Parental Alienation Syndrome in Legal Settings: Existence, Use, and Alternatives

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A thesis submitted to the School of Community Services in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Applied Arts in Behavioural Psychology

St. Lawrence College, Kingston, Ontario

April 01, 2014
Dedication

The thesis is dedicated to my family; Lesley Kirker, Roger Croft, Susan Whalen, Jackson Croft & Hannah Croft for their financial and emotional support throughout my time in the Behavioural Psychology program.

I would also like to dedicate the thesis to Samuel Hudson for his consistent motivation and understanding through my entire college experience and encouraging me to believe that the best is yet to come.
Abstract

Richard Gardner coined the term parental alienation syndrome in 1985. Since then, parental alienation syndrome (PAS) has been used in custody cases in many countries around the world. However, despite frequent acceptance in some legal contexts, PAS has not been recognized by the American Psychiatric Association for inclusion in any of the DSM versions, including the DSM-5. PAS is likely not accredited as a distinct syndrome among mental health professionals due in part to the absence of agreement upon the definition of PAS. A review of the current literature on parental alienation syndrome including possible alternatives to the conceptualization was completed in an attempt to provide an overview of the potential value of PAS in both mental health and legal contexts. It was concluded that although PAS has been anecdotally and theoretically supported by some professionals in various capacities, the lack of empirical support and wide variation of definitions used severely limits the valid application of the concept in mental health and legal contexts, rendering it of little value to professionals. As an alternative, it is proposed that the alienated child theory addresses concerns noted by critics of PAS while maintaining the positive aspects of Gardner’s PAS definition and may consequently be a more valuable avenue of exploration in future research.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for their influence on the thesis:

- Yolanda Fernandez
- Cheryl Clarke
- Monica Richardson
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Chapter I: Introduction

Psychologists are often used as evaluators in custody cases (Powell & Lancaster, 2003). The custody cases typically referred to psychologists for evaluation are usually high conflict and involve allegations of misconduct, and parental mental health issues (Powell & Lancaster, 2003). Children may also be evaluated for various reasons (Powell & Lancaster, 2003). A psychologist prepared custody assessment, or evaluation looks at the child’s psychological and developmental needs as well as the parent’s competencies and ability to successfully raise the child (Lee, Beauregard & Hunsley, 1998). Often psychologists evaluate information from the child obtained through interviews (Powell & Lancaster, 2003). The influence of parental coaching to mold the child’s views and how the child will present them is often a concern (Powell & Lancaster, 2003).

A psychologist by the name of Richard Gardner was the first to name Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) (Joanis & Waldron, 1996). PAS describes cases in which a parent has manipulated a child to present specific negative views about the other parent (Joanis & Waldron, 1996). Symptoms are most likely to occur during custody disputes (Gardner, 2003). Legal professionals have concerns about the use of PAS in custody cases (Bernett, 2008). However, despite controversy surrounding its use and existence, PAS continues to be used in custody cases worldwide (Reay, 2011). The research should determine if it is reasonable to use PAS in custody cases by evaluating the current literature on the use and existence of parental alienation syndrome.

The literature review will include an overview of empirical, theoretical and anecdotal evidence for and against the use of parental alienation syndrome in legal and mental health settings, followed by a review of possible alternatives to PAS. Also included in the thesis will be a method section explaining how the research was obtained, a results section summarizing the overall findings in the literature and a conclusion/discussion section.
Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is defined as a persistent, unwarranted promotion of denigration of one parent by a child under the influence of another parent (Warshak, 2001). PAS includes eight symptoms that are most likely to occur in custody cases (Gardner, 2003). Of the eight possible symptoms the child may show from 4-8 symptoms depending on the severity of the alienation (Baker & Darnall, 2007). The first symptom in PAS as explained by Gardner (2003) is campaign of denigration. The child’s feelings towards the parent being alienated seem to rapidly change from loved and valued to feared, disrespected and sometimes, hated (Baker & Darnall, 2007). The change may be presented in different forms of interpersonal attacks, such as the use of sarcasm, rude or hurtful comments and distorted communication (Turkat, 2003). The second symptom is weak, frivolous or absurd rationalizations for depreciation (Gardner, 2003). If the child is displaying this symptom, their reactions to the alienated parent’s actions has a magnitude not equivalent to the action itself (Baker & Darnall, 2007). Symptom three is a lack of ambivalence towards both parents (Gardner, 2003). The child presents only negative perceptions of the alienated parent and only positive of the alienating parent (Baker & Darnall, 2007). Gardner named the fourth symptom the independent thinker phenomenon (Gardner, 2003). This phenomenon is described as when a child insists without hesitation that rejecting the other parent was their decision, not the decision of the alienating parent (Baker & Darnall, 2007). Often the wording the independent thinker uses to rationalize the alienation comes from the alienating parent and is developmentally inappropriate for the child (Turkat, 2003). The fifth symptom is the absence of guilt from the child (Gardner, 2003). The child displays this behaviour by showing no appreciation for anything the alienated parent has given them such as gifts or financial support (Baker & Darnall, 2007). The child will maintain the opinions without considering how the alienated parent may feel (Baker & Darnall, 2007). Automatic support for
the alienating parent is the sixth symptom (Gardner, 2003). The child refuses to take the alienated parent’s view into consideration and only shows support for the alienating parent during parental conflicts (Baker & Darnall, 2007). The seventh symptom is borrowed scenarios (Gardner, 2003). When a child describes negative scenarios aimed towards the alienated parent the language and concepts used may not be understood or age appropriate for the child (Baker & Randall, 2007). In addition, the child will not have evidence to support the scenarios (Baker & Randall, 2007). The last symptom is that the child begins to reject family members of the alienated parent (Baker & Randall, 2007).

The Existence and Use of PAS

PAS is most common within a family court setting (Gardner, 2003). Baker (2007) conducted a study from 2005-2006 to determine the awareness and acceptance of PAS in legal professionals. Participants for the study were members of the Professional Academy of Custody Evaluators (PACE). In order to be a member of this academy, members need a minimum of a master’s degree in mental health from an accredited university or college, and must have practiced for a specific number of years (Baker, 2007). One hundred and forty professionals participating in custody evaluations at the time of the study answered a 112 item survey they received in the mail (Baker, 2007). In the first section, participants answered questions on how familiar they were with the concept of PAS, how possible they believed it was for a parent to turn a child against the other parent without rationale, how important they believed it was to determine if PAS had occurred, how many judges and lawyers they know endorse PAS within their courtrooms, and other questions to determine the extent to which professionals within the legal and mental health field endorse PAS. These questions were included in the first section of the survey. The next section of the survey focused on the frequency that the participants assessed a number of factors. The factors in question included questions about attachment between parents and children, mental health of the parents, and parent deception. Seventy five percent of the participants said they believed that PAS accusations occurred in between one and five percent of the cases they had completed (Baker, 2007). A quarter of participants reported that they were very familiar with PAS, with the same number reporting that they believe PAS exists (Baker, 2007).

A similar study from the Netherlands (2005), asked a group of individuals their opinions of PAS (Spuirjrt, Harmeling, Stokkers, & Kormos, 2005). The opinions would be surveyed among 138 participants completing a 42 item questionnaire sent to them to complete without supervision by researchers. The 138 individuals consisted of divorced, non-residential parents and divorce mediators. There were slight differences between the questionnaires to be completed by each group. The non-residential parents were asked seven extra questions regarding the relationship they had with their exes. The researchers added these questions under the assumption that a negative relationship with the participant’s ex-partner could explain the origin of the alienation. It was believed that divorce professionals, such as the mediators who completed the questionnaires may have had previous knowledge of PAS prior to the questionnaires. The researchers asked 69 mediators to specify the extent of their knowledge on the subject. The questionnaire included items based on Gardner’s eight symptoms of PAS. The questions assessed how often participants found the symptoms occurred in cases they have been involved in, or in their personal lives. The results indicated that nine percent of participants believed PAS had occurred several times either in cases they worked or within their lives, although none believed it occurred often. Fifty-eight percent of participants believed that PAS
did not, or rarely occurred in the Netherlands and 42% believed it did occur. The 42% that believed PAS occurred believed it only occurred in mild forms. Both divorce mediators and non-residential parents were represented in the positive and negative groups. Background variables were taken into account including age, sex, educational level, details of the divorce and details of the divorce procedure. There was no significant correlation between age, sex, educational level and beliefs about PAS. Remarriage, new partners, number of children also had no significant effect on the data. Although only 138 participants were included in the study, the researchers felt the sample size was sufficient to conclude to assume that PAS does, in fact, happen in the Netherlands.

In an attempt to determine the extent to which Gardner’s eight symptoms of PAS occur in children alienating a parent, Baker & Darnall (2007) developed a 33 question survey. In order to be eligible to complete the survey, the participants had to report feeling severely alienated from one or more of their children and believe that another parent had a significant influence on the child’s alienation behaviours. Step-parents were not eligible for the study, nor were parents of children over 18 years of age. One hundred and fourteen participants were recruited through a website. Although only 92 participants completed the survey. Participants ranged in age from 31-58 years and had a variety of custodial situations. The questions focused on the children’s behaviours based on Gardner’s eight symptoms of PAS. Each question was rated to determine the frequency of the behaviours the participants believed their children displayed. Fifty-one percent of parents said that the first symptom, campaign of denigration always occurred with their children and 28.8% believed that the symptom occurred often. Twelve percent reported that campaign of denigration happened sometimes or rarely. None of the participants said that the symptom never happened with their child. Eighty-four percent of participants believed that all the statements made by the child are weak or frivolous, the second symptom of PAS. Three-fourths of participants stated that their child showed a lack of ambivalence about alienating the parent and 20.3% said they found this symptom to be mostly true. Gardner’s fourth symptom of PAS is the independent thinker phenomenon. This phenomenon describes the child insisting that the statements they are making about the alienated parent are their opinion, and not influenced by anyone else. Seventy-seven percent of participants reported that their child always made the source of opinion clear after making statements about a parent. Seventy-three percent said their child showed no remorse for the alienation. Eighteen percent said their child only showed remorse sometimes. According to Gardner’s definition, the next symptom displayed by children is siding with the alienating parent. Ninety percent of participants agreed that their child always sided with the other parent, 12% said the child often displayed this symptom. None of the participants believed this symptom never occurred. Four out of ten participants said that their child always used borrowed scenarios as rationale for their alienation, while 15% of participants said borrowed scenarios occurred sometimes. Fifty-three percent of participants believed that the alienation from their child had completely spread to members of the extended family, while 11.7% of participants agreed. Between 80-98% of parents described their children as presenting all eight symptoms of PAS to some degree as described by Richard Gardner. Baker & Randall (2007) concluded that this study provides sufficient empirical evidence to justify creating diagnostic tools of PAS for use in psychological and legal assessments.

PAS has been recognized in various countries around the world. As of 2002 there had been 72 rulings of PAS in multiple countries including; Canada, The United States, Australia, Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland (Reay,2011). In 2009 international parental alienation
syndrome online support groups began to develop on Yahoo, which is available world-wide (Kloth-Zanard, 2012). The support groups are available to anyone dealing with PAS; parents, grandparents and spouses of the alienating or alienated parents (Kloth-Zanard, 2012). The Rachel Foundation was created in 2001 to assist and research children affected by PAS (Gardner, 2001).

Summary/Common Themes

As previously stated, parents, legal and mental health professionals and children of divorce are utilizing PAS in various contexts (Warshak, 2001). Suggesting that there is some agreement children of divorce can alienate a parent with no historical rationale for doing so (Warshak, 2001). This is true despite the fact that PAS was not included in the DSM-IV-TR or the DSM-5 as a distinct disorder. Supporters of PAS accept Gardner’s definition of the syndrome because it gives an outline of what to look for when evaluating families for custody and visitation decisions (Warshak, 2001). In all of the articles summarized above, participants agreed that they had seen cases of parental alienation. However, it is important to note that only one of the articles presented uses Gardner’s theory of PAS as a basis for the study, and none of the articles used the same definition of PAS as a basis for questioning. Therefore, comparisons are difficult as it cannot be determined what features of PAS were observed by the participants. In order to fully evaluate the existence and in turn, support the use of PAS, a steady definition of PAS must be determined and utilized in empirical studies.

Arguments Against the Use of Parental Alienation Syndrome

Current Controversies Regarding Parental Alienation Syndrome

A common theme in the literature on PAS is that Gardner’s definition of PAS has limited criteria and the criteria identified is insufficient in detail. Critics believe that PAS focuses too much on the alienating parent, assuming that the alienated parent gave the child no basis for their feelings (Warshak, 2001). The same critics believe that Gardner overlooked the possibility of family dysfunction having an effect on the child’s alienating behaviour (Warshak, 2001). Critics claim that in most cases of PAS neither parent can be deemed mentally healthier than the other, so parental alienation syndrome’s single parent focus is not sufficient for use in legal settings (Warshak, 2001). Critics of PAS discussed in Warshak’s 2001 review, Current Controversies of Regarding Parental Alienation Syndrome, believe Gardner’s definition of PAS has not been fully peer reviewed (Warshack, 2001). As well, the majority of the information published after Gardner’s original PAS definition has been written by Gardner (Warshack, 2001). When Gardner’s additional works on PAS are omitted from reviews there is little pro-parental alienation syndrome evidence remaining (Warshack, 2001). Until additional empirical studies by researchers without a personal investment in PAS evaluating whether PAS exists the topic remains very controversial.

A Review of Critical Issues

The theoretical paper by Turkat (2002) reviews the difficulties of using PAS in mental health and legal environments. Turkat first explains that in order to distinguish phenomenon and diagnoses from one another, they need to have criteria and a classification system to do so. Without the ability to decide if PAS is occurring it is impossible to continue gaining knowledge on the subject and learn to properly intervene. Turkat (2002) explains that legal and mental
health professionals use parental alienation syndrome and parental alienation, a less specific definition of the phenomenon interchangeably. Parental Alienation is a child alienating the parent whether there is justification or not. Parental Alienation Syndrome specifically requires no justification for the alienation. As long as both terms are used interchangeably, PA or PAS will be incorrectly used in the court system. The use of the term syndrome in PAS is also questioned by Turkat (2002). Gardner specified that mild forms of PAS do not need psychiatric diagnosis, therefore making it questionable whether it is correct to deem PAS a syndrome. Turkat suggests instead that PAS being arranged as a continuum, where justified alienation and unjustified alienation are at different ends of a continuum. Turkat (2002) also pointed to the lack of empirical information supporting PAS and its criteria. After listing the necessary components of good scientific research, Turkat (2002) commented that until the research is conducted, legal professionals will have to continue to rely on differing opinions of professional peers. The discrepancy of opinions could contribute to misuse in legal settings.

Other Arguments Against Parental Alienation Syndrome

In their journal article, “Understanding and Collaboratively Treating Parental Alienation Syndrome”, Joanis & Waldron (1996) stated that the alienating parent is rarely solely to blame for the alienation. Similar to Warshak (2001), Joanis & Waldron (1996) suggested that the focus should be on a dysfunctional family dynamic. Gardner’s definition of PAS is described by Joanis & Waldron (1996) as incomplete, simplistic, and erroneous. Baker’s 2007 study was designed to support the existence of PAS. However, Baker (2007) acknowledged that a majority of participants did not believe that PAS should be included in the DSM-5. They believed that the definition of PAS lacks the option of assessing the possibility of a dysfunctional family dynamic as the cause for the PAS symptoms (Baker, 2007). A majority of participants also claimed that they had experience with false accusations of parental alienation (Baker, 2007). Overall, the participants believed that PAS does occur often with families of divorce, but without specific diagnostic criteria they did not support PAS as a psychiatric diagnosis. As previously discussed, Baker & Darnall (2007) completed a study to determine how often, and to what degree PAS occurred by surveying parents who self-identified as alienated from one of their children. A majority of the participants believed in the existence of PAS. However, the authors also concluded that assessing all eight symptoms as defined by Gardner is likely too rigorous a chore for typical assessments.

In Gardner’s 1980 definition of PAS, he specified that PAS was often concurrent with sexual abuse allegations (Rand, 2011). Advocates for feminists and children argue that this statement encouraged legal professionals to use PAS as a rationale for giving sexually abusive parents, specifically fathers, custody (Rand, 2011). These critics are also typically strong believers in children never lying about sexual abuse (Rand, 2011). They believe that parents cannot force children to make the accusations against a caring parent and if they are making the accusations, there must be a valid reason (Rand, 2011). In general, feminist and child advocates argue that Gardner overestimates the frequency of valid PAS cases (Rand, 2011).

Bow, Gould & Flens (2009) conducted an internet survey to determine the views and opinions on parental alienation syndrome of mental health and legal professionals. The survey had 37 questions that were based on a current literature review of parental alienation syndrome. Five hundred and twelve participants started the survey. Fifty-eight percent of the participants only completed one fifth of the survey. Interestingly, all 58 stopped when parental alienation was
introduced. The average age of the participants was 54 years of age, with a mix of female and male participants of various ethnic backgrounds. Fifty-two percent had a PhD, 27% had law degrees, 23% had Master’s degrees, 1% Bachelor’s degrees and 1% had medical degrees. Two percent had other degrees, including dual degrees. Participants were asked how and when they first were introduced to the concept of PAS. The results showed 50% of participants reported first learning about the parental alienation syndrome concept in a professional capacity, 30% learned about PAS through books or articles, and 11% reported they had attended conferences on the subject. Less than 2% had courses about family alienation dynamics in any educational system. The next questions required participants to rate on a Likert scale their knowledge and perceptions of PAS. Seventy-one percent reported a 5 or higher in response to their level of knowledge of PAS with close to half the participants reporting their knowledge as a six or seven on the Likert scale. When asked what level of controversy they believed surrounded PAS on a Likert scale of 1-10, 67% rated the controversy level at five or higher on the Likert scale followed by a close 68% of participants that rated under three. When asked how much of the controversy was caused by Richard Gardner’s definition of PAS, 69% responded with a 6 or higher on the scale. Seventy-five percent stated that they did not believe PAS was in fact a syndrome. Twenty-six percent of participants had dealt with PAS in custody cases. Participants were asked how much empirical research they believed had been conducted on PAS. Sixty-eight percent rated a 3 or lower in response. The next section of questions focused on the assessment of PAS. Eighty-two percent believed that the importance of assessment was over a five on the Likert scale. Gardner’s eight symptoms of parental alienation syndrome were rated by participants individually for the next section of the survey. All symptoms were rated approximately at 5 on the Likert scale. When given a list of possible variables that could be taken into account when assessing PAS, all possible variables such as age of child, gender of child, dynamics between siblings, child cognition and parenting skills, all participants reported the importance to be in the moderate(between four and six) range on the Likert scale. The participants believed it was very important to interview the alienated parent and the alienating parent during the assessment of PAS. Although the study showed that legal and mental health professionals do believe PAS exists, it also showed that the same professionals believe there is a need for more specific knowledge to be obtained when assessing PAS such as variables and interviews with the family members. It was also apparent that Gardner’s definition of PAS was not viewed as fully effective for use in legal settings and often caused controversy and lack of acceptance to PAS.

A different argument about PAS not being acceptable for use in custody cases, comes from NOW, the National Organization for Women(Franklin, 2012). NOW is an american organization that began work in 1966 (Franklin, 2012). Prior to the release of the current DSM-5, NOW began to rally against PAS being included in the DSM-5(Franklin, 2002). The first article shown when the keyword parenal alienation syndrome is used on NOW’s official website, http://www.nowfoundation.org/ is entitled, NOW Foundation Opposes Phony Parental Alienation Disorder. The article goes on to say that PAS is only used in custody cases in an attempt to sway the court away from the mother’s accounts of abuse to support an undeserving father gaining custody (National Organization for Women, 2012).

Summary/Common Themes

Arguments against the use and existence of PAS have been forwarded by various groups and in some research over the last 20 years. However, the themes in all the articles are consistent.
Professionals in the mental health and legal fields, in different countries, of different ethnic groups, in different years, and of different genders, all appear to have the same concerns about PAS. Limited criteria including the lack of focus on the alienating and alienated parents influence on the alienation, age of children, parenting skills and the possibility of falsified information are a common argument against PAS.

**Possible Alternatives to Parental Alienation Syndrome**

In order for the symptoms to occur there must be parent programming or coaching to initiate the child’s negative views of the alienated parent (Baker & Darnall, 2007). Baker (2006) interviewed 40 male and female adults with self-proclaimed childhood experiences of PAS to determine how they perceived both the alienating and alienated parents in retrospect if there were different types of parental alienation identifiable from this information. The participants were interviewed using five groups of questions. The first group consisted of questions to obtain background information. For example; age, gender and place of birth. Memories of the parent’s relationship with each other and the participant, how they were told about their parent’s decision to divorce and similar questions were included in the second group. Alienation was the focus of the third group of questions. Specifically, participants were encouraged to recollect the strategies used by the alienating parent, differences in the relationship between each parent and the participant and how the alienated parent counteracted the alienation. The fourth group of questions asked the participant details about when their thinking of the alienated parent changed; what they were thinking at the time, how they realized the alienation could have been initiated by the alienating parent and if they confronted the alienating parent after the realizations. Lastly, the fifth group focused on the participant’s current lives, including the relationship they currently had with their parents. They were encouraged to give further information related to the topics outside of the questions answered. Researchers listened to the audio tapes recorded of the semi-structured interviews to identify common major themes. Thirty-seven out of the forty interviews had common themes that were categorized into three distinct patterns of alienating parents; narcissistic mother in divorced family, narcissistic mother in non-divorced family and cold, rejecting or abusive alienating parent. Narcissistic mother in divorced family characteristics were found in 14 interviews. The pattern’s criteria is a divorced custodial mother with participant-perceived narcissistic personality traits. Participants whose parent fit the pattern described their relationship with the alienating parent as positive with a high level of admiration. The 14 participants also described negative conversations about the alienated parent as a common occurrence. The narcissistic tendencies of the mothers appeared to be the cause of anger towards the children for wanting a relationship with the alienated parent, feelings of shame and rejection following the divorce and hatred for the alienated parent. These feelings could be motivation for wanting custody of the children. The participants reported feeling responsible for the emotional health of their mothers. The mothers in pattern two also had participant reported narcissistic traits, but were in non-divorced families. Narcissistic mother in non-divorced family was described in eight interviews. The primary technique used by the mothers who fit this pattern was to confide in the participant throughout their childhood about inadequacies of the alienated parent. The mothers may have used this strategy to not only depreciate the child’s opinion of their father, but also to strengthen their relationship with the child and make them feel sympathetic for them. The motivations for pattern two are different from pattern since it occurred within an intact family. Essentially, the mothers felt unsatisfied with their relationship and turned
to the children for revenge or emotional support. Sixteen participants, three from intact families
and 16 from divorced, reported characteristics of the alienating parent that met criteria for pattern
three. Pattern three describes a cold, rejecting, abusive parent. Five of the sixteen alienating
parents that fit pattern three were fathers, instead of strictly mothers like in the first two patterns
(Baker, 2003). In the first two patterns participants reported positive relationships with their
mothers (Baker, 2003). In contrast, half of the alienating parents in pattern three were addicted to
alcohol and verbally, sexually, or physically abusive to the participant (Baker, 2003). The key
focus of pattern three is that the child is choosing to alienate the other parent to avoid negative
consequences from the alienating parent more so than the child’s motivations in patterns one
and two. The study considered the participant’s confirmatory responses about the existence of PAS
as a personal experience to increase the validity of PAS as a construct. As well, commonalities
between the alienating parent’s personalities could also strengthen the argument for PAS (Baker,
2003). Further, Baker’s study presents three patterns of parental behaviour that could be used as
a focus for an alternate diagnosis for PAS. By looking at the behaviour of the alienating parent as
diagnostic criteria it could be determined if they fit into any of the three patterns, and therefore
determine if PAS was occurring in the situation.

Alternatives to Parental Alienation Syndrome in the DSM

Gardner (2003) identified and partially compared DSM-IV diagnoses with similar
elements to PAS as a way to validate its use in the legal system by providing courts with
alternative but also as an argument for the addition of PAS to the DSM. Gardner believed that
the similarities found in his comparisons of PAS to DSM-IV diagnoses were enough to include
PAS into the new addition of the DSM. The diagnoses compared were; Shared Psychotic
Disorder, Parent Child Relational Problem, Delusional Disorder, Paranoid Personality Disorder,
Borderline Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Separation
Anxiety Disorder, Dissociative Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, 5 Subtypes of Adjustment
Disorder and Disorder of Infancy, Childhood or Adolescence Not Otherwise Specified. Gardner
(2004) also compared PAS to False Memory Syndrome (not included in the DSM).

Delusional Disorder. In the DSM-V, two of the disorders Gardner identified as similar
to PAS are now combined; shared psychotic disorder and delusional disorder (American
Psychiatric Association, 2013). If two parties share the same delusions, each person will be
diagnosed with delusional disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There are seven
specified that the subtype closest to PAS is persecutory type. The symptom Gardner (2003)
focused on from within the persecutory type is delusions that the patient, or someone close to
them is being mistreated. According to Gardner (2003) the similarity between PAS and
delusional disorder is that the parent or child may begin to believe their originally fictitious
accusations used as the rationale for alienating the parent. Interestingly, none of the eight
symptoms Gardner (2003) specified in his description of PAS mention if the child or parent
believes their accusations. Ellis (2000) made the comparison of Parental Alienation Syndrome
and a folie a deux relationship or shared psychosis. As previously mentioned the DSM-V now
recognizes shared psychotic disorder and shared delusional disorder as one diagnosis of
delusional disorder to PAS also but with different justifications. Ellis (2000) focused on the
parent slowly transferring their opinions of the alienated parent to their child in PAS being
congruent with the transfer of delusions in delusional disorder. Gardner’s(2003) definition of
PAS does specify that parental alienation behaviours in a child do spawn from the parent’s influence.

**Parent Child Relational Problem (PCRP).** The description of PCRP has went unchanged from the DSM-IV to the DSM-V. Gardner (2003) explained that parent child relational problem is one of the best accepted descriptions of PAS in the DSM-IV because it focuses on the parent-child dyad. Parent child relational problem includes feelings of hostility and anger from the parent to child or child to parent (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Like PCRP, PAS focuses on pattern’s in the parent-child relationship.

**Separation Anxiety Disorder.** Separation anxiety disorder has remained in the DSM without major modifications (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These modifications apply to adults (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and therefore does not affect the comparison to children of PAS and separation anxiety disorder. Separation disorder is defined as inappropriate and extreme anxiety regarding separation from the individual to whom the child is attached (Gardner, 2003). To be eligible for the separation anxiety diagnosis the child must demonstrate 3 of the 8 criterion as described in the DSM-V. Gardner (2003) concluded that three of the eight separation anxiety criterion were applicable to PAS; reoccurring stress or anxiety during and before separation, refusal to go to school or elsewhere and frequent complaints of physical symptoms such as vomiting or headaches before or during separation from the alienating parent. Gardner (2003) hypothesized that a child may display these three criterion to avoid the alienating parent’s negative response to the child showing affection to the alienated parent.

A study conducted by Rand (1997) determined that although separation anxiety can be seen in PAS cases, it is only consequential. After analysing data from 70 families in high-conflict divorces, Rand (1997) determined that the children showing separation anxiety symptoms were typically aged two to three years old, when developmentally a child is likely to show such symptoms anyway. Therefore separation anxiety could be explained by the child’s age instead of PAS (Rand, 1997).

**Narcissistic Personality Disorder.** According to the DSM-V, narcissistic personality disorder involves impairments in an individual’s self-functioning and interpersonal functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). People with narcissistic personality disorder need an excessive amount of admiration, are jealous of others, have a strong sense of entitlement, will take advantage of others for their own gain and are typically very arrogant (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). None of the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder fit the criteria for PAS in regards to the child.

Baker (2006) named three types of parents involved with PAS, the first type being narcissistic mother in divorced family. This parent-focused type describes a mother from a divorced family who according to their children, showed an excessive need for admiration from their child, needing the best in every situation and raising their children in a way beneficial to themselves more-so than the child (Baker, 2006). The mother’s narcissistic personality fuels the PAS influence on their children (Baker, 2006).

**Conduct Disorder.** The fifth criterion in the definition of parental alienation syndrome is a lack of guilt from the child (Gardner et.al, 2006). The same criteria can be found in the DSM-5 definition of conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Aggression towards
people, including bullying, threats and intimidation is a primary component of conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The alienated parent in a PAS situation is the target of aggression from the child, therefore connecting PAS and conduct disorder (Gardner, et.al., 2006). Other people in the alienated parent’s lives such as friends and family can become rejected when PAS is a factor in the parent-child relationship (Gardner, 2003). The aggression followed by lack of guilt would also apply to that dynamic (Gardner et.al, 2006). Although it is not specifically discussed in the original definition of PAS, The International Handbook of Parental Alienation Syndrome (2006) compares PAS to conduct disorder by saying it is common in both conduct disorder and PAS for the child to be deceitful. Deceitfulness is a criteria for conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

**Borderline Personality Disorder.** Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is defined in the DSM-5 as a pervasive pattern of instability of interpersonal relationships, self-image and affects and marked by impulsivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These characteristics begin in early adulthood and are present in a variety of contexts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). An individual must exhibit at least four of the seven criteria for Borderline Personality Disorder to be diagnosed;

- Suspects, without sufficient basis that others are exploiting, harming, or deceiving him or her
- Preoccupied with unjustified doubts about the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends or associates.
- Is reluctant to confide in others because of unwarranted fear that the information will be used maliciously against him or her
- Reads hidden demeaning or threatening means into benign remarks or events.
- Persistently bears grudges.
- Perceives attacks on his or her character or reputation that are not apparent to others and is quick to react angrily or to counterattack.
- Has recurrent suspicions, without justification, regarding fidelity of spouse or sexual partner.

Gardner (2003) argued that if the stress of PAS persists for an extended period of time they may result in the alienating parent’s prior borderline personality symptoms being severe enough to diagnose them with BPD. However, the symptoms of PAS as described by Gardner (2003) include symptoms a child would present. As previously stated, Baker (2006) conducted a parent-focused study of PAS which resulted in 3 types of alienating parents. The third pattern, narcissistic mother in a divorced family included the mother having unjustified suspicious of cheating, gambling or substance abuse (Baker, 2006). Unjustified suspicions are in the criteria for paranoid personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, in order to be diagnosed with BPD, an individual must show at least four of the criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

**Paranoid Personality Disorder.** Paranoid Personality Disorder is a pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent, beginning by
early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Gardner’s (2003) argument was that the alienating parent may have paranoid personality disorder prior to the marital separation, or the alienated parent may develop paranoid personality disorder when the alienation starts. People with this paranoid personality disorder tend to hold grudges against others for the negative treatment they believe they have received (American Psychiatric Association). They also consistently show a lack of trust and excessive suspicion towards others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The second alienating parent pattern described by Baker (2006), narcissistic mother in a divorced family includes suspicion of wrong doings by the alienated parent.

Out of the nine criteria for a paranoid personality disorder diagnosis, none of them can be compared to PAS whether the focus is parent or child based.

**DSM-IV Diagnoses no longer in the DSM.** Disorder of infancy, childhood or adolescence not otherwise specified is no longer a valid diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and therefore will not be discussed. False memory syndrome has never been accepted by any organizations as a diagnosis (Dallam, 2001).

**Summary.** Gardner’s 2003 article, “Does the DSM-IV Have an Equivalent for the Parental Alienation Syndrome Diagnosis”, was written prior to the release of the new DSM-V, but many of the comparisons made by Gardner in regards to the DSM-IV can still be made with the new DSM-V. Gardner’s intention for this article was to present legal professionals alternative diagnoses that could be used for custody disputes while maintaining the essence of the PAS diagnosis (Gardner, 2003). However, PAS does not have enough of the criteria needed for any of the DSM-IV diagnoses that Gardner (2003) discussed to make them interchangeable. The main reason that these alternative diagnoses are not comparable is Gardner’s definition focuses on the child’s behaviours, but many of the alternative diagnoses focus on the parent. It is possible that it would be more beneficial to look at PAS as a phenomenon that occurs in parents in high-conflict separations.

**The Alienated Parent’s Perception of Parental Alienation Syndrome**

Vassiliou & Cartwright (2001) questioned 5 fathers and one mother on their experiences as the alienated parent with parental alienation syndrome using semi-structured interviews conducted on the telephone (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). The open ended, semi structured questions were audio taped. The study hoped to compile evidence to gain more understanding on parental alienation syndrome. Each participant answered questions from each of the following categories;

- Are there characteristics (number of children, ages, number of marriages, etc) common to alienated families?
- Are there common themes or issues among the conflicts with couples that contribute to marriage dissolution?
- Are their common themes in the participant’s perception of the alienation process?
- Given the opportunity, what are some things that the lost parents perceive they would have done differently?

The results of the study included some evidence to support PAS as defined by Richard Gardner. The child being influenced by an alienating parent and extended family becoming involved was consistent among participants. Although the test group was small, the participants
were spread between the United States and Quebec, Canada. Six people across such a far distance all experiencing the same symptoms as outlined as Gardner also gives his definition some anecdotal credibility.

The Alienated Child: A Reformation of Parental Alienation Syndrome

The alienated child is a reformation of PAS created by Kelly & Johnston (2001). The alienated child is described by Kelly and Johnston (2001) as a child who “expresses persistent, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs, toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child’s actual experiences with that parent.” This definition eliminates the focus on the alienating parent’s programming of the child as described by Gardner and moves the focus to the observable alienating behaviours of the child and the relationship between the parent and child (Johnston & Kelly, 2001), similar to Parent Child Relational Disorder. In doing so, it becomes easier to assess the alienation because it provides a neutral, measureable base to assess that does not assume the influence of a third party. Johnston and Kelly (2001) believe the first step in assessment of parental alienation is to determine whether the child is alienating, or just refusing visitation with the parent. Although Johnston and Kelly (2001) do not provide any specific assessment procedures, they do believe that the Alienated Child focus could be used instead of PAS.

The next step in Johnston and Kelly’s (2001) reformulation is a continuum focusing on the parent child relationship. The continuum goes from positive to negative with the following points; positive relationship with both parents, affinity with one parent, allied children, estranged children, and the alienated child. The positive relationship with both parents is a child who values their parents and wants to spend time with both of them. It is the healthiest relationship possible on the continuum. Affinity with one parent is similar in that it is still a positive and healthy relationship however the child has an affinity to one parent but also wants to see, and values the other parent. A child who wants to be a mechanic may enjoying seeing and talking with a parent who is a mechanic over the other with a different occupation, but still loves the other parent. Similarly, an allied child forms an alliance with one parent. During a separation or divorce, the child may want to spend more time with the allied parent, but does not completely avoid the other parent. This alliance may form due to parental conflict if the child believes a parent may have caused the divorce more-so than the other, or from direct or indirect parental influence. Estranged children do not have a relationship with one parent due to a negative history, such as abuse or neglect. The child may have been abused directly or observed the parent abusing another sibling or parent. Some children may even be affected by the aftermath of an abusive parent to another family member without seeing the abuse, causing the estrangement. Johnston and Kelly (2001) believe that this stage in the continuum is often misinterpreted as parental alienation syndrome when the child’s estrangement is actually a healthy response to the abusive parent. Finally, the alienated child is the furthest point in the continuum. The alienated child stage is described as a child who began estrangement after a separation or divorce, strongly and verbally resist visitation with the parent, and seem to have no guilt when doing so. The alienated parents in this case are often considered to be average or above average parents with no history of physical and/or and verbal abuse or neglect towards the child. Even if there is minimal evidence against the alienating parent, the child will express this evidence in an exaggerated manor that is disproportionate to the history of the parent child relationship. Typically, the alienated child is seen in high-conflict disputes but is rare.
In order to properly determine the stage of the continuum a child is experiencing, a framework including possible variables affecting the child’s behaviour during divorce or separation must be used. The level of marital conflict and influence from an outside source including a parent or family member are common variables assessed. Johnston and Kelly (2001) named the parent responsible for negative influence the aligned parent. The aligned parent openly expresses negative opinions of the other parent for the intention of alienation, or without consciously persuading the child to alienate the parent.

In contrast to Gardner’s alienating parent focused theory, the alienated child theory also assesses the possibility of the alienated parent being responsible for the estrangement. The alienated parent may have withdrawn from the marital conflict, making the child feel as if the alienated parent did not care enough to fight for custody or stay married. Self centered, immature parents with harsh or rigid parenting styles and critical and demanding traits are often alienated because of those traits.

Kelly and Johnston (2001) recognize that many variables affect how likely the child is to accept the aligned parent’s influence and maintain behaviours needed for alienation.

Personality traits of the children can increase or decrease the likelihood of alienation. Children with passive, anxious and fearful behaviours and traits are more vulnerable to alienation as a result of being unable to withstand the pressures from the aligned parent or the stress from the custody battle. Children with low self-esteem may thrive on the promise of love from the aligned parent.

The relationship the child has with both parents prior to the separation is often a factor of alienation. Children who heavily relied on the aligned parent for emotional or physical reasons are likely to be accepting of the aligned parent’s processes and behaviours leading to alienation. The aligned parent may have been inconsistent in their treatment of the child, changing their behaviours to show love and rejection erratically. In this case, a child may see alienating the other parent as a chance to gain final, consistent acceptance of the aligned parent. Similarly, threats of being disowned by the aligned parent may influence the child’s alienation of the other parent in hopes of gaining acceptance of the aligned parent. In contrast, a child with a healthy relationship with the aligned parent prior to the separation of divorce may be more likely to accept the aligned parent’s alienation behaviours. Some children may naturally feel the need to rescue the parent who seems more hurt in the separation.

Children who had infrequent or non-existent visitation time with the alienated parent gives the child inadequate time to determine if the aligned parent’s accusations towards the alienated parent are true. Children with low external resources, such as extended family, therapists, or friends, have an increased vulnerability to accepting the aligned parent’s influence.
Although the Alienated Child approach does not completely focus on the child’s behaviours as Gardner’s PAS theory does, they do state the importance of recognizing the behaviours displayed by the child. Kelly and Johnston (2001) decided through their own clinical observations that the behaviours occurring during alienation are consistent with Gardner’s PAS theory. The core feature of the child’s behaviour during alienation is the disproportion between the child’s beliefs and accounts of the parent and the actual history of the parent-child relationship. The key behaviours to explain this core feature have been narrowed down to four behaviours by Kelly and Johnston (2001) as opposed to the eight in Gardner’s theory. The first behaviour is the child’s strong, verbal resistance to visitation with the alienated parent. This is shown simply in the refusal of seeing the parent in any setting, but also in only wanting to speak with lawyers who support their right to decide which parent they will have a relationship with during custody cases. The second behaviour is the manner in which the child presents their stories. This is similar to Gardner’s borrowed scenario component of PAS. The stories presented by the child are repeated often, but hollow without evidence or detail. They are usually presented using language beyond their developmental stage that has been previously presented by the aligned parent. The third behaviour is the child using rude and hostile language and behaviours towards the alienated parent and their extended family, pets, and significant others. Lastly, the child often speaks highly of the aligned parent and refuses to recognize any evidence to the contrary. They also refuse to accept the relationship between their denigration of the alienated parent and the opinion of the aligned parent and are adamant and vocal when stating their refusal.

Children displaying the four behaviours are typically defiant, aggressive and obnoxious in relationships with peers, siblings, and teachers when outside of the custody battle. They tend to prefer to be constantly with the aligned parent. When in presence of the alienated parent outside of the custody case, they complain about the parent’s meals, housing and other belongings of the parent.

**Summary/Findings.** The alienated parent theory is an alternative to Gardner’s parental alienation syndrome theory. It focuses on the behaviours of both the alienated and aligned parent’s behaviours, the child, and the family dynamics and relationships previous to and during the separation or divorce. The alienated child is a reformation of the parental alienation syndrome theory that assesses more factors than PAS while maintaining Gardner’s original basis of the PAS theory.

**Summary of All Findings.** The research and theoretical papers available on parental alienation syndrome ranges from the time of Gardner’s original definition of PAS in 1992, to present day. The geographical range is also extensive with articles published from Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Although most of the articles on parental alienation syndrome are theory based, there are a limited number of empirical articles that support the usefulness to professionals and or belief of the existence of PAS among parents and professionals. That said, a prominent finding in these studies is that among both legal and mental health professionals and parents there is no absolute consensus about the usefulness and existence of PAS. However, there are many similarities in the arguments made on both sides. Supporters of PAS believe they have seen parental alienation syndrome aspects in everyday life and custody cases. When questioned on individual symptoms of PAS, such as campaign of denigration, supporters believed they had also observed the individual aspects as well. Legal professionals also noted that they had worked with other judges and litigators who have accepted
PAS as a defense in their courts. There are supporters of PAS among parents and legal/mental health professionals. Non-supporters of PAS commonly agree that PAS needs to have more specific criteria to ensure proper use in legal and mental health environments and avoid abuse of the concept. For example, adding variables such as age, gender, number of siblings, cognitive level, parenting skills, and living environment could provide more meaningful discrimination of the syndrome. They also agree that a criteria missing from the definition of PAS is the possibility of the child or alienated parent having influence on the alienation. A common argument against the use of PAS is that it provides a legal escape for parents who have actually committed wrongdoings against their children, such as sexual or verbal abuse. Two of the studies reviewed suggested a continuum to be used to gage the justification of alienation to avoid escape of rightfully accused parents. Other alternatives to Gardner’s definition of PAS have also been presented in order to make assessment of these behaviours more feasible. All alternatives consist of assessing PAS by looking at not only the child behaviour but the alienating and alienated parent’s behaviour as well.

Chapter III: Method

In order for research to be eligible as evidence the books and journal articles used had to be written in English and published in the last 15 years. Any journals used needed to be peer reviewed. Any statistics used that were not found in a journal had to be from a government source such as Statistics Canada. There was only one exception to the eligibility standards. Initial published discussion on PAS started in the mid 1980’s. Therefore, Gardner’s original paper, as well as professional’s initial reaction to PAS were written prior to 1998. Any information allotted to be earlier than 1998 was not considered if it was published earlier than 1985. PAS will be the only aspect of the thesis to have research that had been published prior to 1998. All comparisons will be made against Gardner’s definition of PAS as Gardner is the founder of the term as well as to maintain a consistent definition for comparison. Unfortunately due to Gardner’s passing in 2003, the most current information available from Gardner was published in 2003. All evidence is primarily theoretical with some empirical evidence. The purpose of the empirical evidence used is to use statistics from the studies to determine how many professionals and parents believe in PAS, in turn, having concrete evidence to the validity of PAS’s existence and use. The theoretical evidence will be used to further explain the reasoning of professionals for their acceptance or denial of PAS as discussed in the empirical evidence while also providing information to explore possible, more beneficial alternatives to PAS in the legal system.

Searches were completed using EbscoHost, a search engine through St. Lawrence College, Google Scholar and Google. The following search terms were used.

Searches Completed with EbscoHost

- Parental Alienation Syndrome: 133 Results
- Parent Child Relational Problem: 119 results
- Parental Alienation in DSM: 13 Results
- Parent Manipulation: 20 Results
• Richard Gardner: 42 Results
• False Memory Syndrome: 16 Results
• Families of Addiction: 258 Results
• Borderline Personality Disorder DSM-5: 2 Results
• Child Psychological Abuse: 64 Results
• Divorce Rate: 0 Results
• Drug Addiction and Families: 234 Results
• Supervised Access Services: 0 Results
• Shared Psychotic Disorder: 7 Results
• Parental Alienation Disorder and Psychotic Disorder: 0 Results
• Parental Alienation Syndrome and Separation Anxiety Disorder: 212 Results
• Critics of Parental Alienation Syndrome: 0 Results
• The Alienated Child: 28 Results

**Searches Completed on Google Scholar**

• Parents of Parental Alienation 887 900 Results
• Parental Alienation Syndrome and Separation Anxiety Disorder: 11,600 Results
• Parental Alienation Syndrome and Paranoid Personality Disorder: 8040 Results.
• Richard Garner PAS (With publishing date restriction of 2005-2013): 9920 Results.
• Narcissistic Personality Disorder and Parental Alienation Syndrome: 535 Results.
• Critics of Parental Alienation Syndrome: 0 results
• National Organization for Women: 477 000 Results

**Sources Found at Supervised Access Services Belleville, On.**:

• 3 Books:
• 5 Articles

Only full text articles that were found within the search results were used. Out of the 911,173 articles and books found 28 were used within the thesis.
Chapter IV: Results

Unfortunately, limited empirical articles written in English in the last 15 years were found to provide evidence of the use and believed existence of PAS among legal professionals. However, even in this study 67% of legal professionals in the sole empirical study recognized a high level of controversy surrounding parental alienation syndrome and 69% believe the controversy is primarily caused by Gardner’s controversial definition of the syndrome. Seventy-one percent of participants did not even believe that PAS exists at all. After determining that a majority of participants either did not believe in PAS or saw PAS as significantly flawed in its definition, possible alternatives were discussed. Participants agreed that in order to improve PAS as a diagnosis and legal defense other variables should be assessed such as other sources influencing alienation. According to participants, the alienating and alienated parent should be interviewed to eliminate this problem. Generally, PAS as defined by Gardner does not appear to be sufficient for use in legal or mental health reasons. The theoretical articles making arguments against PAS had very similar points. Three of the articles (Warshak, 2001.; Joanis & Waldron, 1996.; Baker, 2007.) claimed Gardner’s definition of PAS has either the wrong focus (i.e., on the child's behaviour) or improperly weighted focus on the criteria. One of the theoretical articles argues against PAS from a social perspective. Advocates for women and children’s rights believe that Gardner over estimates the frequency of PAS and this poses a problem within the court system because many cases deemed PAS may distract or mask sexually abusive fathers. Of note, however, is that there are no empirical studies of this. A similar argument is made by NOW, the National Organization for Women makes a similar argument; that PAS is a strategy to help unfit fathers obtain custody of their children, but again there is no empirical evidence for or against this.

Only four empirical studies fitting all of the criteria described in the method section involved surveys of participant’s beliefs of the existence of PAS rather than a study of the syndrome itself. The four studies (Baker, 2007.; Baker & Darnall, 2007.; Bow, Gould & Flens, 2009.; Spruijt et.al., 2005.) were all completed between 2005-2009 with divorced parents, legal professionals and mental health professionals as participants. Three were completed in North America, specifically New York, Michigan and Quebec. The fourth was a study from the Netherlands. It is important to note that although all the empirical studies resulted in at least 42%
of participants agreeing that PAS does exist, participants in the Netherlands believe that the frequency is much lower than North American participants.

Three possible alternatives to parental alienation were included in the literature review. The first alternative was suggested by Baker and Darnall (2007). It focused on the personality traits of the alienating parent as recounted in semi-structured interviews of adults who self-identified as a child of PAS. The study found three personality types of alienating parents; the narcissistic mother in divorced family, narcissistic mother in non-divorced family, and cold, rejecting, abusive mother or father. The parent focused alternative does not solve the criticisms made in the arguments against PAS. But, does move the focus away from the behaviours of the child to the parent behaviours. However, similar to Gardner’s definition, it could be argued that the focus of the assessment is too narrow and could be better accounted for by parental diagnosis of personality disorders. A second alternative was developed by Gardner (2003). Gardner compared his definition of parental alienation syndrome to various DSM-IV diagnoses and traits of the alienating parent in hopes of providing alternate diagnoses to be used in custody cases. Unfortunately, the article itself discounts Gardner’s parental alienation theory by acknowledging the need for an alienating parent focus which is not a part of his definition of PAS. In addition, his comparisons do not present enough similarities between any of Gardner’s proposed alternatives to PAS to adequately account for the syndrome and there is too much overlap to definitively conclude that PAS is a distinct syndrome. Finally, Kelly & Johnston (2001) proposed an alternative called The Alienated Child. The definition of their reformulation of PAS includes the child’s behaviours being disproportionate to the parent’s actions while adding specific behaviours from the alienated and the alienating parents that may influence the alienation before and during separation and divorce. Further, it provides a continuum of alienation to determine the likelihood that the child’s accusations are true based on the parent-child relationship prior to the separation or divorce. This reformulation of parental alienation syndrome addresses many of the criticisms made in articles against PAS; namely additional variables, multiple focuses and ignoring the possibility of the negative actions of the alienated parent actually occurring.

Chapter V: Discussion

Based on the current review it appears that despite more than 20 years passing since the introduction of the concept of PAS there remains no empirical evidence of its existence. In the few studies done surveying people's beliefs about the existence of PAS the majority of people, professional or parent, believe that parental alienation syndrome needs to be further developed using more variables and focuses. The present review of the current literature does not support
the use of parental alienation syndrome in legal and mental health settings, specifically, custody cases, based on a near complete lack of supporting empirical evidence.

PAS is being used in many contexts. Seventy-two rulings of PAS in a legal setting in multiple countries including Canada, The United States, Australia, Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland were recorded as of 2002 (Reay, 2011). Support groups and foundations have been created to manage PAS. Although the definitions of PAS being used within these contexts are unclear, what is clear is that at least some professionals involved in various legal systems appear to believe that PAS exists as an identifiable syndrome that should be considered within custody and access decisions.

The idea to review the literature on parental alienation syndrome occurred while observing multiple families during supervised visitation and exchanges at Supervised Access Services of Belleville through the Counselling Services of Belleville and District. Many of the families were in high conflict, often presenting contentious arguments against their child’s other parent. Workers are unable to ever truly know which claims are true and which are false. Legal professionals face similar dilemmas and ultimately need to both assess and make decisions about “the truth” in high conflict access and custody situations. This choice affects entire families and can increase or decrease quality of life for the child who is the subject of the custody dispute. For that reason, the appropriate use or stopping the use of parental alienation syndrome is vital to custody cases. If PAS does in fact exist, it can only be determined by well controlled empirical studies. Only at that point can a decision be made as to how it may or may not be used in legal and professional settings.

Strengths and Limitations

The limited research on parental alienation syndrome that exists is quickly becoming outdated. The present review of the research occurred after the release of the new DSM, the DSM-V, which once again elected to not include PAS as a diagnosis. This seems largely based on the fact that over the last twenty years almost all of literature on PAS has been theoretical rather than empirical providing no additional evidence of Gardner’s syndrome. Despite Richard Gardner constantly updating his definition of parental alienation syndrome as he made more observations and more criticisms were presented research has not followed suit. Perhaps if Gardner had not passed, he would have continued to update his definition spurring additional research on the topic. As noted, however, to date insufficient evidence exists to conclude that PAS exists as a distinct phenomenon. Based on the current review, if legal professionals wish to continue to use PAS in access and custody cases, methodologically rigorous research needs to be completed in the near future.

Multi-Level Challenges

Research for the parental alienation study was completed at Supervised Access Services (SAS) in Belleville, Ontario. The initial challenge in exploring parental alienation syndrome was the lack of clients willing to participate in a study. Clients of supervised access services were typically involved with high conflict custody cases at the time of research. Their current situation deterred them from being willing to have an outside influence reading, and reporting on their case files in fear of the placement student or other SAS workers becoming biased when reporting
on their visits and exchanges. The challenge resulted in the study taking the form of a literature review.

A prominent challenge in the completion of a literature review focused on parental alienation syndrome was the availability of current, empirical articles. Richard Gardner, the term’s creator as well as the primary source of information on the subject, passed away in 2003, significantly reducing information on the subject. Many of the articles by other authors were in response to Gardner’s ongoing publications on PAS, so his passing decreasing interest in the subject as well.

**Contribution to Behavioural Psychology and Custody Cases**

Kelly & Johnston (2001) provided an alternative to PAS that improves the original definition using all the popular criticisms of Gardner’s original definition. Even if this alternative is not used, it proves that the criticisms of PAS are avoidable. Therefore, if mental health and legal professionals can create a standardized framework for the assessment of PAS it could be in custody cases with increased certainty. Increasing certainty of diagnosis and use in custody cases ensures that children receive the best possible living arrangement and treatment possible.

**References**


