

Dear colleagues,

The following e-mail, which I sent to a number of colleagues who had asked me for early findings and current literature on the parental alienation syndrome, may interest you.

Kind regards,

Dr. med. Wilfrid v. Boch-Galhau

Specialist in psychiatry, neurology,  
psychosomatic medicine and psychotherapy

*Dear colleagues,*

*Thank you for your letter requesting some early scientific findings relating to the parental alienation syndrome. I would like to share with you some findings – particularly from US research – and list a number of international publications on the subject.*

**1. Richard A. Gardner:** *(Should courts order PAS-children to visit/reside with the alienated parent? A Follow-up Study. American Journal Forensic Psychology 19 (3): 61 – 106)*

*In this longitudinal study, the late Prof. Dr. Richard A. Gardner gives details of 99 cases of alienation in which he was immediately involved. In this context, the US child psychiatrist comes to the conclusion that the court should order contact or order that the child reside with the alienated parent. The results of cases where such a legal order was made (22) are compared with those cases where this recommendation was not followed (77).*

*Summary of findings: "In 22 cases, the court decided either to limit contact with the alienating parent or to order a custody change. In all 22 cases, the attitude of rejection improved considerably or disappeared altogether. ... In 77 cases, the court decided against a custody change or against limiting contact with the alienating parent. In these conditions, the symptoms of alienation became more severe in 70 cases (90.9 %). Only in 7 cases (9.1 %) where no order for custody change was made, was there a noticeable improvement. A direct link can therefore be made between a custody change and/or limited contact with the alienating parent on the one hand and a reduction in symptoms of alienation on the other."*

**2. In a small-scale study, J. Dunne and M. Hedrick** *(Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, Vol. 21, pp. 21 – 38, 1994) analysed 16 cases of parental alienation: The study shows that traditional therapy and interventions are not successful methods for the rehabilitation of children affected by parental alienation. Even though courts of law are extremely reluctant to make drastic decisions – particularly if these go against the wishes of a child – the study shows clearly that only a custody change will ultimately cure alienation.*

**3. The researchers S. S. Clawar and P. V. Rivlin (1991)** *report from the well-known study "Children Held Hostage: Dealing with Programmed and Brainwashed Children" (American Bar Association, Section of Family Law, Chicago, 1991): "Environmental modification refers to the minor or major changes to be made in the amount of physical contact a child is permitted with the programming/brainwashing and target parents. As a general rule, we have found that change of the physical environment and increased social contact with a target parent are the major positive ways to deprogram a child. The more continuous and regular contact the child has with the programmer and brainwasher, the more likely the process is to continue and damage is to increase .... In some cases, the positive changes that occur in the child are so radical that they are surprising to observe." (p. 148ff) ... "It is our opinion that one of the most powerful tools the courts have is the threat and implementation of environmental modification. Of the approximately four hundred cases we have*

seen where the courts have increased the contact with the target parent (and in half of these, over the objection of the children), there has been positive change in 90 percent of the relationships between the child and the target parent, including the elimination or reduction of many social-psychological, educational, and physical problems that the child present prior to the modification." (p. 150) ... "We have had the opportunity to interview hundreds of children after environmental change has taken place, and we can quote one child as a fair summary of the others. I would never have made the change to spend more time with my mother if the court didn't make it happen and you didn't suggest it. Now that I have, I've gotten to know my mother. She's a nicer person than I ever believed, and I realize that I could have grown up without ever knowing her and what she believes about life. It's been really important, and I want to thank you (child extends hand to shake). I have also learned that I don't know everything and I have to be really careful about making closed opinions in the future. " (p. 151)

**4. A larger 2013 study by Clawar & Rivlin** of 1,000 families, entitled "Children Held Hostage – Identifying Brainwashed Children, Presenting a Case, and Crafting Solutions" (American Bar Association, Chicago, 2013) yielded similar results.

**5. In the Kopetski follow-up study** "The Spectrum of Parental Alienation Syndrome (Part III): L. Kopetski, D. C. Rand & R. Rand [2005] American Journal of Forensic Psychology; 23 (1): 15 – 43, 84 of the 423 families they had studied in the period 1975 – 1990 were PAS cases. In 49 cases, alienation seemed to have been interrupted; in 15 cases, it was fully developed; 8 cases were pending in court; and of 12 cases the outcome was unknown. In 18 of the 49 cases where alienation had been interrupted, the court had either awarded custody to the alienated parent or ordered contact with that parent. In the other cases of "interruption", the parents had reached agreement concerning custody and contact. In cases of "fully developed" alienation, the alienating parent had been awarded sole custody and had continued legal proceedings until contact with the alienated parent had finally been terminated. A therapist was usually involved, who supported the alienation process and who would cite the premise that it would be harmful to the child if he or she was removed from a pathological symbiotic relationship with the alienating parent.

The findings from this study would suggest that experts in custody and contact arrangements can differentiate in their recommendations between "interrupted" and "fully developed" alienation in PAS cases at the more severe end of the spectrum. Legal decisions regarding custody and contact played a key role in interrupting or preventing alienation. Therapy, as a form of primary intervention to interrupt alienation, proved ineffective and, in some cases, even aggravated the situation. These findings agree with those from other studies (for instance, Clawar and Rivlin, 1991/2013; Dunne and Hedrik, 1994; Gardner, 2001). More and more data indicate that medium to severe alienation requires structural interventions in the form of court decisions on custody and contact rights, to ensure the child has access to both parents.

Custody decisions made on the basis of traditional concepts such as the "primary parent theory" or "the child's primary attachment relationship" assume that only one parent is really important for a child, and that a child's stated preference is not influenced by a parent. These assumptions clash with the concept that children of divorce need both parents, just like children in intact families.

**6. Ms Michaela Hachenberg** presents some very interesting findings in her thesis, submitted to the Institute of Psychology at the University of Würzburg, Germany, in October 2014 for a Diplom degree in psychology. Entitled "Elterliche Entfremdung – Diagnose und mögliche Folgen" [Parental alienation – diagnosis and possible consequences], this is highly recommended reading.

Her study aimed to design a questionnaire for a retrospective survey of parental alienation. The questionnaire items on parental alienation are based on the PAS criteria developed by Gardner, and on the basis of Ms Hachenberg's own work with separated families at a practice for forensic psychology in Würzburg. The questionnaire includes items on parental behaviour, child behaviour and mental disorders in the respondents. It also collects demographic data and information about expert reports and court decisions. The questionnaire was distributed online using the SoSci survey platform. To

ensure maximum heterogeneity of the respondent sample, a link to the questionnaire was posted via the author's Facebook account. Of the 548 questionnaires completed, 261 were included in the survey. Criteria for including a questionnaire were separation of the parents, age of majority, and completion of at least 65 questionnaire items.

Based on factor analysis and the scaling of the items on PA development in children, a 5-factor solution with the following scales emerged:

- a) Denigration and rejection
- b) Lack of ambivalence
- c) Fabrication, lying
- d) Spread to the social circle of the parent with contact rights
- e) Doubt and remorse

The author succeeded in designing a reliable questionnaire. The individual PA scales and both scales for parental behaviour (programming and conflict behaviour) show good to very good results in Cronbach's alpha, cf. Tables 1 and 2. Expectations regarding the correlations between the scales are confirmed. Only the correlation between the first scale (rejection and denigration) and the third (fabrication and lying) is not significant.

Multivariate variance analysis of the PA scales and some individual items show significant differences between the PA group and the group not affected by PA in the areas "joint custody" and "independent contact arrangement". The groups were formed using the total score of the five PA scales. The top third are considered as an alienated group (PA group), while the two lower thirds are combined in a non-PA group.

The items on parental behaviour are represented based on factor analysis and scaling by the scales

- a) parental programming, and
- b) parental conflict behaviour.

With regard to the intercorrelations between the scales on parental behaviour and the PA scales, no significance was found between the parental programming scale and denigration of the parent with contact rights. For the remaining four PA scales (lack of ambivalence, fabrication, spread to the social circle, and doubt), there are significant correlations with parental programming. As expected, parental conflict behaviour shows significant correlations with the PA scales, except for the scale "spread to the social circle of the parent with contact rights", where there is no significant link.

A comparison of the PA group with the group not affected by parental alienation shows highly significant results regarding mental disorders. In the PA group, just under 20 % more mental disorders are listed than in the non-PA group. More respondents in the PA group list depression, anxiety disorders, attachment problems, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts, emotional problems and borderline disorders. The diagnosis data show higher values for depression, anxiety disorders and borderline disorders (80 % of these are from the PA group) than for the respondents from the non-PA group. In addition to the diagnoses, respondents list self-harmful behaviour and self-esteem problems. The level of attachment problems, psychosomatic disorders and borderline-related disorders currently experienced by the PA group is significantly higher than in the group of the remaining respondents. Regarding the frequency of individual items, the following is noticeable: More than 50 % of respondents would have liked more contact. Just under 40 % of the sample state they had doubts because of potentially hurting the parent they were living with, or were afraid that there would be trouble. For about 65 %, the issue of contact after separation of the parents triggered further conflict, and 80 % state that both parents had spoken ill of each other in front of them. As reasons for their rejection of the parent with contact rights, just under 40 % list trivialities, while 15 % name events that occurred before they were three years old. About a quarter report that there had been a direct ban on contact by the resident parent, while half the respondents feel they were influenced by that parent. Of the total sample, 35.6 % state that contact was interrupted; of these, 73.8% state they resumed contact. As the reason for resuming contact, 19.4 % list own interest, 10.8 % own longing, 9.7 % a change in their own attitude, 8.6 % a change in the behaviour of the parent with contact rights, and 6.5 % fam-

ily events. In its current form, this questionnaire could be used for research purposes or for retrospection in a therapeutic setting.

**7. At the University of Bremen** in the Department of Human and Health Sciences, **Mr Yasar Kadkhodaey** submitted an interesting thesis for a Master's degree in Clinical Psychology in 2015. Entitled "Das Parental Alienation Syndrome nach Richard Gardner – Eine qualitative Untersuchung hoch konflikthafter Scheidungsfamilien zur Analyse von Hinweisen auf kindliche Entfremdungssymptome und entfremdende elterliche Verhaltensweisen" [The Parental Alienation Syndrome according to Richard Gardner – a qualitative survey of high-conflict families of divorce for an analysis of indications of alienation symptoms in children and alienating behaviour in parents], this is well worth reading.

**Summary:** This Master's thesis identifies specific characteristics of high-conflict divorces and their negative impact on the children involved. It demonstrates the link between the typical behaviours of parents acting against each other and alienation efforts that are harmful to child welfare and constitute emotional abuse. The thesis identifies alienation methods and stages that feature in the concept of the parental alienation syndrome (PAS) according to Gardner. It is the intention of alienating parents to influence their child in such a way that he or she adopts a clear attitude of rejection without any legitimate justification of the other, normally non-resident parent. This abuse of the dependency relationship with the child causes specific symptoms in the child that require special diagnostic methods. Both adequate diagnostic methods for children and parents and legally advisable contact arrangements are fundamentally different to divorce cases that take place in a conventional context and are thus free from alienation efforts. The fact that Gardner's PAS concept has not been fully adopted in legal practice, although it addresses a very serious child welfare-related aspect in the determination of expert recommendations regarding custody and contact rights, is contrasted with the results of a study based on a qualitative data analysis of family law expert reports for high-conflict families of divorce. Clear evidence can be shown of the presence of alienation symptoms in children and alienating behaviour in parents, which supports the applicability of Gardner's frequently disputed PAS concept.

**Conclusion:** The aim of this thesis was to present the characteristics of high-conflict families of divorce and to identify them as the basis for the occurrence of alienation symptoms. To verify this correlation, the thesis studied the presence of relevant symptoms in children and behavioural characteristics of parents in high-conflict divorce cases. The presence of PAS symptoms in children, as described by Gardner in his PAS concept, and of alienating parental behaviour, as identified by the items in the Darnell questionnaire, could be clearly demonstrated (cf. Tables 6 and 7). The expert reports for these cases were, of course, found to contain varying amounts of evidence of this. But throughout this thesis, a clear picture emerges, which matches the findings from PAS research literature and supports the justification for the PAS concept. In the general PAS controversy, which is addressed in the Discussion section of this thesis (cf. Section 6.2), many critical voices are directed at the label for the set of symptoms combined in the PAS concept. While, then, many PAS critics are addressing the concrete name for the alienation process identified by Gardner, other research groups are developing concepts that essentially have the same basic characteristics and dynamics, thus differing mainly in name (Rand, 2011). But whether or not full support is given to the establishment of the PAS concept, it is increasingly cited both in US court rulings and German court decisions regarding custody and contact rights (Schwarz, 2011). This may be partly because the PAS concept demands the consideration of factors that considerably affect the welfare of children of divorce. According to current research findings, three particularly important factors can be identified, which determine the level of distress in affected children: Firstly, there are the circumstances that result in the primary caregiver no longer being able to care for the child in an appropriate manner (because of their own stress and problems) or to recognise or satisfy the child's basic needs and wishes. These have a strong negative impact on the child's ability to process the parents' separation, especially in the first two years following separation. Secondly, a high level of parental conflict usually involves the joint children, causing additional distress for them. Thirdly, another major factor in the child's stress and strain experience is irregular or

non-existent contact with one parent (Schüler & Löhr, 2013). Regarding this last aspect, the PAS literature recommends enforcing contact between alienated children and their rejected parent (Boch-Galhau, 2012). It has been shown that the circumstances specified exist in cases of PAS children. Such children are exposed to a large number of stress factors and strains that are different in quality to those experienced by children during a regular parental separation process. The general and undisputed recognition of the PAS concept, which is often withheld because of its absence to date from the classification systems, may well result in more extensive research into this topic. According to Ben-Ami and Baker (2012), for instance, there is considerable need for studies of the effectiveness of different preventive measures, which could help familiarise professionals handling cases of high-conflict parental separation with empirically proven actions. Alienating parents must be made aware of the mental health impacts on their children. PAS distorts children's emotional perception, depriving them of the ability to make their own rational decisions and the corresponding self-efficacy experiences (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). Directive action is required both at the therapeutic and at the legal level, to efficiently counter the efforts of alienating parents, which are harmful to child welfare. However, this leads to the central problem of getting a court to recognise the existence of the parental alienation syndrome (Gardner, 2003a). Expert witnesses, for instance, anticipate the difficulties in justifying a diagnosis of PAS, therefore avoid using it to steer clear of the risk of being challenged for bias (Gardner, 2002a). This, however, makes it impossible for the legal professions to adhere to the principle of making recommendations that are in the interests of child welfare.

**8. The results of these seven studies** are confirmed in a small study by W. v. Boch-Galhau, "Parental Alienation und Parental Alienation Syndrome/Disorder - A serious form of psychological child abuse – with case examples" (Verlag Wissenschaft und Bildung, Berlin, 2012 [German edition] and 2013 [expanded English edition]). In four detailed follow-up interviews conducted 6 or 8 years after custody transfer, four – by now – adolescents or young adults report that, following the custody change ordered by the court (against their will), their attitude of rejection disappeared and that their psychosocial development took a more favourable course with the previously alienated parent. (Always with case-specific expert psychological support.)

They regret that the court had not made this decision much earlier. In the other four cases where contact with the alienating parent was not reduced and no custody change was implemented, the alienation process continued with a range of long-term socio-psychological consequences. (Please send me an e-mail to receive a **review of this book in the American Journal of Family Therapy 42** (2014) 92 – 94.)

**9. In a more recent publication by A. J. L. Baker and S. R. Sauber**, "Working with Alienated Children and Families – A Clinical Guidebook" (Routledge, New York and London, 2013), 16 experts provide guidelines for the clinical treatment of alienated children in 12 chapters. I would like to draw attention particularly to chapters 11 and 12. This is a very good book for professional practice.

**10.** Please note also this book by **D. Lorandos, W. Bernet and S. R. Sauber**: "Parental Alienation: The Handbook for Mental Health and Legal Professionals". Published in December 2013, it summarises scientific findings on parental alienation from around the globe. The authors of this handbook are 13 internationally renowned experts. The CD that comes with the handbook contains more than 1,000 scientifically relevant literature references from 36 countries. It also discusses roughly 500 court cases from the United States and Canada, where expert psychologists and/or judges cited evidence of parental alienation in their decisions. This is currently the most up-to-date publication on the subject. It is highly recommended for all professionals dealing with children in high-conflict divorces – anywhere in the world! One chapter (Chapter 13) addresses global initiatives on parental alienation, providing insights particularly into the situation in Europe and in Germany.)

([http://www.ccthomas.com/details.cfm?P\\_ISBN13=9780398088811](http://www.ccthomas.com/details.cfm?P_ISBN13=9780398088811); Please send me an e-mail to receive a **review of this handbook in the Austrian journal "Neuropsychiatrie"** (Springer-Verlag, 28(2) 2014).

### **Notes on some more international literature:**

*The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 39: 48 – 71, 2011 published an article by **D. C. Rand, PhD**, "Parental Alienation Critics and the Politics of Science". This paper examines the claims made by two main groups of critics regarding the parental alienation syndrome (PAS) and parental alienation (PA). It addresses the following and other issues: The role of the alienating parent; structural interventions (such as custody transfers); the correlation between PAS and accusations of sexual abuse; and the controversy surrounding use of the term "syndrome". It is highly recommended reading.

The journal **Professional Psychology: Research and Practice**, Vol. 46, No. 4, pp. 235 – 249, 2015) published an article by **Prof. R. A. Warshak, PhD**, University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, entitled "Ten Parental Alienation Fallacies That Compromise Decisions in Court". False beliefs about the genesis of parental alienation and about appropriate forms of treatment shape opinions and decisions that fail to meet children's needs.

This article reviews 10 misunderstandings.

1. Children never unreasonably reject the parent with whom they spend the most time.
2. Children never unreasonably reject mothers.
3. Each parent contributes equally to a child's alienation.
4. Alienation is a child's transient, short-lived response to the parents' separation.
5. Rejecting a parent is a short-term healthy coping mechanism.
6. Young children living with an alienating parent need no intervention.
7. Alienated adolescents' stated preferences should dominate custody decisions.
8. Children who appear to function well outside the family need no intervention.
9. Severely alienated children are best treated with traditional therapy techniques while living primarily with their favoured parent.
10. Separating children from an alienating parent is traumatic.

Reliance on false beliefs compromises investigations and undermines adequate consideration of alternative explanations for the causes of a child's alienation.

Most critical, fallacies about parental alienation short-change children and parents by supporting outcomes that fail to provide effective relief to those who experience this problem.

**Prof. Warshak, PhD**, Clinical Professor for Psychiatry at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Tx/USA, also published his outstanding summary "Parental Alienation: Overview, Management, Intervention, and Practice Tips" in the **Journal of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers**, Vol. 28, 2015: 181 – 248.

In collaboration with the family courts, Prof. Warshak successfully introduced the psychological programme "Family Bridges" (cf. Family Court Review 48 [1] 2010: 48 – 80) for reuniting highly alienated children of divorce with their alienated parent some years ago.

In summer 2015, **Prof. William Bernet** (Vanderbilt Medical School, Univ. Nashville, USA) published an article entitled "Parental Alienation, Misinformation versus Facts" in **Judges Journal**, Vol. 54, No. 3: 23 – 27. This paper discusses common issues of misinformation regarding parental alienation.

The journal "**Neuropsychiatrie**" 28 (1) 2014, Springer-Verlag, published an article by the Austrian **child psychiatrist Wolfgang Menz**: "Ein Fall von Eltern-Kind-Entfremdung" [A case of parental alienation] – which I highly recommend! <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs40211-013-0092-4#page-1>

"**Juristische Blätter**", Austria, 135, 420 – 428 (2013, Part I) and 135, 488- 496 (2013, Part II) published an article by **Hinterhofer, Müller, Payrhuber and Pletzer**: "Das Eltern-Entfremdungssyndrom (PAS) aus medizinischer und rechtlicher Sicht" [The parental alienation syndrome (PAS) from the medical and legal perspectives]. This German language article is also worthwhile reading, for both legal and mental health professionals.

**J. v. Staudinger's new *Kommentar*** (2014) zum deutschen Bürgerlichen Gesetzbuch mit Einführungsgesetz und Nebengesetzen, Buch 4 Familienrecht, §§ 1684 – 1717 (Elterliche Sorge 3 – Umgangsrecht) [Commentary on the German Civil Code incl. the Introductory Act and the Ancillary Laws, Vol. 4 Family law, Sections 1684 – 1717 (Parental responsibility 3 – Access rights)], new revised edition by M. Coester, Th. Rauscher, L. Salgo, Sellier – de Gruyter-Verlag, Berlin, 2014, provides a detailed and objective commentary on parental alienation and the parental alienation syndrome.

In 2013, the British scholar **Sue Whitcombe** was honoured by the British Psychological Society for her excellent article "Psychopathology and the conceptualisation of mental disorder: The debate around the inclusion of Parental Alienation in DSM-5" in **Counselling Psychology Review**, Vol. 28, No. 3, September 2013.

**French-speaking readers** will be interested to hear that the French national court of appeal, the **Cour de cassation**, has now recognised the parental alienation syndrome /syndrome d'aliénation parentale: *Le syndrome d'aliénation parentale reconnu par la Cour de cassation: les premiers pas d'une révolution dans le contentieux familial?* [Cour de cassation recognises parental alienation syndrome: a first step towards revolution in family disputes?] Ruling no. 660 of 26 June 2013 (12-14.392) - Cour de cassation - First Civil Division - ECLI:FR:CCASS:2013:C100660  
[http://www.courdecassation.fr/jurisprudence\\_2/premiere\\_chambre\\_civile\\_568/660\\_26\\_26933.html](http://www.courdecassation.fr/jurisprudence_2/premiere_chambre_civile_568/660_26_26933.html);  
[http://www.lexisnexis.fr/droit-document/article/droit-famille/11-2013/152\\_PS\\_FAM\\_FAM1311CM00152.htm#.U1\\_Ylf0zk0](http://www.lexisnexis.fr/droit-document/article/droit-famille/11-2013/152_PS_FAM_FAM1311CM00152.htm#.U1_Ylf0zk0); .

The book "La convention internationale des droits de L'enfant, une Convention particulière" [The International Convention on the Rights of the Child, a special convention] (C. Neirinck and M. Brugeman), Dalloz, 2014, includes an outstanding article by French legal professional **Sophie Paricard** (University of Toulouse 1), entitled "**Le syndrome d'aliénation parentale, catalyseur d'un conflit des droits de l'enfant**" [The parental alienation syndrome – a catalyst for conflict of children's rights].

In his article "**Le syndrome de Médée, parcours sadique de la perte d'amour**" [The Medea syndrome, a sadistic journey into the loss of love] in **Revue Médicale Suisse**, 2010, 6: 340 – 342", the French-speaking psychiatrist and psychotherapist **Prof. Andreoli Antonio** (Geneva) reports that the Medea syndrome (comparable with the Parental Alienation Syndrome according to Gardner) is a highly destructive response with serious consequences for the children and adults. In his view, legislation should be improved to prevent alienating behaviour and provide better protection to the victims. Any hope of reaching personalities with such severe disorders other than by means of legal sanctions is in vain, according to Antonio.

In January 2016, Editions Chronique Sociale will publish a book entitled "**Enfants en danger, séparations conflictuelles et aliénation parentale**" [Children at risk, high-conflict separation and parental alienation] by **Olga Odinetz** and the well-known French child psychiatrist **Roland Broca**. Its 20 chapters are authored by experts such as Olga Odinetz, Roland Broca, Gérard Poussin, Marie-France Hirigoyen, Constance Broca, Marc Juston, Paul Bensussan, Alexis Chalom, Christine Ravaz, Sophie Paricard, Michel Delage, Marie France Carlier, Célia Lilo and Benoît van Dieren. **Please send me an e-mail to receive a table of contents and a list of the authors.**

I hope these notes have answered some of your questions.

Kind regards,

Dr. med. Wilfrid v. Boch-Galhau

Specialist in psychiatry and neurology,  
psychosomatic medicine and psychotherapy

Previously a member of the interdisciplinary working group 'Beratung bei Trennung und Scheidung'  
[Counselling during separation and divorce], Würzburg

Co-organiser of the 2002 international Parental Alienation Syndrome conference, Frankfurt/Main,  
Germany

Member of the international "Parental Alienation Study Group"

Oberer Dallenbergweg 15  
97082 Würzburg, Germany

[praxis@drvboch.de](mailto:praxis@drvboch.de)

[www.drvboch.de](http://www.drvboch.de)

[www.pas-konferenz.de](http://www.pas-konferenz.de)