of misinformation and misunderstanding regarding this topic. These misunderstandings—like memes and woozles—have taken on a life of their own. Misinformation makes it hard for children and parents who are embroiled in a PA situation to get the help they need, since practitioners may have difficulty in accurately identifying and treating this toxic condition. Here are some examples of recurrent misunderstandings regarding PA theory.

### **Blatant Ad Hominem Attacks**

Since the 1980’s, critics of PA theory have made unprofessional and extremely inappropriate statements regarding Richard Gardner, e.g., that he was “a proponent of pedophilia” and that he “invented” PA simply as a legal device to protect fathers who sexually abused their children. As time progressed, critics made false statements about

the next generation of PA scholars: that we have created a “cottage industry” and are motivated to increase our income by providing expert testimony regarding PA. Also, that we engage in censorship and book-burning when we try to correct misinformation that has been published regarding PA. These false claims are not supported by scholarly investigation but are angry outbursts by writers who tend to speak up without considering the consequences.

### **Recurrent Misstatements of PA Theory**

Recurrent repetition of the *same misinformation* can be studied systematically by citation analysis, which is a type of bibliometric research. For example, Bernet and Xu studied the repetition of the following statement in mental health and legal literature: “PA theory assumes that the favored parent has caused PA in the child simply because the child refuses to have a relationship with the rejected parent.” That is a seriously false representation of PA theory for two reasons: (1) All PA scholars agree that there are several possible causes for a child’s contact refusal or parent–child contact problem; (2) No serious PA scholar “assumes” that all children who manifest contact refusal were indoctrinated by the favored parent to reject the other parent. Bernet and Xu located 94 examples of that *same misinformation* in the writings and presentations of PA critics between 1994 and 2022. They used citation analysis software to illustrate the flow of misinformation over 29 years (*Scholarly Rumors, Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 2023). The underlying causes of that unbroken trail of misunderstanding appear to be the psychological mindset of the writer (e.g., confirmation bias) and sloppy research practices (such as persistent use of secondary and tertiary sources of information).

### **Straw Person Arguments Regarding the Diagnosis of PA**

A straw person argument occurs in the following way: Author A publishes an article regarding some aspect of PA theory; then Author B misinterprets the statement of PA theory and criticizes their own flawed version of the theory. In that way, Author B makes a big deal out of finding fault with their own interpretation of PA theory, which differs significantly from what Author A wrote in the first place.

For example, Bernet and Greenhill (Five-Factor Model, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2022) published criteria for the diagnosis of PA, which is called the Five-Factor Model (FFM) or sometimes the Baker Model. The five criteria are: the child manifests contact resistance or refusal; a prior positive relationship between the child and the rejected parent; absence of abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient parenting on the part of the rejected parent; multiple alienating behaviors on the part of the favored parent; and the child exhibits many of the eight behavioral manifestations of PA. Some critics compare the FFM with the “Ecological Model” or the “Multi-Factor Model” and disparage the FFM as being less useful or less comprehensive. The problem is that the FFM and the Ecological Model have different scopes of interest. The Ecological Model is a broad concept that pertains to all the different reasons why a child might manifest contact refusal, including a parent who is abusive, a parent with an alcohol problem, separation anxiety, a new stepparent, PA,

etc. In contrast, the FFM is a narrow concept that pertains to only one of those various scenarios, i.e., PA. It is illogical to compare the Ecological Model with the FFM and say that one of them is superior. These two models are completely compatible if they are correctly defined and understood.

### **Hopeful Road Ahead**

As a maladaptive family dynamic, PA is an intense, painful phenomenon that causes hard feelings among family members without a good reason. Sadly, PA also contributes to painful misunderstandings among mental health and legal practitioners and researchers. It has been suggested that misunderstandings among professionals are an echo of the feelings among family members. It is a fractal in human psychology, perhaps, not just in mathematical shapes.

Mental health and legal professionals should try to identify and undo misunderstandings and misinformation that they encounter in scholarly literature as well as in their day-to-day professional activities. In the example of the straw person argument, Author A and Author B should communicate with each other, listen to each other, and try to understand each person's perspective. This advice pertains to PA theory and other aspects of family law, in which potential misunderstandings may cloud our understanding and resolution of critical situations. We strive for the day when proponents of PA and critics of PA can engage in meaningful dialogue so that progress can be made for millions of children and parents who are hurting.

For questions, comments, or dialogue, please contact [william.bernet@vumc.org](mailto:william.bernet@vumc.org).