



## **Reliability and validity of the four-factor model of parental alienation**

Amy J. L. Baker

According to the four-factor model of parental alienation, in order for alienation to be present there must be: (1) a prior positive relationship between the child and the now rejected parent; (2) absence of maltreatment by the rejected parent; (3) use of alienating behaviours by the favoured parent; and (4) presence of behavioural manifestations of alienation in the child. The purpose of the current study was to determine the reliability and validity of the four-factor model as a model of parental alienation. The study tested the reliability and validity of the four-factor model by having mental health professionals code vignettes representing a combination of presence and absence of the factors. Reliability was quite high across the vignettes, coders and factors. There was agreement that when all four factors are present the case is alienation and when one or no factor are present it is not alienation. These data support the four-factor model and suggest avenues for continuing to study the interplay among the factors deemed relevant by mental health professionals in the field of children's relationships with their divorced parents.

### **Practitioner points**

- The four-factor model of parental alienation is a framework to ensure that information about all parties is factored into custody assessments
- The four-factor model of parental alienation can be used to differentiate alienated from estranged children
- The reliability and validity of the four-factor model of parental alienation will be relevant for professionals providing expert testimony

*Keywords:* *parental alienation; reliability; validity.*

---

Fontana Center for Child Protection, PO Box 505, Teaneck, NJ 07666.  
E-mail: amyjlbaker@aol.com

© 2018 The Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice

## **Introduction**

Parental alienation as an explanation for a child's rejection of a parent is relevant in both mental health and legal settings (Lorandos, Bernet and Sauber, 2013). When parents are in dispute, one parent may raise the issue that the child's rejection of him or her is not reality-based but rather induced by the other parent through a process referred to as parental alienation. Invoking the explanatory concept of parental alienation could result in the opposing side in the dispute arguing that it should not be admissible in court. There have been questions raised about whether it is or is not a syndrome and whether there is sufficient science to merit its inclusion in a legal process (e.g. Lorandos, 2013). Whether or not a formal challenge to the scientific admissibility of parental alienation occurs, opposing counsel will have an opportunity through the cross-examination to make the case that parental alienation theory should be excluded from testimony. There are several such common lines of argument.

An argument against the admissibility of parental alienation theory may take the form of condemning the person who coined the term, Dr Gardner, for self-publishing one of his books, for supposedly not accurately portraying his credentials and several patently false allegations (e.g. Bruch, 2001; Dallum, 1999). It may take the form of pointing out that it is not mentioned by name in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association, or the argument could be offered that the science behind parental alienation theory is not sound. For example, in 2015 Thomas and Richardson wrote, 'Despite having been introduced 30 years ago, there remains no credible scientific evidence supporting parental alienation syndrome (PAS, also called parental alienation (PA) and parental alienation disorder (PAD)). The concept has not gained general acceptance in the scientific field, and there remains no test, no data, or any experiment to support claims made concerning PAS. Because of this lack of scientific credibility, many organizations – scientific, medical, and legal – continue to reject its use and acceptance'. In their short opinion piece, the authors claim (without references or supporting documentation) that there is no consensus in the field for the construct of parental alienation. The above, and similar, statements are made despite hundreds of articles on the topic having been published in peer-reviewed journals internationally (e.g. see the review in Bernet and Baker, 2013).

A more balanced perspective is provided in a recent review conducted by Saini, Johnston, Fidler and Bala (2016) which concluded that

although there are questions about parental alienation theory yet to be answered, with respect to the behaviours of an alienating parent, 'the identification of PABs [Parental Alienation Behaviors] has produced a set of remarkably concordant findings ... Mothers, fathers, children, young adults, and counselors have been able to describe the explicit behaviors that may be perpetrated by one parent and have the capacity to distance, damage, or destroy a child's relationship with the other parent' (p. 418). They also concluded that, 'The cluster of symptoms or behaviors indicating the presence of alienation in the child can also be reliably identified' (p. 423).

Likewise, a recent literature review of the scientific underpinnings of parental alienation theory presented evidence for the reliability and validity of the seventeen primary alienating behaviours as well as the eight behavioural manifestations of alienation in children (Baker, *in press*). In that chapter, and elsewhere (Baker, Bone and Ludmer, 2014; Baker, Burkhard and Kelly, 2012) a model of parental alienation, referred to as the four-factor model, is presented, such that the behaviours of both parents as well as the child are taken into account when determining whether a child who is rejecting a parent is alienated.

The components of the four-factor model of parental alienation are: (1) the presence of a prior positive relationship between the child and the now rejected parent; (2) the absence of maltreatment or seriously deficient parenting on the part of the now rejected parent; (3) the use of multiple alienating behaviours on the part of the favoured parent; and (4) the exhibition of the eight behavioural manifestations of alienation by the child (Gardner, 1998). Only when all four factors are present should it be concluded that the child is alienated as opposed to estranged.

The first factor, a prior positive relationship between the child and the now rejected parent, shows that the now rejected parent was not so deficient in parenting that s/he was unable to form an attachment bond with the child. This factor precludes parents who were habitually absent, uninvolved, and uncaring from claiming that they are victims of parental alienation. This is integral to parental alienation theory. As Gardner wrote, 'I am referring here only to those who have been good, dedicated parents ...' (1998, p. 209). This means that by definition the parent was not so ineffective, incompetent, damaged, or uninvolved that there was no prior attachment bond. The premise of parental alienation theory is that the favoured parent has turned the child against a parent with whom the child at one time had a close and loving bond. It must be established that the bond between parent and child had previously existed.

The purpose of the second factor, absence of abuse and/or neglect on the part of the now rejected parent, is to preclude parents who have engaged in behaviours that warrant a child's rejection from claiming that they are victims of parental alienation. This does not mean that the parent must be perfect, only that the child's rejection of the parent is far out of proportion to anything that parent has actually done. As noted by Gardner (1998), 'I am referring here to those who are truly innocent of any behavior that warrants the degree of victimization visited upon them by their PAS children' (p. 209). If the rejected parent had abused or neglected the child, the case could be a hybrid (a combination of both alienation and estrangement elements) or it might be a case of realistic estrangement, but it cannot be a pure case of parental alienation. Abuse or neglect on the part of the rejected parent provides an alternative explanation for why a child would be rejecting a parent and hence negates the validity of alienation as the explanation for the child's behaviour.

In order for a child to be considered alienated the child must have been exposed to parental alienation behaviours by the favoured parent. It is these behaviours that comprise Factor 3. It is not sufficient to assume or infer that the behaviours have occurred. They must be observed (through actions, attitudes, written statements, behaviours, and so forth). The premise underlying this third factor is that the actions and attitudes of one parent have negatively affected the child's perception and experience of the other parent. That is, the child comes to have thoughts and feelings about one parent that are a response to the influence of the other parent over and above the child's direct experience of the parent. Research has identified seventeen primary behaviours by the alienating parent (e.g. Baker and Ben Ami, 2011; Baker and Brassard, 2013; Baker and Chambers, 2011). These are the behaviours that can foster a child's unjustified rejection of the other parent: (1) denigrating the other parent to the child to create the impression that the other parent is unsafe, unloving, and unavailable; (2) limiting the child's contact with the other parent such that the parent and child cannot share meaningfully in each other's lives; (3) interfering with the child's communication with the other parent such that the parent and child cannot emotionally connect during periods of separation; (4) making it difficult for the child to think about, talk about, and look at photos of the other parent and thereby attenuating the attachment between them; (5) withholding love and affection when the child exhibits interest and affection towards the other parent; (6) allowing the child to choose to spend time with the other parent and

creating the impression that time with the other parent is optional and undesirable; (7) forcing the child to reject the other parent; (8) telling the child that the other parent does not love him; (9) creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous; (10) confiding in the child about personal and legal matters in order to induce the child to be hurt and angry at the other parent; (11) asking the child to spy on the other parent; (12) asking the child to keep secrets from the other parent; (13) referring to the other parent by first name rather than 'mom' or 'dad'; (14) referring to a new significant other as 'mom' or 'dad'; (15) changing the child's name to remove the association with the other parent; (16) withholding information from the other parent; and (17) undermining the other parent's authority.

There are several studies establishing the reliability and validity of these Factor 3 behaviours. For example, Baker and Chambers (2011) presented the Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ) as a brief assessment of adult recall of parental use of alienating behaviours. The measure was found to be both reliable and valid. The internal consistency score was above .90 and those from divorced/separated families had higher scores on all twenty items than those from intact families. In over half a dozen subsequent studies, the BSQ has been used with over 2500 research participants from an array of locations, ages, experiences, and sampling strategies. In each study the BSQ was found to have extremely high internal consistency scores as well as being associated with the relevant reliable, and valid measures of outcomes that theory suggests would be associated with exposure to alienating behaviours such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and difficulties trusting others (e.g. Baker and Ben Ami, 2011; Baker and Brassard, 2013; Baker and Eichler, 2014; Baker and Verrocchio, 2013). It is these behaviours that comprise Factor 3 of the four-factor model.

Factor 4 refers to a child exhibiting eight behaviours that theory and research determine differentiate alienated children from children who are not alienated (Gardner, 1998): (1) the campaign of denigration of the targeted parent; (2) weak, frivolous and absurd reasons offered by the child for the rejection of the targeted parent; (3) lack of ambivalence in the child's views such that one parent is seen as all good and the other is seen as all bad; (4) lack of remorse in the child for the cruel treatment of the targeted parent; (5) the child's automatic support for the favoured parent in all inter-parental disputes; (6) the 'independent thinker' phenomenon in which the child strenuously professes to have not been influenced at all by the favoured parent; (7) the child's use of words and phrases borrowed from the favoured parent; and (8) the spread of the child's animosity to the friends and family of the targeted

parent. There is both clinical and research support that alienated children behave quite differently than children who are realistically estranged from a parent. For example, in Kelly and Johnston's (2001) reformulation paper, they state that, 'For the most part our observations of the behaviors and emotional responses of alienated children are similar to those reported by others (Gardner, 1987, 1992)' (p. 263). Empirically, Baker, Burkhard and Kelly (2012) found that only alienated children claimed to have no positive memories of the rejected parent, failed to identify a single positive aspect of that parent, expressed no interest in reparation of the relationship, and failed to see any flaws in the non-rejected parent. Bernet and colleagues (2017), similarly, found no expression of mixed feelings in alienated children who viewed one parent as all good and the other as all bad, something that was not seen even in children who had been neglected and abandoned by a parent. As a point of contrast, abused and neglected children who had been removed from home have consistently been found to miss their abusive parent, want to be reunited with that parent, blame themselves for the abuse, and minimise the negative impact of the abuse (Baker, Creegan, Quinones and Rozelle, 2016).

While the research basis for the components of the four-factor model of parental alienation is strong, what has been missing from the research literature is a study that examines all four factors simultaneously. The purpose of the current study was to determine the reliability and validity of the four-factor model of parental alienation in order to help practitioners who may be unfamiliar with the phenomenon of parental alienation. That is, rather than examining the research support for each factor individually, the current study looked at the four factors simultaneously.

The specific questions addressed in the study pertain to the reliability and validity of the four-factor model of parental alienation of identifying alienation as the likely cause of a child's rejection of a parent. With respect to reliability, the following two questions were asked: (1) is there agreement between the coders on presence/absence of each of the four factors? And (2) is there agreement between the coders on the determination that alienation is present? With respect to validity the following questions were asked: (1) was it more likely that a case vignette with all four factors present would be viewed as a case of alienation than a vignette that did not have all four factors present? and (2) was there an association between the number of factors present in the vignette and the determination that alienation was present in the case?

## Methods

### *Sample selection*

In April 2018, 100 names were randomly selected from the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) member list, which served as the first round of participants for the survey. PASG is a voluntary free membership organisation comprised of professionals and individuals in the lay public interested in the study of the phenomenon of parental alienation. The website provides up-to-date information about books and articles relevant to the topic and provides a forum for members to connect with each other. Twenty-nine of the 100 were eliminated because the individuals were determined to not be mental health professionals based on a review of the information provided in the PASG member listing. The remaining seventy-one were invited to participate in the survey study. Of that number, four people responded that they were not mental health professionals, three emails bounced back as invalid, and two people sent emails back in a foreign language. The remaining sixty-two were considered the first-round sample for the study. One person declined to participate as too ill; fifty-seven agreed to participate, and four never responded. The response rate was 92 per cent (57 out of 62).

An additional forty-nine names were offered by the participants in a snowball fashion. Of this group, seventeen individuals were eliminated because they were not mental health professionals. Invitations were sent to the remaining thirty-two people. Two people declined to participate, eight never responded, and twenty-two people agreed to participate (68 per cent response rate, 22 out of 32). The total response rate for the study was 84 per cent ( $57 + 22$ ) divided by ( $62 + 32$ ). Of the seventy-nine people who agreed to complete the survey, several surveys were improperly completed. The final completion rate was 68 out of 79 (86 per cent).

### *Sample*

Table 1 presents the sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants.

As can be seen, of the sixty-eight participants with valid surveys, two-thirds were PASG members. Two-thirds were from the US and the remaining one-third were from twelve other countries (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia, Sweden and the United Kingdom). Two-thirds were female. The sample ranged in age from 27 to 78 with a mean of 55.7 years ( $SD = 11.5$  years). Professional backgrounds included doctorates

TABLE 1 *Sample characteristics*

	N	%
Male	20	29.9
PASG member	45	66.2
From USA	47	69.1
Master's degree	30	46.9
Discipline		
psychology	34	52.3
counselling	11	16.9
social work	9	13.8
MFT	4	06.2
Other	7	10.5
Age		
20–39	8	11.9
40–59	35	52.2
60–79	24	35.8
Number of years....	Mean (SD)	Range
Conducting custody evaluations	9.9 (18.4)	0 to 50
Conducting reunification treatment	8.8 (9.8)	0 to 37
Testifying in court about parental alienation	11.9 (13.)	0 to 50
Conducting research on parental alienation	6.4 (12.3)	0 to 45
Coaching parents dealing with parental alienation	10.5 (11.2)	0 to 50
Providing training to professionals about parental alienation	11.1 (11.7)	0 to 45

TABLE 2 *Correlations between participants and author*

	N	%
Below .49	2	3.0
.50 to .59	0	0.0
.60 to .69	4	6.0
.70 to .79	4	6.0
.80 to .89	07	10.5
.90 to .99	18	27.0
1.0	32	48.0

(n = 54%) and master's level (46%) degrees in a range of fields including psychology, medicine, law, family therapy, and counselling.

In terms of number of years working in the field of parental alienation/alignment/estrangement, they had on average 9.9 (SD = 13.4) years conducting custody evaluations (range = 0 to 50 years), 8.8 (SD = 9.8) years conducting reunification therapy (range 0 to 37 years), 11.9 (SD = 13.0) years testifying in court (range 0 to 50 years), 6.4 (12.3) years conducting research (range 0 to 45 years), 10.5 (SD = 11.2) years providing parent coaching (range 0 to 50), and 11.1 (SD = 11.7) years conducting trainings in the field (range 0 to 45 years).

#### *Procedures*

Email invitations were sent to the randomly selected PASG members and those who responded affirmatively were sent the survey. Each coder coded only one vignette. Which version of the survey they were sent was random except that about twice as many were sent version 16 than the other versions. That is, a random order of vignettes was sent out to every other participant, alternated with vignette version 16. Multiple follow up email invitations were sent to remind and encourage participants to complete their survey.

The first part of the survey was an informed consent explanation that provided the information about the survey, ensured confidentiality of the responses, and offered an opportunity to opt in or out of the survey.

#### *The survey*

Following the informed consent was the vignette, which was followed by seventeen questions. Six of the questions asked about socio-demographic information about the participant including his or her name, gender, age, country of residence, highest educational degree and discipline the degree was in. The next six questions on the survey asked whether the person has engaged in professional activities with respect to families affected by parental alienation/alignments/estrangement in the following areas: custody evaluations, reunification therapy, testifying in court, research, parent coaching, and training professionals. Respondents were asked to indicate whether, and if so for how many years, they had engaged in each activity.

The final five questions of the survey were about the vignette. The respondent was asked to answer each question about the vignette using a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much). They were asked the following questions based on information in the vignette: Did

they believe that (1) Parent A had a positive relationship with the children at some point; (2) Parent A engaged in maltreatment of the children; (3) Parent B engaged in multiple parental alienation strategies; (4) the children exhibited multiple parental alienation behaviours; and (5) the most likely cause of the children's rejection/conflict with Parent A was parent alienation and not estrangement.

#### *Vignettes*

Sixteen vignettes were created by the author based on the theory and science underlying parental alienation. Each vignette described a family. In order to avoid any bias associated with gender of parents or children, the rejected parent was referred to as Parent A and the favoured parent was referred to as Parent B and the children were referred to as 'the twins'. In that way, the gender of all four family members was not known to the study participants.

Each vignette contained four paragraphs. Each paragraph was about a factor in the four-factor model: (1) prior positive relationship between the child and the now rejected parent; (2) absence of abuse/neglect on the part of the now rejected parent; (3) use of parental alienation behaviours by the favoured parent; and (4) children exhibiting behaviours of alienation (although the paragraphs were not given a header indicating the topic).

There were two versions of each paragraph, one in which the factor was present and one in which the factor was absent. In all, there were sixteen possible combinations of presence/absence of each of the four factors. Version 1 of the vignette was absent all factors, that is: Parent A did *not* have a prior positive relationship with the children, Parent A *did* engage in abuse/neglect, Parent B did *not* engage in alienating behaviors, and the children were *not* exhibiting signs of alienation. In version 16, all four factors were present: Parent A did have a prior positive relationship, Parent A did not abuse or neglect the children, Parent B had engaged in alienating behaviours, and the children were behaving in a manner consistent with alienation. Vignette 16 is presented in the Appendix and all are available from the author upon request.

#### *Ideal coding of the vignettes*

The author assigned a code for each of the four factors for each of the sixteen vignettes and it was this code that the participant's responses were compared to.

## Results

### *Inter-rater reliability*

The first question addressed was whether there was inter-rater reliability regarding the coding of the vignettes. This was looked at several different ways. First, correlations were calculated to examine the concordance between each participant and the author. That is, each participant's ratings were correlated with the author's rating. The overall correlation between the ideal coding and the actual coding was .91. Correlations between the author and participants were also calculated separately for each of the five variables. For the five questions the correlations were .94, .89, .91, .87, and .82.

Agreement was also looked at for each of the participants and the author for each participant separately, in order to see if there were any outliers.

As can be seen in Table 2, thirty-three participants had a correlation of 1 (100 per cent agreement), eighteen had correlations between .90 and .99, seven had correlations between .80 and .89, eight had correlations between .60 and .79, and two had correlations below .50. Agreement was also examined as percentage agreement. For all of the vignettes across all of the coders there was 75 per cent exact agreement (that is the two coders agreed on the exact codes) and there was 94 per cent agreement defined as the two ratings being no more than one point different. There was no relationship between gender, age, or PASG membership and level of agreement.

### *Validity of the ratings*

The second set of questions asked about the relationship between each of the factors and the overall coding of parental alienation as the likely cause of a child's rejection of a parent.

The first hypothesis tested was that the more factors present, the more likely it would be that alienation would be viewed as being present. To test this, a correlation was conducted between the number of factors present in a vignette (from 0 to 4 factors) and the likelihood of the child being viewed as alienated (variable 5 coded on a 0-4 scale). The correlation was  $r = .80$ ,  $p < .001$ . A one-way ANOVA was also conducted with the number of factors present as the independent variable and the likelihood of alienation present as the dependent variable. This was statistically significant,  $F(4, 63) = 30.7$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, the more

factors present in the scenario the more likely it was that the study participants believed that the child was alienated as opposed to estranged.

The second hypothesis tested was that vignette 16 would be viewed as a case of alienation. To test this hypothesis, a cross-tabulation was calculated with vignettes dichotomised as 16 or not 16, and alienation dichotomised such that the 'much' and 'very much' categories were combined into the category of 'alienated' and the 'not at all' and 'a little' and 'somewhat' categories were combined into 'not alienated'. All thirty-three of the vignette 16 s were coded as 'alienated' as compared to only 31 per cent of the vignettes that were not 16, chi square ( $n = 67$ ) = 34.9,  $p < .001$ .

We also asked about the vignettes with only one or no factors present to see what proportion of them were coded as alienation cases. Of the seventeen vignettes with none or only one factor present, fifteen (88 per cent) were coded as non-alienation cases compared to only 17 per cent of the vignettes with two or more factors, chi-square (1, 68) = 27.8,  $p < .001$ .

Means of the summary score were examined (which ranged from 0 to 16) and whether a vignette was 16 or not, by conducting an independent t-test. The mean scores for vignette 16 s were statistically significantly higher (mean = 15.4, SD = 1.0) than the mean scores for the other 15 vignettes (mean = 8.7, SD = 3.3),  $t (df = 39.9) = 11.4$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Two key concepts in the field of classification are sensitivity and specificity. The former refers to the extent to which a true case is assessed as a true case and the latter refers to the extent to which a non-case is classified as a non-case. In this study we found very high sensitivity in that all (100 per cent) of the true cases (vignette 16) were classified as a true case of parental alienation. We also found a high rate of specificity in that none of the true non-cases (vignette 1) were classified as being a case of alienation. The cases with some elements of alienation but not all were much less likely to be rated as being a true case.

The next analysis asked about the association between each of the four factors and the overall assessment that a case was alienation. Multiple regression analysis was used to test if the four factors significantly predicted ratings of alienation. The results indicated that two factors explained 82 per cent of the variance ( $R^2 = .82$ ,  $F(4,64) = 70.8$ ,  $p < .001$ ). An examination of the beta weights revealed that Factor 3 ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Factor 4 ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p > .001$ ) were the most important for the equation and once they were accounted for, Factors 1 and 2 did not contribute to the equation. Thus, once a case was deemed to

have Factors 3 and 4 present, the likelihood that a case would be considered alienation was very high.

A logistic regression was also conducted with the dependent variable a dichotomised version of the determination of alienation as the cause and the independent variables were the ratings of Factors 1 through 4. As with the linear regression, the determination of whether alienation was present was based on Factors 3 and 4.

## **Discussion**

This study was conducted in order to contribute to the knowledge base regarding the reliability and validity of the four-factor model of parental alienation. The first question of the study was whether coders would generally agree about the degree to which each of the four factors were present in a case and the likelihood that alienation was the cause of a child's rejection of a parent. Sixty-eight professionals in the field of alienation/estrangement were asked to rate one of sixteen different vignettes (with each vignette representing a different combination of the four factors). The author coded all of the vignettes. A correlation was conducted between each study participant and the author.

With respect to reliability it was determined that the overall correlation between the first author and the set of coders was over .90 and the extent of actual agreement was .75 per cent. Agreement was improved if it was calculated as within one point on the 5-point scale. Using this metric, agreement was over 90 per cent. Although there were a few coders whose ratings did not comport with the author's, the vast majority were in high agreement. Agreement was also high across each of the five variables coded and for each of the sixteen different versions of the vignette coded. Thus, it can be concluded that mental health professionals in the field of child alignment can provide accurate assessments of the degree to which each of the four factors are present, and based on that information can provide accurate assessments of the likelihood that alienation is the cause of a child's rejection of one parent and alignment with the other. These data can be used when the concept of error rate is raised in a legal challenge to parental alienation theory in that vignette 16 represents a paradigmatic case of parental alienation and there was 100 per cent agreement that vignette 16 was in fact a case of parental alienation. There was absolute agreement that when all four factors were present, that alienation was the best explanation for a child's rejection of a parent. There was also very high agreement

for vignettes with no or only one factor present, with 88 per cent of the coders agreeing that alienation was not the cause of the child's rejection of the parent.

Interestingly, about one-third of the cases with two or three factors present were viewed as cases of alienation as well. This indicates that there is some difficulty applying the four-factor model in some situations, especially those in which some (but not all) elements of alienation are present. A closer examination of the vignettes which were not vignette 16 but were classified as alienation by the study participants revealed an interesting pattern. With two exceptions, the vignettes were those in which either Factor 3 and/or Factor 4 were present. That is, if the favoured parent was engaging in alienating behaviours, that was given more weight (especially if the children were exhibiting the signs of alienation) than whether the currently rejected parent was an involved and loving parent prior to the current breach, and more weight than whether the rejected parent had engaged in maltreatment. While it is very helpful to have an assessment tool with a high degree of sensitivity (assessing true cases as PA), high specificity is also essential in order to avoid non-PA cases being classified as such. In this study sensitivity was quite high while specificity was somewhat lower. Part of the issue might be that the second factor (absence of abuse/neglect on the part of the rejected parent) might not have been as clear cut in the vignette as it could have been in terms of the vignettes in which it was supposed to be present. In those vignettes, it was supposed to be clear that the rejected parent had maltreated the children, but few people viewed it that way. Thus, the lowered specificity may be due to ambiguity in the vignette rather than in the coders' understanding of the four-factor model.

In the current study, the four-factor model of parental alienation was found to be both reliable and valid. There was overwhelming agreement that when a parent had a prior positive relationship with a child, when that parent did not maltreat the child, when the favoured parent had engaged in multiple alienating behaviours, and when the child was exhibiting the behavioural manifestations of an alienated child, then the best explanation of the child's rejection is alienation and not estrangement.

While these data contribute to the confidence in the reliability and validity of the construct of parental alienation, there are always additional questions that could be answered in future research. For example, future studies could be conducted with different versions of the sixteen vignettes in order to establish the robustness of the data presented here. Research could be conducted to vary the number of

alienating behaviors in the third factor to determine if there is a threshold for how many is enough for the factor to be viewed as present. In the current study, seven of the seventeen primary parental alienating behaviours were included in the vignette. This cut-off was seen as sufficient for determining that the parent was in fact engaging in alienating behaviours. Future research could explore whether the threshold could be even lower and/or could explore different combinations of alienating behaviours. Likewise, the number of manifestations of alienation in the child could be varied. In the current study, the fourth paragraph contained all eight behaviours. Future research could explore whether the number could be lower and still be considered as present.

Future studies could also explore the impact of various additional factors as described in the Kelly and Johnston (2001) model. In their proposed reformulation they suggested that a host of additional factors should be taken into account when determining whether alienation is present and/or in the development of a treatment plan. These variables include: how humiliating the separation was for the parents; the personality of each of the parents; the child's age, cognitive capacity, and temperament; sibling relationships; marital conflict; divorce conflict and litigation; and the role of the extended family and allied professionals involved with the family. Vignettes could be written with each of these factors present or absent in order to determine the perception among professionals in the field about the contributing role of these variables when alienation is already clearly present or clearly absent. Three possible roles for these variables could be tested with respect to: (1) understanding why alienation is present in a family; (2) determining that alienation is present; and (3) planning a treatment that is likely to succeed. For example, if the favoured parent has been diagnosed with a personality disorder, that might be viewed as helpful for explaining why s/he engaged in alienating behaviours (i.e. poor boundaries, fragile ego, prone to anger, and so forth). Likewise, knowing that a parent has a personality disorder could be viewed as helpful for treatment planning (i.e. knowledge about the specific disorder could be factored into the treatment plan). It is hypothesised, and should be tested, that with respect to determining that alienation is present, these additional factors are relevant for the development of a hypothesis not for the ultimate decision.

Thus, it is hypothesised that the variables identified by Kelly and Johnston (2001) are highly relevant for understanding *how* alienation unfolded in a family and for treatment planning but less so for assessing *whether* alienation is present. The information would be relevant

for hypothesis testing and the development of a prior probability. For example, if a rejecting child has two older siblings who are not currently alienated, this may impact the likelihood that the child is not alienated, but in the end if the four factors are present, then the conclusion should be made that the child is in fact alienated. However, the information about the older siblings not being alienated could be an important factor in the treatment plan. That is, they could be included in the reunification plan for the alienated child and could play an important role in helping the child to reconnect with the rejected parent. It is clear that the role of these additional factors needs to be explored in future research.

Future studies should also replicate these findings with a broader set of mental health professionals in order to determine whether consensus exists outside of the self-identified professionals with interest in the topic of parental alienation, as was the core sample for this study.

The clinical implications of the findings from the current study are that if a clinician has confidence in the presence of the four factors, then it can be concluded with great certainty that alienation is occurring in a family. If none of the factors are present, it can be concluded that alienation is not present. The confidence in an assessment when two or three of the factors are present is somewhat more complicated, as the theory suggests that all four factors are required. Nonetheless, there was a subset of clinicians who felt confident that alienation was present when only Factor 3 (presence of alienation behaviours on the part of the favoured parent) and Factor 4 (presence of alienating behaviours in the child) were present. This may be because the vignettes were not as clear about Factor 1 and Factor 2 or it may mean that additional training is required in order to ensure that only true cases of alienation are classified as such.

In sum, there is high agreement that cases with all four factors present are cases of parental alienation. There is also high agreement that cases with one or no factors present are not alienation. Overall, the rate of agreement was very high across all of the cases, although cases with both Factors 3 and 4 present were seen as cases of alienation even if Factors 1 and 2 were not present. Nonetheless, there is overwhelming agreement that if all four factors are present, then alienation is the most likely cause of a child's rejection of a parent. This should increase the confidence of mental health professionals that when they observe evidence of all four factors, their conclusions are warranted. These data contribute to the confidence in the reliability and validity of the

four-factor model of parental alienation as well as pointing the way to future directions for research and practice in the field.

## **Appendix A: Vignette 16**

### **Vignette**

According to collateral contacts Parent A was a loving and involved parent to the twins. People who knew the family have said that the Parent A was thrilled when they were born, and delighted in the new role of being a parent. Parent A was devoted to the twins and was involved in many aspects of their care and upbringing. Some people noted that sometimes Parent A could be distracted with work and family obligations but that Parent A had a strong connection to the twins when they were together. Even Parent B conceded to the custody evaluator that Parent A had been a 'pretty good' parent for many years. Hundreds of photographs show the children and Parent A engaging in a wide range of activities together, with a relaxed and happy demeanour. The children appeared to be comfortable, happy, and loving towards Parent A in most of the photos.

Parent B has described Parent A as demanding and difficult for much of their marriage. However, there are no police reports for domestic violence nor child abuse claims made against Parent A. None of the therapists assigned to the children made a note that there was a concern for the safety of the children when they were with Parent A. No reports had ever been called in by any of the numerous mandated reporters involved with the family. Parent B has also complained that Parent A worked too much and spent too much time with his/her ailing parents when the children were younger, but when deposed, admitted that this was not actually abusive or neglectful. Parent A did admit to yelling at the children sometimes and did call them 'rude' on a few occasions when they refused to say hello when s/he came to see them in their various sports and music activities.

A review of the documents along with discussion with collateral contacts revealed that Parent B has often been critical of Parent A in front of the children, referring to that parent as a 'loser' and 'creepy'. Parent B has been known to make it difficult for Parent A to reach the children during Parent B's parenting time, often not answering the home phone and not allowing the children to answer their cell phones when Parent A calls. Parent B has also claimed to 'encourage' the children to call Parent A but believes that they are old enough to decide for themselves. Parent B has also filed motions to allow the children to develop their own schedules so that they can have a 'voice' and a 'choice' in their time, something Parent B claims is in their best interest. Parent B has consistently not shared important academic and medical information with Parent A, claiming that it is the other parent's responsibility to follow up with the school and the doctors and that the onus should not be on him/her to do that. About a year ago Parent B began texting Parent A the night before his/her parenting time to announce that the children would not be coming. Reasons ranged from homework, tennis lessons, and that the children 'needed a

'break' and wanted to 'just hang out at home', which Parent B supported as in their best interest. If Parent A showed up for parenting time, no one would answer the door. There are no photos of Parent A in Parent B's home, Parent B sometimes refers to Parent A by first name, and has begun to refer to a new significant other as the real 'father/mother' of the children.

Parent B has told friends and neighbours that Parent A is being very difficult and has been an 'abusive' spouse and parent. Parent B's attorney has written letters to the therapist for the twins saying that the children are afraid of being with Parent A and asking if the therapist would write a letter to the courts to that effect. Parent A has also learned that Parent B spoke with the principal of the children's school, saying that Parent A has been abusive to the children and asking if Parent A could be barred from attending an upcoming show one of the twins will be performing in, saying that it would be too stressful for the child to have Parent A in the audience. Parent B has also made statements that Parent A was 'never around' when the children were younger and that Parent B was really a single parent most of the time.

The children are openly critical and hostile towards Parent A. They refuse to have parenting time, claiming that Parent A is 'weird', and that they feel unsafe when they are with that parent. When asked what it is about Parent A that is weird, they claim that it is an 'intangible' feeling that they shouldn't have to justify or explain. During the custody evaluation office visit, the children refused to look at Parent A or else glowered at that parent with intense hostility and contempt. As part of the custody evaluation the children completed a checklist of adjectives to describe each parent and they circled 'perfect' and 'wonderful' for Parent B and 'disgusting' and 'stupid' for Parent A. One of their complaints about Parent A is that s/he said mean things about them and stole their college money, something Parent A claims is not true but the children will not look at the documents brought to show them that the money is still in their accounts. The children have started to refer to Parent A by first name and 'weirdo', something Parent B has said as well. When this was pointed out to the children they claimed that they came up with the same idea independently and that 'in no way' was Parent B influencing them. The children have recently refused to speak with their grandparents on Parent A's side of the family, complaining that they are weird too.

## References

- Baker, A. J. L. and Ben Ami, N. (2011) To turn a child against a parent is to turn a child against himself. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 54(2), 203–219.
- Baker, A. J. L., Bone, M. and Ludmer, B. (2014) *High conflict custody battle survival guide*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Baker, A. J. L. and Brassard, M. (2013) Adolescents caught in parental loyalty conflicts. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 54, 393–413.
- Baker, A. J. L., Burkhard, B. and Kelly, J. (2012) Differentiating alienated from not adult children: a pilot study. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 53(3), 178–193.

- Baker, A. J. L. and Chambers, J. (2011) Adult recall of childhood exposure to parental conflict: unpacking the black box of parental alienation. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, **52**(1), 55–76.
- Baker, A. J. L., Creegan, A., Quinones, A. and Rozelle, L. (2016) Foster children's views of their birth parents: a review of the literature. *Children and Youth Services Review*, **67**, 177–183.
- Baker, A. J. L. and Eichler, A. (2014) College student childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflicts. *Families in Society*, **95**, 59–66.
- Baker, A. J. L. and Verrocchio, M. C. (2013) Italian college student childhood exposure to parental alienation: correlated with well-being. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, **54**(8), 609–628.
- Baker, A. J. L. (forthcoming) Quantitative research regarding parental alienation. In D. Lorandos and W. Bernet (eds.) *Parental alienation: science and the law*. Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas.
- Bernet, B. and Baker, A. J. L. (2013) Parental alienation, DSM-5, and ICD-11: response to critics. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, **41**, 98–104.
- Bernet, B., Gregory, N., Reay, K. and Rohner, R. (2017) An objective measure of splitting in parental alienation: the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire. *Journal of Forensic Science*, August, 776–783.
- Bruch, C. (2001) Parental alienation syndrome and parental alienation: getting it wrong in child custody cases. *Family Law Quarterly*, **35**(3), 527–552.
- Dallam, S. J. (1999) Parental alienation syndrome: is it scientific? In E. St Charles and L. Crook (eds.) *Exposé: the failure of family courts to protect children from abuse in custody disputes*. Los Gatos, CA: Our Children Our Children Charitable Foundation.
- Gardner, R. A. (1998). *The parental alienation syndrome* (2nd edn). Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics.
- Kelly, J. and Johnston, J. (2001) The alienated child: a reformulation of parental alienation syndrome. *Family Court Review*, **39**, 249–266.
- Lorandos, D. (2013) Legal implications in cases of parental alienation. In D. Lorandos, W. Bernet and S. R. Sauber (eds.) *Parental alienation: the handbook for mental health and legal professionals* (pp. 232–262). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Lorandos, D., Bernet, W. and Sauber, S.R. (2013) Overview of parental alienation. In D. Lorandos, W. Bernet and S. R. Sauber (eds.) *Parental alienation: the handbook for mental health and legal professionals* (pp. 5–46). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Saini, M., Johnston, J., Fidler, B.J. and Bala, N. (2016) Empirical studies of alienation. In L. Drozd, M. Saini and N. Olesen (eds.) *Parenting plan evaluations: applied research for the family court* (2nd edn) (pp. 374–430). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, R. M. and Richardson, J. T. (2015) Parental alienation syndrome: 30 years on and still junk science. *Judges Journal*, **54**(3).

