

# A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation and Other Inaccuracies in *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*





**A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation  
and Other Inaccuracies in  
*Challenging Parental Alienation:  
New Directions for Professionals and Parents***

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**Una Revisión Integral de la  
Información Errónea y Otras Imprecisiones en  
*Desafiando la Alienación Parental:  
Nuevas Directrices para Profesionales y Padres***

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Several other professionals and graduate students contributed work on this document but have asked to remain anonymous due to concerns about retaliation that may be directed toward them by the editors and chapter authors of the book.

This document is the product of two international organizations, which advocate on behalf of research and practice on parental alienation and related topics:

- Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) is a nonprofit corporation founded in 2010 with the purpose of educating mental health and legal professionals and the general public regarding parental alienation. PASG consists of 900 members in 65 countries. (Additional information is available at [www.pasg.info](http://www.pasg.info)).

- Global Action for Research Integrity in Parental Alienation (GARI-PA) is an international nonprofit organization that investigates and corrects scientific fraud that relates to parental alienation. (Additional information is available at [www.garipa.org](http://www.garipa.org)).

In addition, this document has been endorsed by the leadership of 45 organizations representing thousands of concerned scientists, professionals, and stakeholders who represent very broad support for our conclusions and recommendations. (See Appendix A for the list of these endorsers.)



## Introduction

This document is a comprehensive analysis and critique of the book, *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*, copyright 2022, edited by Jean Mercer and Margaret Drew. The book was published by Routledge, an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group, a large company in London and New York. The initial purpose of our involvement in this project was to prepare independent book reviews that would be submitted for publication in professional journals. However, soon after starting our analysis, we identified gross mischaracterizations, misinformation, blatant errors, conflicts of interest, lack of expertise, use of science denial techniques, plagiarism, and deliberate misrepresentations of the current state of peer-reviewed published research, scientific inquiry, and case law support for the family dynamic of parental alienation (PA). These errors are so egregious that we believe they constitute a deliberate attempt to mislead mental health professionals, legal professionals, and parents. The misinformation contained in this book is likely to cause irreparable harm to children and families. Therefore, after conducting our analysis, we decided to submit a request of the publisher to immediately **withdraw the book from publication**.

### Summary of Our Attempts to Remedy the Identified Issues

After preparing a formal critique of the book, the contents of which are contained in this report, we submitted a request to the publisher to retract the book from circulation, recall existing physical and digital copies, and issue a public statement that this action was taken. The critique and request for retraction was also endorsed by 45 organizations studying and working with families affected by PA. (See Appendix A.)

This critique was submitted to Claire Jarvis, Senior Editor for Health and Social Care at Routledge, and Jeremy North, Managing Director of Books at Taylor & Francis, in August 2022. Ms. Jarvis's response was that the original book proposal was reviewed by two "experts" in the field, that she appreciated the field is a "contested" one. She added that they are happy with the book and did not intend to withdraw the book from sale.

After failing to receive an adequate response from the publisher, we requested assistance from the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) on September 1, 2022. COPE is a limited liability company and registered charity consisting of journal editors who are concerned with publication misconduct, unethical research, and other issues related to the integrity of the scientific record. COPE claims to support and encourage editors to identify, report, and investigate ethical issues in the publication process. After accepting our case for review, we were informed by Alysya Levine, Operations Manager at COPE, that we were

required to refrain from posting anything on social media or other outlets while it was under review. For the next six months, we remained “silent” about our concerns regarding the book while COPE tried to obtain the answers to the questions we raised with the publishers.

Iratxe Puebla, Facilitation and Integrity Officer at COPE, emailed Ms. Jarvis and Sabina Alam, Director of Publishing Ethics and Integrity at Taylor & Francis. They were asked to provide information on how they were processing the concerns raised in this report, and whether the book was peer reviewed prior to publication. They were also asked to clarify whether the publisher sought further review of the book by experts and, if so, what the procedural aspects of the review were. Ms. Jarvis’s response was the same to COPE: they were happy with the reviews they obtained about the proposal. She also stated that the academic credentials of the editors were also satisfactory to them so they were not going to withdraw the book from sale.

Ms. Puebla from COPE attempted to email Ms. Jarvis with the same request for information three more times over the course of three months. Ms. Jarvis was given deadlines each time to respond. Each time, the requests were ignored. We had to prompt COPE each time to follow-up with Ms. Jarvis.

Finding it unacceptable to let this radio silence from Routledge continue indefinitely, we contacted COPE three more times through the beginning of February 2023, asking what the next steps were. The only response we received from COPE was that the members of the Facilitation and Integrity Subcommittee were discussing the matter. No additional action was taken.

(See Appendix B for the complete correspondence among the authors of this report, the leadership at Routledge and Taylor & Francis, and personnel at COPE.)

Given that Routledge and COPE failed to take our concerns raised in this report seriously, we have now decided to make this material public. It is worrisome that the misinformation, misrepresentations of science, and use of science denial techniques (among many other issues) remains in print and is being used in ways that pose a significant danger to families.

For example, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children cited the Mercer and Drew book in their newsletter, *APSAC Alert* (Volume 13, Number 2), that “an expert who claims that PA is accepted by the relevant scientific community is impeachable on the ground that there exist numerous publications and a recent book (Mercer & Drew, 2022).” The U.S. Department of Justice website also lists the book in their library of publications written by individuals who have received funding from them (one of the

chapter authors, Joan Meier). The book received a positive review in *Domestic Violence Report* (Saffren, 2022). Numerous advocacy blogs written by “protective parents” link to the book, and several articles published in low-tiered, professional journals have cited the book in articles (not research) critical of PA. The book is also being used to support arguments to change laws about PA in the U.S.

Therefore, the purpose of this technical report is to raise attention to the dangers of this grossly misleading and inaccurate book. We are extremely disappointed in the failure of the publisher to be concerned with the issues that are raised here and believe they have acted unethically. We are also disappointed in COPE, which is supposed to assist in addressing such concerns about ethical behavior. It appears to us that Routledge’s involvement in COPE is to give the *appearance* of being concerned about ethics, but in practice they have allowed a book like *Challenging Parental Alienation* to remain in circulation and spread falsehoods and ideology rather than scientific evidence. We leave it to you, the reader, to form your own conclusions. We hope that if you agree with us, you will assist in raising awareness about this serious issue that affects the lives of millions of families.



## Overview

During a time when public trust in institutions is trending downward due to the influence of misinformation, public trust in scientists has been described as “guarded” (Funk, 2017). Scientific misinformation (e.g., cigarettes not causing cancer; Oreskes & Conway, 2010, climate change denial) proliferates through social media, entertainment news, and the Internet. Scientists are slowly realizing that the problems of public health, social inequity, or climate change cannot be solved without addressing the growing problem of misinformation (West & Bergstrom, 2021). This document serves to address misinformation throughout *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*.

### Misinformation versus Disinformation

We have used the term misinformation to describe much of the content of the Mercer & Drew (2022) book, which refers to information that is *inadvertently* false and is spread without malicious intent. There is plenty of misinformation in this book, particularly within the chapters published by authors who wrote opinions outside their scope of their expertise. For example, many of the chapter authors are lawyers who provided opinions about scientific research and how custody evaluations are conducted or who, not being mental health providers themselves, mused about how mental health professionals are trained.

In contrast, disinformation refers to the spread of information known to be false with the *intent to cause harm* (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). While it is impossible to determine the intent of the authors of chapters in the book, we will use the word disinformation only in instances where we believe the editors and their colleagues either likely knew, or should have known (based on their years of experience and academic backgrounds) that the information they provided was blatantly inconsistent with widely known existing research and ignored due to the research not supporting their belief systems. This disinformation has a strong likelihood to harm children and families affected by these writings.

Routledge has historically published high quality books on a variety of scientifically important topics. For example, in 2019, Routledge published a book that accurately describes PA and its scientific basis (*Understanding and Managing Parental Alienation: A Guide to Assessment and Treatment*, by Janet Haines, Mandy Matthewson, and Marcus Turnbull). We are concerned about Routledge’s standards to have published *Challenging Parental Alienation* only two years later because so much of the content of the 2022 book

directly contradicts the 2019 material, is not empirically supported, and is grossly inaccurate. Also, Routledge published *Parental Alienation: An Evidence Based Approach*, by Denise McCartan in 2022, which is considerably more consistent with the Haines et al. (2019) Routledge book. We understand it is not every publisher's goal to fact check or vet the books it decides to publish. However, the majority of the writings in *Challenging Parental Alienation* are neither scholarly nor accurate. It is our opinion that the authors of this book either know or should have known this, and that the publisher's support and promotion of this book in its current form represents a lack of understanding about PA theory at a minimum and constitutes willful negligence in the spreading of mis/disinformation at its worst.

It was our expectation that the publisher's review of the errors we have identified in this book would result in their decision to discontinue publication (both written and electronic) and withdraw printed copies from distribution. This report identifies many misleading statements and mis/disinformation about PA, unverifiable anecdotal claims made by the authors, evidence of plagiarism, and a strong reliance on secondary (and even tertiary) sources and opinions published by others rather than scientific evidence. There are too many issues to detail them all. We will, however, provide a non-exhaustive selection of quotations from the book to illustrate what we consider to be the most problematic issues, and we emphasize in **bold** those areas that are discussed.

For example, the very premise of the book and how PA is conceptualized as being just a "belief system" is problematic:

*"This book addresses the concept of parental alienation – the **belief** that when a child of divorced parents avoids one parent, it may be because the preferred parent has persuaded the child to do this. (Front Matter, p. i)*

*For the system of ideas that relates a preferred parent's actions to a child's avoidance or rejection of the other parent, we will use the term **parental alienation belief system**. (Mercer & Drew, p. 3)*

***Parental alienation is a belief system** that purports to inform the courts of what is in the child's best interest. Typically, the father will argue that it is not in the child's best interest to reside with the mother because the mother is alienating. (Zaccour, p. 189)*

The editors begin by stating the book addresses the "concept" or the "idea" of PA. The authors of many of the chapters characterize PA as just a "belief system" held by some professionals, implying that there is no validity to the concept itself. The term "belief

system” (or variants thereof) is used at least 95 times in the book. Yet, as we describe in this report, this statement is a gross mischaracterization of the state of the research and scientific support for PA. Mercer’s educational background is as a developmental psychologist, so the fact that she has omitted mention of the considerable attention this research topic has received in some of the most reputable journals in the field is a disinformation tactic.

To organize our review, we developed general themes of the misleading statements and mis/disinformation that appear in the book. Each of these themes represent an attempt to mislead the public and professionals, to stir controversy that does not exist, and to elevate the authors’ positions as individuals who stand to benefit from increased controversy for the groups they represent. Given the extent of the problems we will further highlight in this document, we do not think a simple rewrite of the book chapters will be enough. The book must be withdrawn from publication and circulation and a press release should be made to explain why this action has been taken.





## **Misinformation: “There Is No Empirical Research That Supports the Reality of Parental Alienation”**

The authors of the book consistently mischaracterized the status of psychological, psychiatric, social, and legal research on PA. Numerous systematic reviews of the scientific research on PA have been published, several in high impact journals published by the American Psychological Association and the Association for Psychological Science, including: *Psychological Bulletin*, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *Developmental Psychology*, and *Psychology, Public Policy & Law* (see Harman, Kruk, et al., 2018; Harman, Bernet, et al., 2019; Harman & Lorandos, 2021; and Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022).

In a review of all scientific research published through 2020, 213 peer-reviewed studies, dissertations, and master’s theses were identified that were available to the authors at the time of the writing of this book. Since 2020, there have been many more studies published (e.g., Avieli & Levy, 2022; Mullis et al., 2022; Roma et al., 2022; Rowlands et al., 2023). This review also does not include hundreds of papers and literature review articles written by scholars about PA. It is impossible for any reputable scholar to ignore the existence of this scientific work, much of it publicly indexed at the Vanderbilt University Medical Center (<https://ckm.vumc.org/pasg/>). It is also unethical to suggest to the reader that no such evidence exists at all. Yet across the entire book, very few of these 213 empirical studies are mentioned, much less critiqued on their merits by any of the authors. The authors proclaim to be legitimate experts on the topic of PA, and yet they appear to be willfully blind to or deliberately misleading about the existence of the scientific research on the topic.

Below are some sample statements made by authors of chapters in the book that illustrate the use of this disinformation tactic:

*Thus, parental alienation is not a formal legislated criterion, but rather an opinion that can be argued in court and that may come up in expert evaluations (despite the lack of credible scientific evidence supporting a “diagnosis” of parental alienation). (Zaccour, p. 189)*

*Of further concern is the fact that the law was enacted despite the shortage of scientific studies in that country (Soma et al. 2016). (Zaccour, p. 198)*

*Despite the scientific community’s strong rejection of parental alienation syndrome, this concept continues to be applied in court cases, for instance in Spain (Martín*

*López 2009) and in Italy 2006 (Lavadera, Ferracuti, and Togliatti 2012) .... Judges also found that very young children and children who had a good relationship with both parents were “alienated.” We can conclude that while **parental alienation** gives court decisions an appearance of objectivity and scientific integrity, it is rather a catch-all term that **has little to do with what the literature advances.** (Zaccour, p. 200)*

The author (Zaccour) of these three particular statements claims that there is not credible scientific evidence regarding the diagnosis of PA. There are countries that have legislated laws against the creation of PA (e.g., Brazil) and base their judicial findings of such abuse on scientific research. The author provides no support for her opinion that the scientific community strongly rejects parental alienation syndrome and fails to recognize that psychological terminology often changes as science advances. For example, just because scientists and clinicians do not call PTSD “battle fatigue” or “shell shock” anymore does not mean that they strongly reject the problem’s very existence. The term “parental alienation” is used today instead of “parental alienation syndrome” or “PAS,” because of scientific advances that have occurred.

The author of the statements above also twists her language to make it appear that PA is not a scientifically accepted concept, despite research on its being published in some of the top psychological science journals and its broad application in courts throughout the world. While there is published literature by critics of PA in professional journals (most of them low-tiered and lacking scientific impact factors) or unreviewed papers posted on internet archives (see Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022, for details on this issue), these opinions are not supported with empirical evidence. It is dangerous to imply that the courts should defer to the opinions of these critics rather than the scientific evidence that is downplayed and omitted by these statements. It is especially concerning when these critics speak outside of their field of expertise. Zaccour is an attorney who has no qualifications to render judgements about scientific validity.

The following set of quotations are taken directly from a chapter written by Meier, another attorney and advocate who is not a scientist, where this notion of there not being scientific evidence for PA is repeated many times.

*This chapter begins with a brief overview of the [parental alienation] concept and its destructive impact on custody and abuse litigation. It then provides an overview of the foundational beliefs driving alienation’s use in these cases, and **the widely acknowledged lack of objective, scientific support for them.** (Meier, p. 216)*

*And before the pathologization of parental denigration or exclusion, the reality that parents do sometimes use their children to hurt the other parent did not imply that an “expert” could objectively know when one parent’s negative views of the other were legitimate or illegitimate, nor know whether and to what extent those views may have caused a child’s estrangement from the other parent. ... **The remainder of this chapter explains why there is no such reliable research to underpin these speculative beliefs.*** (Meier, p. 217)

*After years of advocacy by certain proponents for inclusion of the renamed “parental alienation disorder” (“PAD”) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-V, **it was rejected as lacking sufficient scientific support*** (Crary, 2012; Milchman, Geffner and Meier 2020). (Meier, p. 218)

*The invention of a concept of alienation (“child alienation” or “parental alienation” or just “alienation”) distinct from PAS was first propounded by a small group of respected forensic experts around the turn of the millennium. They called for intensive research to explore and support the concept (Johnston 2005, 761 & n. 16). Over the following 10–15 years, a growing number of articles were published about the concept – **but to date, there remains no credible scientific evidence underpinning the way the parental alienation concept is understood and used in court.*** (Meier, pp. 220–221)

***The quasi-scientific alienation concept packages together three core premises:** (i) the causal hypothesis: that a favored parent’s criticism, fear, or negative view of the other parent – whether conscious or unconscious – can itself do lasting damage to a child’s relationship with the other parent; (ii) that “alienation” can reliably be differentiated from other concededly legitimate causes of a child’s estrangement, including, but not limited to, domestic abuse; and (iii) that the harm of alienation to children is so profound as to warrant extreme measures to prevent it, including custody reversal and limited or no contact with the preferred parent. **There is virtually no research testing any of these core beliefs; moreover, there is other credible research casting serious doubt on them.*** (Meier, p. 222)

***Existing research typically fails to differentiate between causes for children’s estrangement, simply treating estranged children as presumptively “alienated”:** **Until there are scientifically valid studies using independent measures of parenting quality that can distinguish between children who rationally and irrationally reject a parent, PA advocates cannot claim scientific support for identifying alienated children.*** (Milchman, 2020, 44). (Meier, p. 224)

The author of these statements again mischaracterizes the research by claiming there is no objective, scientific evidence for PA. Meier even calls research on PA “quasi-scientific” in an effort to delegitimize an entire field of scientific study. She cites another PA critic’s opinion (Milchman) about the state of the research rather than acknowledge many of the scientifically peer-reviewed systematic reviews that have been published on the research related to the topic. We see the same portrayal of the scientific literature by Mercer and Drew:

*There has **never been even a single published complete case study** that would show how identification of a parental alienation case was accomplished. (Mercer & Drew, p. 7)*

*Very little of the research related to the parental alienation belief system meets high scientific standards, and **very few attempts** have been made to answer obvious basic questions. (Mercer & Drew, p. 250)*

These statements by Mercer and Drew overlook the fact that among over 213 studies, multiple methodological approaches, samples, and measurement techniques, were used to study over 17 different topics related to PA (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022), and there were many case studies within this sample. It is highly unlikely that the *entire* field of study on PA has “low” scientific standards, as that would imply that all scientific methods cannot be trusted to provide valid information. Rather, when findings made across multiple studies that employ different measures, samples, and methods come to similar conclusions, we can have *more* confidence in the findings. This issue is not addressed at all by the authors, who make it appear there has been very little research on the topic to begin with.

*In fact, **publications involving the parental alienation belief system have offered almost no information on some of the most obvious questions about children in these cases.** What is the age range for children who are avoiding a parent? Are there more boys or more girls in these cases? Is puberty a factor that helps to trigger children’s avoidance of a parent? Are children who avoid a parent different from those who do not avoid, in temperament or personality characteristics?” (Mercer, p. 173)*

This statement fails to consider any of the research on PA, where considerable detail about the samples, ages of children, comparisons of age groups, and other factors are clearly described in great detail (see Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). There are several

other chapter authors who have presented this misinformation, such as with this statement:

*Since the mid-1980s, a belief system we now call “parental alienation” – **which lacks a scientific foundation** – has been brought into the practice of custody evaluations by mental health professionals who accept that belief system and apply it in their work. (Erikson, p. 89)*

## Summary

The illustrative statements made by the authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* in this section gives the reader the impression that PA is just a belief system that is supported by pseudoscience or no science at all. The popular expression that *if you tell a lie often enough, it becomes the truth* is an accurate description of the campaign that critics of PA have waged to discredit a blossoming field of study (Harman, Bernet, et al., 2019). The authors of the chapters in the book should be aware of the considerable scientific body of evidence for PA and related fields of study and yet they continuously made unsupported and seemingly authoritative claims that amount to nothing more than ipse dixit statements (i.e., it is true because I say it is).

It is especially alarming that the authors, most of whom are not trained as research scientists, make such claims in areas outside of their area of specialty, which violates most ethical standards in their respective professions. This science denial campaign can negatively impact upon the safety and well-being of children. Ignoring and discrediting the scientific basis of PA is in itself reason enough to cast doubt and suspicion upon the motivations and validity of the author’s opinions.



## **Misinformation: “Parental Alienation Theory Assumes That All Children Who Manifest Contact Refusal Were Influenced to Do So by the Alienating Activities of the Favored Parent”**

Authors across the book repeatedly stated that PA theory assumes that *all children* who resist contact with a parent were influenced to do so by the alienating parent. Yet, no PA scholar or scientist has suggested that custody evaluators should assume that *all rejecting children* or *every case of contact refusal* is caused by an alienating parent. Furthermore, there are no published articles or books on the practice of forensic child custody evaluation that would suggest the assumption of any family characteristic at the outset of the referral of a custody case, much less an assumption of PA. It is noteworthy that the PA critics in this book never cite a specific publication of a PA scholar as the source of this false information.

No PA scholar since Gardner (1985)—when the concept of PAS was introduced—has suggested that custody evaluators should assume that every case of contact refusal is caused by an alienating parent. PA is recognized by professionals and scientists as being relatively rare (e.g., 1-3% of children; Bernet, 2010) and it is only found in about 20% of custody evaluation referrals (Kopetski et al., 2006). Custody evaluation referrals represent less than 1% of all custody litigation occurring at a given time (Melton et al., 2007), so even the idea that there is some kind of mass hysteria around the identification or adjudication of PA in custody evaluations is false on its face.

Bernet (2022) and Bernet and Xu (2022) published peer-reviewed research that described in detail the recurrent pattern of the same misinformation (i.e., that PA scholars assume that all cases of contact refusal are caused by an indoctrinating, alienating parent) published between 1994 and 2022. It should be noted that many of the spreaders of this same misinformation are among the thirteen authors of chapters within this book. The following are just a few examples of this misinformation in the book edited by Mercer and Drew:

The ambiguity of the language makes it too easy to imply that when one of these phenomena is referenced, one or more of the others must be present. This is especially a problem when a child is said to show avoidance of one parent, **and this statement is also taken to suggest, without further evidence, that a parent’s encouragement of the child’s avoidance is present.** (Mercer & Drew, p. 2)

*PA scholars conflate behavior designed to inappropriately influence a child against the other parent with behaviors occurring for other reasons, as well as various*

*behaviors that do not necessarily involve a child’s rejection of parent. (Mercer & Drew, p. 3)*

*Observed events in which the preferred parent persuades, forces, or encourages the child to avoid the other parent will be called parent encouragement of child avoidance behavior .... It should be noted that this third usage refers to an event that is often asserted but rarely proved by parental alienation proponents, **who tend to infer the existence of parent encouragement when they observe child avoidance.** (Mercer & Drew, p. 4)*

*“Identification of inappropriate parental behaviors that have the goal of rejection of the other parent **appears almost invariably to be an inference from the child’s attitude and behavior** rather than a matter of objective evidence that inappropriate persuasion has taken place.” (Mercer & Drew, p. 7)*

Each of these statements leads the reader to accept the authors’ word that scholars and practitioners who “believe” in PA automatically assume a favored parent is responsible for a child’s resistance or refusal of contact with a parent. Yet, PA scholars have consistently described multiple reasons for a child’s resistance/refusal of contact, with the alienating parent only being the reason in cases of PA. Children may resist/refuse contact due to loyalty conflicts, estrangement, PA, or what are called “hybrid” situations (e.g., see Bernet et al., 2016). The purpose of assessment tools such as the use of the Five-Factor Model (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022; Morrison & Ring, 2021) is to rule out these alternative explanations. The authors of the statements above omit these important details to mislead the reader.

There are several other examples of this misinformation across other chapters of the book:

*It appears that [Gardner] was unable to accept a straightforward explanation that a child resisting contact with a parent might be doing so because of something that parent had done. Instead, his only conclusion could be that the child was suffering a mental disorder, **induced by the other parent.** (Doughty & Drew, p. 27)*

*“Rather than being perceived, alienation is inferred when behaviors interpreted as caused by alienation are observed. ... **The inferential nature of alienation is generally not recognized or acknowledged by proponents of alienation.** This is a significant omission because implying that something is directly perceived rather than inferred makes it appear to be objective and therefore beyond dispute.” (emphasis in original) (Milchman, p. 107)*



*There are no behavioral observations that specifically and uniquely indicate alienation (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, and Bala 2012, 2016) though examples interpreted as revealing alienation abound in the alienation literature (Milchman, Geffner, and Meier 2020 a, b). **Rather than being perceived, alienation is inferred when behaviors interpreted as caused by alienation are observed.*** (emphasis in original) (Milchman, p. 107)

*Alienation—as a label—facilitates the **automatic attribution of a child’s avoidance or a parent’s concerns about the other’s parenting to an illegitimate ‘alienating’ motive without meaningful investigation** (Milchman, Geffner, and Meier 2020). (Meier, p. 223)*

*From a legal perspective, alienation claims require little to no proof. As alienation advocates argue, **a child’s unwillingness to be with a parent creates a presumption that the (typically) mother’s actions cause the child’s choice.*** (Drew, p. 159)

Relatedly, the authors of chapters across the book also presented misinformation that alienating behaviors of a favored parent *always* lead to the child’s rejection of their other parent. This version of misinformation is the reverse of the previous example. No scientist or scholar publishing on PA that we can identify has ever stated that parental alienating behaviors always lead to the child’s rejection of their other parent. Indeed, numerous peer-reviewed studies on parental alienating behaviors explicitly state that only a small proportion of children who are influenced by such behaviors become alienated from their other parent (e.g., Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019). Yet, some of the authors of this book present this misinformation. For example:

*Note that **mere alienating conduct can give rise to these remedies**, seemingly without the need to show that the child actually rejects the “alienated” parent. The problem is that “alienating” actions such as denigrating the other parent are the norm in high-conflict custody cases (Johnston 2005).* (Zaccour, p. 198)

While high conflict cases often involve parental denigration by parents, parental denigration itself does not always result in PA of a child. One chapter author, Meier, even falsely stated, with no empirical support for it, that PA was invented just for litigation:

*Although the concept is viewed by some as a psychological condition, **it was invented specifically for litigation.** Gardner described PAS as a “syndrome” whereby vengeful mothers employ a variety of strategies including child abuse allegations as a “powerful weapon” to punish the ex and ensure custody to themselves (Gardner*

1992a, 1992b; Nichols 2014). PAS, then, **was specifically designed to refute court allegations of dangerousness by one parent against the other (primarily mothers against fathers), and to defend or insulate such accused parents in court.** (Meier, pp. 217–218)

## Summary

This misinformation theme illustrates the use of strawman arguments, which are a common technique that deniers of science use to discredit scientific advancements. The authors of the chapters in the book make false claims that PA theory assumes *all* children who resist contact with a parent were influenced to do so by the alienating parent, and that parental custody evaluators should assume *every case of contact refusal* is caused by an alienating parent. We have never found any scholar or scientist that has ever made this “single factor” argument. Then, the authors go to great lengths to describe the dangers and invalidity of the assumption. The authors also omit mention of the rebuttals that have been made by PA experts against this false assumption (Bernet, 2022; Bernet & Xu, 2022). Another strawman argument made by the authors is their claims that alienating behaviors of a favored parent *always* lead to the child’s rejection of their other parent. This fabricated claim has never been promoted by any PA expert. The rampant use of such strawman arguments by the authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* is another reason to be suspicious of the authors’ motivations and conclusions.

## **Misinformation: “There Is No Scientifically Based Method for Distinguishing Alienation and Estrangement”**

The authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* stated repeatedly that there is no scientifically based method for distinguishing PA from estrangement. Listed below are 14 examples of research published in peer-reviewed articles that are used to help distinguish alienation from estrangement. Note that none of these instruments is intended to be used in isolation in assessing a family or child for PA, just as there is no one measure of child abuse or domestic violence. Instead, each of these measures is intended to be one component of a comprehensive psychosocial evaluation of the family.

Baker, Amy J. L., Barbara Burkhard, & Jane Albertson-Kelly (2012). Differentiating Alienated from Not Alienated Children: A Pilot Study. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 53(3), 178–193.

The Baker Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ) is intended to identify alienated children using a paper-and-pencil measure that is short, easy to administer, and easy to score objectively. The authors found that the BAQ discriminated between alienated and nonalienated children at an 87.5% accuracy rate.

Baker, Amy J. L., & Jaclyn Chambers (2011). Adult recall of Childhood Exposure to Parental Conflict: Unpacking the Black Box of Parental Alienation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 52(1), 55–76.

The Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ) is a standardized measure that can be used to collect reliable and valid information about the specific alienating behaviors that a child had been exposed to and/or a parent was currently engaging in. The BSQ measures 17 primary alienating behaviors.

Bernet, William, Nilgun Gregory, Kathleen M. Reay, & Ronald P. Rohner (2017). An Objective Measure of Splitting in Parental Alienation: The Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 63(3), 776–783.

Bernet, William, Nilgun Gregory, Ronald P. Rohner, & Kathleen M. Reay (2020). Measuring the Difference Between Parental Alienation and Parental Estrangement: The PARQ-Gap. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 65(4), 1225–1234.

The premise of these two articles was that a psychological test—the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ)—will assist with distinguishing seriously alienated from nonalienated children. The authors tested 45 severely alienated children and 71 nonalienated children. The PARQ Gap (the absolute difference between the child’s PARQ: Mother and PARQ: Father scores) was 99% accurate in distinguishing alienated from nonalienated children.

Blagg, Nigel, & Eva Godfrey (2018). Exploring Parent–Child Relationships in Alienated Versus Neglected/Emotionally Abused Children Using the Bene–Anthony Family Relations Test. *Child Abuse Review* 27, 486–496.

The authors administered the Bene–Anthony Family Relations Test (BAFRT) to children in the United Kingdom. They concluded that children in the alienated group who had not been abused or neglected by their target parent expressed almost exclusively negative feelings toward them, while also expressing almost exclusively positive feelings toward their preferred parent.

Bricklin, Barry, & Michael H. Halbert (2004). Can Child Custody Data be Generated Scientifically? Part I. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 32(2), 119–138.

This article studied data using the Bricklin Perceptual Scales and Perception-of-Relationships Test from 3,880 cases and found satisfactory reliability and validity. The BPS test shows alienated children are likely to see the preferred parent as totally good and the rejected parent as totally bad.

Gomide, Paula I. C., Everline B. Camargo, & Marcia G. Fernandes (2016). Analysis of the Psychometric Properties of a Parental Alienation Scale. *Paidéia*, 26(65), 291–298.

The authors developed the Parental Alienation Scale (PAS), a questionnaire to be completed by evaluators familiar with the family. The questions pertain to both the parents’ and the child’s activities and behaviors. This test distinguished alienating parents from target parents and alienated children from nonalienated children.

Gordon, Robert M, Ronald W. Stoffey, & Jennifer J. Bottinelli (2008). MMPI-2 Findings of Primitive Defenses in Alienating Parents. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 36(3), 211–228.

The authors found that parents who induced alienation in their children manifested higher scores (in the clinical range) on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory–2 (MMPI-2) than control mothers and fathers (scores in the normal range), indicating primitive defenses such as splitting and projective identification. The scores of targeted parents were similar to the scores of control parents.

Laughrea, Kathleen (2002). Alienated Family Relationship Scale: Validation with Young Adults. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 17(1), 37–48.

The author developed the Alienated Family Relationship Scale (AFRS), which is administered to children. A factor analysis and reliability analysis confirmed that the two alienation scales (father alienating against mother and mother alienating against father) were reliable. Scores on this scale were related to other measures in a theoretically consistent manner indicating good validity of the measure.

Roma, Paolo, Daniela Marchetti, & Cristina Mazza, et al. (2022). A Comparison of MMPI-2 Profiles Between Parental Alienation Cases and Custody Cases. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 31, 1196–1206.

A comparative analysis of MMPI-2 profiles of 41 couples experiencing PA and 39 control couples. Results indicated that mothers who were classified as alienating presented a faking-good defensive profile, denied hostile and negative impulses, blamed other for their problems, and displayed excessive sensitivity.

Rowlands, Gina A. (2018). Parental Alienation: A Measurement Tool. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 60(4), 316–331.

The Rowlands' Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) is a questionnaire for parents designed to capture the manifestations of PA in their children. Six significant factors were extracted representing the eight traditional behavioral symptoms of PA.

Siegel, Jeffrey C., & Joseph S. Langford (1998). MMPI-2 Validity Scales and Suspected Parental Alienation Syndrome. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 16(4), 5–14.

The authors found that alienating mothers were more likely to complete MMPI-2 questions in a defensive manner, striving to appear as flawless as possible.

Sîrbu, Alina Georgeta, Mona Vintilă, Luca Tisu, Adelina Mihaela Ștefănuț, Otilia Ioana Tudorel, Beatrice Măguran, & Roxana Andreea Toma (2021). Parental Alienation – Development and Validation of a Behavioral Anchor Scale. *Sustainability*, 13(316), 1–18.

The authors developed a scale (Parental Alienation Questionnaire) consisting of 24 items, which reflect the eight typical behavioral symptoms of PA. The PAQ, which is designed to be completed by evaluators, “seems to be a promising tool not only for clinical and judicial practice, but also for research.”

Zicavo Martinez, Nelson, Ricardo Rey Clericus, & Luciano Ponce (2021). ZICAP II Scale: Parental Alienation Assessment in 9 to 15 Years-Old Children of Separated Parents in Chile. *Ciencias Psicológicas*, 15(1), e-2159, 1–15.

The ZICAP is a 29-item questionnaire completed by children. The questions relate to both the parent’s alienating behaviors and the symptoms of PA in the child. The test scores classified the children as Absence of PA, Mild PA, Moderate PA, and Severe PA.

Despite there being published, peer-reviewed scientific research on the differentiation of PA cases from other forms of family conflict, the authors in *Challenging Parental Alienation* omitted this work or expressed unsupported opinions about the validity and quality of this research. Below is just a small selection of examples of this disinformation from the chapters written by Meier, who largely cites other PA critics’ opinions as her sources:

*In short, while the alienation literature continues to grow, **there remains no objective or reliable measure for identifying and distinguishing alienation from legitimate estrangement** (Barnett 2020; Doughty et al. 2020). (Meier, p. 222)*

*Existing research typically fails to differentiate between causes for children’s estrangement, simply treating estranged children as presumptively “alienated”: Until there are scientifically valid studies using independent measures of parenting quality that can distinguish between children who rationally and irrationally reject*

*a parent, PA advocates cannot claim scientific support for identifying alienated children. (Milchman, 2020, 44). (Meier, p. 224)*

*Yet one of the only existing studies purporting to test a tool for measuring alienation itself fails to screen out abuse or other causes of children's estrangement, simply accepting parents' self-reports, evaluator and court opinions **with no verification that alternative causes had been ruled out (which they rarely are)** (Rowlands 2018). (Meier, p. 224)*

Meier's writing style in these quotations misrepresents science in a way to undermine its importance. By saying that the Rowland's study in the last quotation is "one of the only existing studies" measuring PA gives the reader the impression that few studies have been conducted on the topic. Including most of the studies detailed at the start of this section, there have been over 27 studies that have focused on the measurement of PA published through 2020 (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). Meier also completely misrepresents what Rowlands (2018) reported in the study. First, Meier suggests Rowlands' study was measuring children's "estrangement" which was not what Rowlands' research was investigating—it was investigating PA. This is one of dozens of times throughout the book that one of the authors has attempted to redefine PA to something more common, simplistic, and/or less problematic to imply that "the punishment does not fit the crime." PA and estrangement are not interchangeable concepts. In science, precision in definition and operationalization of concepts is important.

Second, Meier states "alternative causes" of PA (now defined by her as "estrangement") are rarely verified. This statement is made without citation because no such research exists to support her opinion. In fact, forensic mental health professionals are trained to look for disconfirming information to the hypothesis being formed by the investigation, including ruling out domestic violence or child abuse of all forms. Therefore, the questions Rowlands (2018) asked in her study to ensure that the parents' self-reports were reliable for her research purposes were *precisely appropriate* to screen out abuse and other causes of PA (although not causes of estrangement because this was not the aim of her study). What Meier fails to report in her chapter is just as significant: Rowlands (2018) found support for 6 of the 8 factors that are indicators of PA. Meier's statements represent only a few of the numerous times in this book that she uses the "blowfish" science denial technique, where specific pieces of information from research studies are quoted (or misquoted) while ignoring other parts of the study that confirm what other scientists have found about PA.

*One argument for labelling a child alienated frequently seen in litigation is **the peculiar claim that genuinely abused children do not wholly reject a parent without***

*toxic intervention from the other parent (Bernet and Baker 2013, 1010). While it is true that some abused children, in some contexts such as foster care, continue to love and long for an abusive or neglectful parent’s affection, all the children in that study were grateful for having been removed from an unsafe home (Baker et al. 2016). Moreover, children removed from their home and both parents bear little resemblance to children who live with a parent they love and trust while seeking to avoid a parent they experience as abusive or destructive, the normal context of alienation/custody battles. (Meier, p. 225)*

Again, Meier attempts to change the definition of PA to equate actually abused children with children who “experience” their parent as abusive or destructive. Meier is correct in stating that children being removed by child protective services and children being removed because of PA (although she does not want to call it “parental alienation”) bear little resemblance to each other. Estranged children and alienated children *are* different from each other. However, just because a child “experiences” a parent as being abusive or destructive does not mean that parent *has been* abusive or destructive. While Meier frequently complains that forensic mental health professionals do not consider other causes of children’s behavior before diagnosing PA, it is Meier who fails to consider other causes of children’s perceptions and sense of experience when no evidence for actual abuse can be found.

Bowles also conflates PA with other forms of family conflict:

*This claim [of alienation] can come in many forms, **whether it is called estrangement, enmeshment, resistance** or other terms that essentially promote the alienation belief system. (Bowles, p. xiv)*

PA is not “estrangement,” “enmeshment,” or simply “resistance.” These types of statements are intended to conflate PA with other family issues. Characterizing PA as something that “everyone” does serves to minimize the form of child abuse that it is. In order for bad behavior to be a parental alienating behavior, it needs to be part of a pattern of coercively controlling abusive behaviors, unilaterally leveraged, and used over time to gain and maintain control and power over the other parent and child(ren) (Harman, Kruk, et al., 2018; Harman, Maniotes, et al., 2021). To those who research and provide treatment for PA, it is hard to believe someone who has truly seen PA would use these words so interchangeably.

Mercer and Drew also present disinformation about the differentiation between PA and other family conflicts:



*It is common for parental alienation proponents to **make claims based on poorly validated tests** and inferences derived from the child's rejection of the parent and no other information. (Mercer & Drew, p. 15)*

*A number of professional journals that **claim to be peer-reviewed** have accepted and published articles that take the parental alienation approach. It appears **that none of these publications has thoroughly described identification, treatment, and later assessment of parental alienation cases**. As some of the methods are proprietary (for example, Family Bridges™), this is not entirely surprising. Also unsurprising is that articles rebutting the parental alienation belief system have been published in peer-reviewed professional journals. (Mercer & Drew, p. 254)*

There is absolutely no support for these statements made by Mercer and Drew. The authors attempt to create a conspiracy theory by suggesting that articles about PA that have been accepted for publication must not be peer-reviewed, and that it is only the journals that accept rebuttals of PA research that are peer-reviewed. Mercer and Drew offer no evidence to suggest that the journals where research on PA has been published do not adhere to the most rigorous peer-review standards. It is no wonder the authors of this statement do not identify which journals they are referring to, as such a statement is defamatory on its face. At the same time, the authors claim that all the articles rebutting the PA “belief system” are, in fact peer reviewed.

Mercer and Drew’s comments about the Family Bridges program also curiously omit mention of the considerable detail about the phases, syllabi, rationale, principles, and outcomes of the program that have been published in peer-reviewed journals (Warshak, 2010; 2019). When a judge appoints therapists to work with a family, they have no idea what the therapist does in their office, nor what the therapist’s track record is with PA cases. To portray the Family Bridges intervention program as being a secretive enterprise is grossly misleading and an ad hominem attack.

As previously cited, the study of PA has amassed 213 empirical studies (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). “Anti-parental alienation” articles are associated with a massive web of misinformation (Bernet, 2022; Bernet & Xu, 2022). In addition, the journals where most of this misinformation is published do not have scientific impact factors, and the editorial boards (who select the peer reviewers) have been identified as the primary spreaders of PA misinformation. For example, many of these anti-PA publications have been published in *The Journal of Child Custody* (now renamed *The Journal of Family Trauma, Child Development, and Child Custody*) or were authored or co-authored by editors of that journal.

Interestingly, Meier’s watershed “empirical study” (Meier et al., 2019) that was referenced throughout the book by several authors was not peer-reviewed at all and was posted on an internet archive at her place of employment. She has published other descriptive data from this “watershed” study in the *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* (2020; which is a special issue with other articles written by chapter authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation*). This journal is a low-tiered, peer-reviewed publication, and Meier (2020) only refers the reader to her 2019 paper for details about the unreviewed methods. Even her rebuttal to a critique of her study that was published in a top APA journal (see Harman & Lorandos, 2021) was not accepted for publication by that or any other high-tiered peer-reviewed journal. Rather, she published her response in *The Journal of Family Trauma, Child Development, and Child Custody* (Meier et al., 2022).

Another author in the book also repeated this disinformation:

*Barbara Fidler and Nicholas Bala also observe that “there are no valid empirical assessment protocols or tools that can reliably measure or establish the presence of alienation as differentiated from other types of [parent-child contact problems], including realistic estrangement or justified rejection (Fidler & Bala 2020, 581).”*  
(Zaccour, p. 205)

*Believers in parental alienation often cast aside these concerns by saying that parental alienation does not apply when the child has good reasons to reject the father. Yet as Janet Johnston and Matthew Sullivan admit, “[d]espite universal agreement that family violence and child abuse preclude a finding of PA, **virtually no common criteria exist to ensure these distinctions have been made** (Johnston & Sullivan 2020, 273).”*  
(Zaccour, p. 205)

## Summary

The authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* state repeatedly that there is no scientifically based method for distinguishing parental alienation from estrangement, despite there being many valid and reliable measures to do so. Interestingly, while the authors state there is no way to distinguish the two terms, they inaccurately conflate them in their own arguments. They knew or should have known that research on this topic exists for over three decades and that multiple measures have been developed and discussed in the scientific peer reviewed literature since then. The authors also misrepresent and discount the scientific status of parental alienation research while at the same time inflate the weak stature of their own publications (most of which contain no empirical data). These

science denial strategies are another contributing reason that *Challenging Parental Alienation* needs to be withdrawn from publication.



## **Misinformation: “There Is No Empirically Based Treatment for Parental Alienation”**

The authors of the chapters in *Challenging Parental Alienation* repeatedly stated that there are not empirically based treatments for PA. These statements can be characterized as disinformation, as there have been numerous research reviews and books written on interventions for alienated children (e.g., see Templer et al., 2017; Warshak, 2020), and several peer-reviewed scientific evaluation studies of interventions for severely alienated children (e.g., Harman, Saunders, et al., 2021; Reay, 2015; Warshak, 2019) that the authors should have known about. Below are just a few examples of this misinformation:

*At the time of this writing, no published research on say parent alienation treatments shows that any of the methods is an evidence-based treatment. For that reason, it is correct to say that none of these treatments meets Daubert standards.* (Mercer & Drew, p. 16–17)

*Turning Points for Families ... Rigorous research about the effectiveness of this program could not be found.* (Trane, Champion, & Hupp, p. 143)

*Parent alienation treatments appear to engender some of the very issues they report wanting to reduce, such as extended time away from a parent. That is, a youth is forced to spend extended time with a nonpreferred parent, often against the youth’s wishes and often without the ability to communicate with the preferred parent. In addition, the youth’s point of view is often confronted, challenged, and negated in this coercive power dynamic established by court-ordered treatment...The priority appears to be that the child and the nonpreferred parent spend time together, with minimal consideration placed on identifying or ameliorating the possible multitude of factors that led toward the initial and ongoing rejection.* (Trane, Champion, & Hupp, p. 153)

*And it does mean that no “treatment” for “parental alienation” can be considered scientifically supported.* (Meier, p. 217)

*Such draconian interventions are justified by the assertion that parental alienation is irrevocably and profoundly harmful for children, akin to child abuse (Harman et al. 2018). Yet no credible evidence supports either the belief that a parent’s alienating behaviors can cause such harm, or that such behaviors are as harmful as direct child abuse.* (Meier, p. 226)

*Some intensive alienation treatments continue (Mercer 2019). They are controversial, particularly because they are not regulated. Treatment for parental alienation is classified as psycho-educational, not as medical treatment, and is therefore not covered by health insurance schemes in the US. (Doughty & Drew, p. 33)*

A 2017 review (Templer et al., 2017) of ten empirical studies of specific interventions found that "changes in custodial or residential arrangement in favour of the targeted parents are effective in ameliorating parenting alienation." Templer et al. also found that "specialized family therapy addressing the alienation is effective in restoring family relationships and family functioning." Furthermore, Vittorio Vezzetti (2016) notes that scientific research is demonstrating the biological basis of the problem of PA through the indisputable consequences on the well-being and health of children. He notes such parental loss is a question of public health, a finding consistent with the over 60 years of research on attachment and loss in children, an area of study foundational to any developmental psychologist, which Mercer claims to be. Yet, none of these important studies are mentioned by the authors. The statement by Meier regarding the Harman et al. (2018) paper is also false. The Harman et al. paper, published in *Psychological Bulletin*, reviewed considerable research to support the harms that PA does to children and to support how it is a form of family violence. Meier's characterization of interventions as "Draconian" also omits the wide variety of interventions that are best practices for PA based on severity, with only the more intensive interventions for the most severe cases (e.g., Warshak, 2020).

The authors of these statements also fail to acknowledge a commentary written by Joan Kelly (2010) in the journal *Family Court Review* regarding the Family Bridges program, the first structured intervention program for severely alienated families:

*In the overall development of Family Bridges, its goals and principles, and particularly the varied and relevant materials selected for use with parents and children, the **incorporation of relevant social science research was evident**. Further, the daily structure and manner of presentation of the Family Bridges Workshop were guided by well-established evidence-based instruction principles and incorporated multi-media learning, a positive learning environment, focused lessons addressing relevant concepts, and learning materials providing assistance with integration of materials...**The most striking feature of the Family Bridges Workshop was the empirical research foundation underlying the specific content of the four day educational program**. The lessons and materials were drawn from universally accepted research in social, cognitive, and child developmental psychology, sociology, and social neuroscience. (Kelly, 2010; p. 83)*

Mercer mentions that PA treatments are not “evidence based.” In the medical field, the “gold standard” for how therapeutic interventions are determined to be “scientifically based” is through the use of what are called randomized controlled trials. This type of research design takes a sample of people and randomly assigns some of them to a treatment group, and the rest of them to a group that does not get treatment. Then, their outcomes are compared.

Mercer claims that PA treatment programs do not meet this standard. In applied fields such as public health, scientists have long recognized that it is not always ethical or feasible to conduct randomized controlled trials. For example, if there is scientific evidence that a program is effective, it would not be ethical to withhold the treatment from a group who needs it. The population who needs treatment may also be small in number, and so getting large enough groups of people to compare would not be feasible. Just because it is not practical, feasible, or ethical to use a randomized controlled trial does not mean that research using other methods is bad.

Other research standards have been developed for use when randomized controlled trials are problematic. For example, Beelmann and Lutterbach (2021) have detailed five interrelated steps that are used to create what are considered scientifically based interventions. Four-day intensive interventions for severe PA meet each of these steps. Considering advances in scientific thinking regarding appropriate standards for establishing whether an intervention is empirically based or scientifically based, Mercer’s claims about the lack of evidence based PA treatments are unfounded.

Even more concerning are statements made by Bowles, Drew, and Zaccour regarding how PA should be addressed by the courts:

*In cases involving abuse, however, **claims of alienation must be set aside** with the court focusing on allegations of abuse by one parent and any trauma the family has endured. (Bowles, p. xiii)*

*Whenever abuse allegations are raised, alienation claims should not be entertained (Meier 2010, 220–221). Safety must be the first line of inquiry **without the distractions of claims that the non-abusive parent** is vengefully or pathologically interfering with the relationship between the children and the alleged abuser. (Drew, p. 169)*

*To make matters worse, even as alienation is defined very broadly, **courts will go as far as to intervene in situations of “quasi-alienation,” were they find “clues” of alienation, a situation “close” to parental alienation, or a “risk” of alienation** (Martín López 2009, 10; Zaccour 2018, 1100). With the breadth that parental alienation*

*theory is taking, one is left to wonder if there is even one custody court case where a father could not try their luck with an allegation of alienation. (Zaccour, p. 201)*

Trial courts are capable of evaluating more than one accusation or claim at a time. Furthermore, to preferentially determine which claim should take priority before any evidence has even been presented not only interferes with one's due process (guilty before proven innocent), it provides parents with a "nuclear option" whereby the mere mention of domestic violence, regardless of its reliability or validity, deprives the other party of their due process rights and ability to present their own perspective of the case. The first two statements are blatantly unconstitutional and unrealistic suggestions and serve to minimize the seriousness of PA and its impact on children. The alienation of a child is part of an abusive strategy of a parent to harm the other parent. The child is weaponized and used against the alienated parent (Harman, Matthewson, et al., 2022; Rowlands, 2023), alienating parents are the parents most likely to have findings of abuse made against them, and they often make false allegations of abuse against the alienated parent to deflect attention away from their own abusive behavior (Sharples et al., 2023). The statements made by Mercer and Drew serve to protect abusive parents.

Zaccour's argument is a typical example of the slippery slope strategy that critics of science use to demonstrate that if an issue is acknowledged, it will be the beginning of a slippery slope of events that will ultimately cause extremely undesirable consequences. Also, while we cannot read the mind of Zaccour, her concerns about what could transpire if PA claims are taken seriously causes one to stop and wonder if she is projecting the very modus operandi of the extreme advocates of the domestic violence movement onto PA advocates. In other words, *Challenging Parental Alienation* preaches that any allegation of domestic violence and abuse (no matter how farfetched or unsubstantiated it may be) should be taken so seriously it takes precedence over all other issues, negates due process, and suspends normative evidentiary protocol.

## Summary

The authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* represent that there is no empirically based treatment for PA, yet they omit research on the existing treatments and attempt to instill fear into the reader about the potential dangers of these treatments. Based upon their strawman arguments, the authors likewise propose suggestions about how the courts should deal with PA claims that compromise due process, minimize the seriousness of PA on children, and ignore the prevalence or even existence of false abuse allegations.



## Mischaracterization of Research Studies

The entirety of misrepresentation of the published research on PA and related fields in this book is too extensive to review thoroughly in this document. We have already provided a few examples in the previous sections. We will start here with a few more examples of how research on PA is mischaracterized, and then move to other related areas of research (e.g., suggestibility) that have been applied in PA cases.

The work of Rowen & Emery (2018) was consistently misrepresented by chapter authors, as illustrated by the quotation below:

*The only objective research examining the effect of a parent’s denigration of the other to the child had found the denigration, rather than turning a child against the denigrated parent, turns children against the denigrator. ... Stunningly, Rowen and Emery’s studies consistently found a **“lack of support for the outcomes predicted by the alienation hypothesis”**: Rather, they found that where one parent denigrates the other, it is usually a reciprocal behavior, and that it “typically backfires” or “boomerangs” against the more aggressively denigrating parent (Rowen and Emery 2018). (Meier, pp. 222–223)*

The study referenced in this quotation did not operationalize PA as other scholars in the field have done—indeed, the authors equated behaviors of the parent as being an indication of PA, even though only a small proportion of children ultimately become alienated from the behaviors of an alienating parent (e.g., see Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019). Only 10 young adults (of a sample of 994) met Rowen and Emery’s (2018) definition of PA, from which they drew their sweeping conclusions. Based on the definition used by the authors of the study, the participants in their sample were more likely to be experiencing loyalty conflicts, which is a very different family conflict than PA. Rowen and Emery did find that children tended to favor the target of denigration rather than the denigrating parent. But their idea of “denigration” (rather mild criticisms and badmouthing the other parent) is totally unlike the pervasive criticism, anger, and hatred that are typically expressed by alienating parents. It makes sense that children might sympathize with a parent who is being denigrated but will align with a parent who strongly and persistently badmouths the targeted parent. Meier is an attorney, not trained as a scientist, and she lacks the training in research methods that would give her the ability to be critical of Rowen & Emery’s methods. Consequently, their study is inaccurately presented by Meier as “proof” that parental denigration does not work to cause PA.

Although there were many other examples of the misrepresentation of PA research (when it was acknowledged to exist), for brevity’s sake we present some examples of the ways one particular source was used by the authors in the book. A well-known chapter entitled, “Empirical Studies of Alienation,” by Michael Saini, Janet Johnston, Barbara Fidler, and Nicholas Bala (2016) is cited by many authors in this book. The authors persistently “spin” and misrepresent statements from the chapter in order to support their own narrative. This tactic is found throughout this book with the chapter authors’ “take” on other papers, particularly if the paper was published in the last 20 years when PA research began to take a turn towards solid, empirical contributions to the field. For the most part, the authors ignore this work, but when they do acknowledge it, they consistently and deliberately misrepresent it. Below is an example of how this is done by chapter authors Milchman and Meier:

<u>Quotation from Mercer/Drew Book</u>	<u>Information from Saini Et Al.</u>
<p><i>There is no scientific evidence that the proposed factors can validly identify alienated children and distinguish them from abused children. The evidence cited to support them is largely anecdotal (Saini et al. 2016). (Milchman, pp. 122–123)</i></p>	<p>While Saini et al. discuss anecdotal evidence, they do not refer to the evidence as “largely anecdotal.”</p>
<p><i>Saini et al., while forthrightly and admirably acknowledging that there is no legitimate scientific evidence or support for the alienation premise, nonetheless assert that there is a broad consensus among forensic psychologists about what constitute “parental alienation behaviors” (“PABs”), which “have the capacity” to harm a child’s relationship with the other parent (Saini et al. 2016, 430). (Meier, p. 222)</i></p>	<p>First, the statement, “<i>there is no legitimate scientific evidence or support for the alienation premise,</i>” is a misrepresentation of the Saini et al. chapter. The emphasis of the chapter is that further research needs to be done with stricter standards. Additionally, Meier provided the wrong page number for the quotation; she cited page 430, which is one of the reference pages.</p>

<p><i>The same review states “most importantly, although the majority of researchers purport to exclude from their studies cases where abuse of the child had occurred, few have reported working definitions of child abuse and systematic methods for excluding them from their samples” (Saini et al, 2016, 431) (Meier, p. 224)</i></p>	<p>The page number given for the alleged quotation was for a different chapter in the book written by a different author. The correct location for the quotation from Saini et al. is pages 417–418. However, the original text in Saini et al. does not have the words, “most importantly.”</p>
<p><i>In fact, several of the studies they reviewed found that, even where one parent was identified as engaging in ‘parental alienating behaviors’ the other purportedly alienated parent was “more prone to actual abuse of the child” (Saini et al., 2016, 431). (Meier, p. 224)</i></p>	<p>We could not find the quoted statement in the Saini et al. chapter. The page number given for the alleged quotation was for a different chapter in the book written by a different author.</p>
<p><i>Moreover, Saini et al.’s research review concluded that “there is a lack of clear, empirical evidence that children who resist or refuse contact with one of their parents are universally emotionally disturbed or necessarily at risk for long-term negative outcomes,” rendering any long-term effects of alienation “inconclusive” (Saini et al. 2016, 436–437). (Meier, p. 226)</i></p>	<p>We could not find the quoted statement in the Saini et al. chapter. The page number given for the alleged quotation was for a different chapter in the book written by a different author.</p>

The authors of the chapters in *Challenging Parental Alienation* also mischaracterized research on sexual abuse allegations and suggestibility in the context of PA cases. For example,

*Ever since Richard Gardner proposed the Parental Alienation Syndrome to explain a child’s rejection of a parent in divorce cases **when child sexual abuse is alleged**, the*

*same eight factors have been used to identify alienated children (Gardner 1986). (Milchman, p. 107)*

***Alienation thinking relies heavily on suggestibility research to give plausibility to their argument** that children, especially young ones, can be led by their favored parents to make false sexual abuse allegations (Barden 2013, Campbell 2013, Lorandos 2013). However, the research they cite to support this argument largely consists of experimental studies in which the suggestions are markedly different from abuse suggestions. They range from neutral to mildly upsetting but are never traumatic. This research has been strongly criticized on the grounds that getting children to accept false information about trivial details that are inconsequential for their lives has little bearing on getting them to accept suggestions that they have been sexually assaulted by a loved parent (Eisen, Quas, and Goodman 2002, Eisen, Goodman, Quin, Davis, and Crayton 2007, Malloy and Quas 2009). (Milchman, p. 125)*

*If suggestibility by immediate family were responsible for children's allegations to official interviewers, then the youngest children – who have consistently been found to be more suggestible than older ones in experimental studies – **should have made more allegations in their follow-up interviews than did the older children.** However, Pipe et al. (2007) did not find age differences in the rate of allegations made in follow-up interviews. In all age groups (4–5 years, 6–8 years, 9–13 years), the same proportion of children who first disclosed to immediate family members also disclosed to official interviewers (68%) (89, T. 5.5). The finding that younger and purportedly more suggestible children did not make any more abuse disclosures in follow-up interviews than did older and purportedly less suggestible children **raises doubt that suggestions made by immediate family members were responsible for the children's subsequent abuse disclosures.** (Milchman, p. 126)*

These quotations from Milchman are misleading on numerous counts. First, the author has equated allegations of abuse with PA, when less than half of cases where PA occurs involve any allegations of abuse whatsoever (Harman & Lorandos, 2021; Harman, Giancarlo, et al., 2023). The quotation also falsely implies that being more suggestible makes a person make “more” allegations. Suggestibility affects memory and reliability, not necessarily the volume of false reports. Furthermore, suggestibility research shares some variance with the false allegations stemming from PA, but it is imperfect on its own to explain the pressures involved with the alienation of children by a parent and why false allegations are made. Suggestibility research carefully distinguishes between outcries that are intentionally false versus details that may have been “suggested” (often times inadvertently) to a child. Young children are more “suggestible” than older children or

adults, but when it comes to coaching a child to make a false statement, young children do not do this as well as older children. There are many studies documenting the extent that mothers can create and mold false and error-laden reports from their children (e.g., Principe et al., 2013; 2022; Thomas, 2020).

Several other authors misrepresented the research literature to support their arguments. For example, Mercer wrote:

*Published work on parental alienation-related cases suggests that the lower limit of the age range for child avoidant behavior cases is about nine years (and even this may apply only when older siblings are in the picture). ... Generally, parental alienation-related cases involve boys or girls from the preteen years through age 17. This fact suggests that developmental information from research on infants, toddlers, and preschoolers is not particularly useful for understanding child avoidant behavior, unless there is in a specific case, some reason to think that earlier developmental events have somehow been the foundation for a current rejection of a parent. Nevertheless, **it has been common for parental alienation proponents to use information about much younger children as a rationale for their arguments.** It has been less common-in fact quite rare-for such authors to reference developmental phenomena that are likely to belong to the ages of the children involved in parental alienation related cases. (Mercer, p. 176)*

There are several problems regarding age of children in these statements. First, Mercer provides no empirical research on PA to support the statement that the lower limit for child avoidance behaviors is 9 years old. Indeed, age differences have not been found in the research literature (see Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). The statement also falsely equates child avoidant behavior with PA when the latter is just one of several forms of child parental resistance. By using this false equivalency, Mercer creates a strawman argument: she changes the definition of PA and then makes the reader believe the research “doesn’t add up” when it is applied to this new definition. In addition, we are not aware of any PA scholar who would suggest that the developmental history of a child prior to their preteen years is unimportant to understanding PA. A complete developmental history of child and parent is required in all forensic clinical interviews as a part of any custody evaluation, regardless of whether PA is at issue or not. Mercer also presents strong anecdotal and scientifically unsupported opinions regarding the use of abuse allegations in court using statements from a judge in her forward:

*I recognized that when allegations of alienation are raised in cases involving domestic abuse, **the allegations were advanced to minimize any claims of abuse.** (Bowles, p. xiii)*

*Typically, judges will find that when alienation claims are raised in cases involving abuse, **the claim is a manipulative tool of the abuser** being used to deflect attention from their abusive behaviors. (Bowles, pp. xiii–xiv)*

In less than half of PA cases, claims of domestic violence have been levied against the alienated parent (Harman & Lorandos, 2021; Harman, Giancarlo, et al., 2023). Among the claims that were investigated or heard in court, only 10% were found to be true or substantiated. Over 75% of the allegations levied against alienated parents by an alienating parent were investigated and found to be unsubstantiated or false (Harman, Giancarlo, et al., 2023). Rowlands et al. (2023) and Sharples et al. (2023) have also found that it is the alienating parent, not the alienated parent, who is most likely to have a finding of abuse made against them, and that their false allegations of abuse toward the alienated parent are a form of legal and administrative aggression (Hines et al., 2015) against them to maintain power and control over the children. Harman, Maniotes, and Grubb (2021) also found that many of the parents who had been alienated from their children in their sample were the victims of intimate terrorism or coercively controlling violence perpetrated by the alienating parent. Indeed, Harman, Giancarlo, and colleagues (2023) found that 30% of abuse allegations were made by an alienating parent against the alienated parent **after** a court filing or decision, presumably out of retaliation against the alienated parent. The quotations cited in this book invert the parent who is the abuser.

One thing that makes alienating parents different than survivors of domestic abuse is that they are not typically afraid of their alleged abuser. They instigate, attempt to humiliate, and cause conflict. Judge Bowles' statement in the forward of *Challenging Parental Alienation* illustrates the frustration that some judges experience when victims of domestic violence frequently do not show up for court and they often retract their statements. They did this out of fear. Many domestic violence advocates argue that alienating parents are just finding their voice and fighting back, but that is not how trauma works and it is a gross departure from what you see in the cycle of family violence. The allegations of PA are not advanced to minimize the claims of abuse; they are advanced to provide a legitimate reason for why the alienating parent is lying. The opposite is never discussed or considered: that domestic violence and child abuse claims are made by some mothers to distract from legitimate allegations of PA. The fact that men are just as likely to be alienating parents as women (e.g., Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019) is also never discussed.

It is up to due process to fetter out whether an allegation is a lie or whether what Judge Bowles noted is true: that these claims are advanced to cover up actual abuse. PA scientists acknowledge that **both** these positions are possible—it is up to empirically driven

evaluation techniques, evidence presentation, and the due process of law to determine which is true. A scientific approach also does not foreclose on an answer before these two approaches have been exhausted. Zaccour also presents some examples of this disinformation regarding the use of abuse in PA cases:

*Because of its emphasis on false allegations of violence, the parental alienation belief system “deters the legal system from investigating reports of ill-treatment or sexual abuse on behalf of the noncustodial parent as it tends to automatically classify allegations as false” (Clemente and Padilla-Racero 2015, 181). (Zaccour, p. 204)*

*My study of Quebec appellate decisions on parental alienation shows that even when there is a history of domestic violence in a file, often appellate courts make no mention of it (Zaccour 2020, 319). Therefore, the proposition – **not even shared by all parental alienation proponents** – that the parental alienation framework does not apply to circumstances of domestic violence solves nothing. **The current significance of parental alienation theory “is inseparable from its utility as a means of discrediting claims of abuse” (Meier 2010, 221). (Zaccour, p. 205)***

Zaccour also makes sweeping misstatements about the state of research on child custody and parenting time:

*Courts and evaluators often assume that it is in the child’s best interest to have frequent contacts with both parents. As seen in the introduction, such assumptions may be embedded in legislation directing courts to allocate as much time as possible with each parent, and to consider each parent’s willingness to facilitate contact with the other parent. **Yet as a review of the social science literature concludes, the research suggests that children do not necessarily benefit from greater contact with their non-custodial parent** – rather it is the type of parenting the non-custodial parent engages in, not the amount of time that parent spends with the children, that is most significant. **[The research also] indicates that children do not fare better post-divorce in joint custody arrangements than they do in sole custody, and some children – including those in high conflict families – may fare worse (Shaffer, 2007, 287). (Zaccour, p. 195)***

Zaccour’s statements about custodial arrangements and child outcomes are not supported with any empirical evidence—the Shaffer (2007) reference is an opinion about shared parenting research published in a law journal, and she omits to mention the significant amount of scientific research on the long-term benefits of shared parenting on

children, *even when there is parental conflict* (see Nielsen, 2018, for a review of 60 studies documenting this effect).

## Summary

The authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* mischaracterize and misrepresent the existing research about PA, make *slothful inductions* (i.e., ignoring relevant evidence when coming to a conclusion), and *imply nefarious intent* to PA researchers, all of which are science denial techniques. It is therefore difficult to give any credibility to the claims that the authors make in this book about PA research. The extent of the distortions that the authors make about PA research suggest that the authors are either incompetent in their ability to access and evaluate research (most of the authors are not scientists, or if they are, they do not conduct research of their own) or are ignorant about the topic that they profess expertise in. Alternatively, while we cannot read the minds of the authors, it is easy to conclude that the authors are willfully misrepresenting the research about PA to promote their own agendas. In either case, the blatant mischaracterization about the status of PA research is another reason that *Challenging Parental Alienation* needs to be withdrawn from publication.



## Misuse of Case Studies That Contain Hyperbole and Are Intended to Elicit Fear and Undermine Legal Institutions

Case studies are typically used by scholars to educate through the use of a prototype, which is then supported by multiple streams of data and discussion with citations to empirical research (e.g., Alpi & Evans, 2019). The authors of the chapters of this book do not use case studies in this way. The case studies and anecdotes that appear in the book provide no context, are nonsensical, hyperbolic, nonspecific, insinuating, misleading, and unethical. The authors' use of case studies is intended to elicit fear, and they repeatedly fail to cite empirical evidence to contextualize the case and demonstrate its representativeness. Custody litigation is generally confidential to protect the privacy of families. It is not possible to fact check the case studies in the book to know if they are real, which allows the authors to twist the facts of cases to support their opinions. Even if a case study actually happened, the case is presented by the author to enhance their argument, not presented as an even-handed example of how one should approach a case.

To illustrate how this was done throughout the book, Chapter 1 begins with several anecdotes written by Mercer and Drew, the first being:

*Allie was 17 and Merle 14 when they stated their strong preferences for living with their father and limiting their contacts with their mother and her boyfriend. The parents had been divorced for years and had managed to parent the girls successfully. **But the presence of the boyfriend was a problem for the two girls, and when they stated this, their mother accused their father of having "alienated" them from her by manipulating their beliefs and emotions. After some litigation, a family court judge agreed that this must have happened and ordered Allie and Merle to be taken to another state to receive treatment for their attitudes. The girls were taken in handcuffs from the courtroom. Subsequently, Allie petitioned for emancipation and received it. Merle now lives in a different state with her mother and the boyfriend and does not see her father or Allie.*** (Mercer & Drew, p. 1)

The basic premise of this example—that two girls would be unhappy with their mother's new boyfriend—is common. A new stepparent figure can be a difficult adjustment for some children, particularly teenagers. There is no reason to use quotation marks for the word *alienated*. Either it is factually correct that the mother accused the father of having alienated the girls or she did not. Quoting a fact of record implies either the word "alienation" is Mercer and Drew's interpretation of the mother's accusation or is

a passive aggressive attempt to influence the reader to believe that the term is not legitimate. Interestingly, this brief description does not describe either parental alienating behaviors or outcomes—there is no way, from the information provided, to know or verify whether this was, in fact, a case of PA.

Even more misleading is Mercer and Drew’s claim that the girls were taken in handcuffs from the courtroom. There is no scenario in which 17- and 14-year-old children would be handcuffed in a family law court room. If a person poses a threat to themselves or others, they may be temporarily restrained. Without any context or specific details, the reader is left to believe the judge randomly and unlawfully detained the children. The authors also minimize the damage that PA causes to children that would warrant a transfer of custody in the first place.

Mercer and Drew do not describe their stories as case studies, instead referring to them as anecdotes. They conveniently unify these stories by describing them as sharing “*a focus on a single idea, that children who reject contact with one parent are likely to have developed a negative attitude toward that parent because of the other parent’s intentional or unconscious actions,*” and then go on to state that this is the definition for PA. Despite the fact that this is not the definition of PA, none of their anecdotes provides enough information for the reader to know whether the negative attitudes the children held were actually because of the other parent’s intentional or unconscious actions. Such information is conveniently left out of their anecdotes altogether.

More disturbing is the fact that the anecdotes told throughout the book are completely devoid of relevant facts that would have provided the basis for whether PA had occurred. “After some litigation” is all the reader is told about why the judge made their decision in the Mercer and Drew anecdote. The litigation is where all the evidence is presented and provides the basis for the judge’s decision. Without a doubt, it is the ***most important part*** of truly understanding this story, yet it has been completely omitted. Furthermore, family court judges do not “agree” or “disagree” with one side or the other, so it is wrong to state that the judge “agreed that this must have happened.” Judges rule, based on the preponderance of the evidence provided to them, and this is evidence Mercer and Drew apparently do not want the reader to know about.

The wording inaccuracies throughout the anecdotes are subtle, but meaningful and persuasive to the reader. Children are not “taken to another state to receive treatment for their *attitudes.*” They are ordered to participate in treatment for a mental health issue and child abuse that was found by a court of law to be interfering with their best interests. If children were ordered to participate in treatment aimed at addressing PA in the family system, the girls would not be ordered to participate in this alone, as it is implied here. The entire family system would have been ordered to participate.

Handcuffing was described by other authors in the book to make it appear the children who participate in PA interventions are doing so only under threat and unreasonable force. In the chapter written by Barnett, Riley, and “Katharine,” the authors devote 25 pages to stories from young adults alleged to have participated in PA intervention programs. The stories contain many vague and unverifiable descriptions of events, and contain language (e.g., not feeling “safe,” a parent being “abusive” or is “creepy”) that indicates the children have likely been unduly influenced by a parent to believe things that did not happen, do not have declarative memories of their own, are intentionally lying, or have thought disordered processes. One example in the chapter reflects the extreme behaviors and cognitive distortions of such individuals:

*At this point, I actually refused to go. I dropped on the ground and said, “I refuse. You can carry me and **handcuff me** but I will not go willingly.” And they told me that if I didn’t go with them they would put my dad in prison for 30 days. I got up real quick, because punishing me I could take, but jailing my father? And jeopardizing any safe housing I may have when I get out? That was completely unacceptable to me. After I got up, they took us out from the back and put us in a van and we began driving to the airport. At first, we refused to talk to these “transport agents.” I had a plan. I had flown fairly frequently, so I was familiar with the rules at airports, and familiar with all of their “anti-trafficking” signage, which claims: “If you are being **trafficked**, just tell TSA and they will save you!” Well, I did. I told at least ten different TSA agents that I was being kidnapped. While they were checking my boarding pass, the nearest ones I could pull aside, TEN DIFFERENT AGENTS were told I was being kidnapped. NONE of them did anything besides laugh. I was trying to think fast, what’s a surefire way to get police to come in an airport? Make a terrorist threat. So, in the middle of security, I loudly announced “I **have a bomb in my shoe, I need you to come arrest me!**” (Barnett, Riley, & “Katherine,” p. 67)*

This individual not only characterized the reunification therapist as a “trafficker,” but then faked having a bomb in order to avoid participating in the court ordered intervention. This story has been cited by other PA critics as “proof” that children are handcuffed to force them to participate in the interventions. In *Parental Alienation: An Evidence Based Approach* (2022), McCartan reports the results of her inquiry into this claim. She states, “I contacted someone associated with the camp and was told that the child was 17 years old and, when traveling through an airport, said they had a bomb, so the airport security handcuffed them” (p. 4). In other words, authors of chapters in *Challenging Parental Alienation* use such anecdotes to make it appear it was the court and reunification program that handcuffed the child, rather than the child’s own threats made to airport security about having a bomb in her possession.

Some of the anecdotal statements in the book may very well have happened—mental health professionals inevitably make mistakes. Bias, lack of experience, burnout, and other human factors do impact the work product of forensic evaluators as much as any other profession. The issue is that when the authors provide anecdotes to support their statements, the person who experienced the event is never identified, no context is provided, and they are stated as fact and norm. Even more concerning, we could find no instance of empirical research being used to support such statements. The consequence is that the reader is left to accept the statements at face value, without regard to how or why, which is a strategy intended to instill fear and hostility in the reader and reinforce mistrust in our legal system. In a few other anecdotes, the authors cite work of other critics of PA, or of zealous investigative journalists as their sources to make it appear that the children who appear in treatment programs for PA are in danger. For example,

*Anecdotally, [i]n more than one case children subjected to these procedures [total cut-off the child's contact with the mother and 'deprogramming' of the child] **have become suicidal** – and in some cases died – in reaction to court orders to live with the father they believed abused them (Meier 2009, 238). (Zaccour, p. 207)*

*Mainstream news media have featured **young adults who were traumatised as children** by the consequences of court orders that they be removed from home and transported without explanation (Tabachnik 2017; see Chapter 4). (Doughty & Drew, p. 33)*

These examples and subsequent discussions completely omit mention of the outcome studies that have been conducted by scholars for the intervention programs that they allege caused these issues in the children (e.g., Harman, Saunders, et al., 2021; Reay, 2015; Warshak, 2019). When alienating parents fail to follow their treatment protocols and then resume contact with their children who participated in therapeutic programs, the children are at high risk of regressing back to being alienated. When this happens, the children, some of whom are then young adults, have reached out to journalists to mischaracterize and discredit the program that was ordered to repair their relationship with the alienated parent. Zaccour also cites Meier as proof that children who participate in these programs become suicidal, but Meier herself provided no empirical evidence for this statement in her original source.

Meier also describes a few cases that had very little information to validate their veracity:

*Scholars including this author have described myriad ways that parental alienation labelling has been used in specific cases to deny or sidestep credible evidence of*

*abuse, with grave consequences (Silberg and Dallam 2019; Meier 2010, 2020). Two examples suffice here: A couple divorces after a marriage marked by a “pattern of severe abuse” (as found by the court). During subsequent visits, the 2- and then 4-year-old child accuses her father of putting a “stick in my butt-butt” and “poo-poo” (child’s word for vagina). Children’s Hospital and County social workers, as well as the child’s therapist, suspect sexual abuse and urge the mother to get legal protection for the child. After a civil trial, including an opinion by a forensic evaluator that parental alienation may be at work, the court concludes that the child is fabricating these allegations, possibly because, among other things, she “senses her mother’s dislike” for her father. He finds no sexual abuse and orders unsupervised visits to continue – but is reversed on appeal (C.W. v E.F., 928 A.2d 655 (2007)). (Meier, p. 219)*

In this poignant quotation, there are very few details about the cases other than a reference to one case (<https://bit.ly/3R9i8WX>). It is up to the reader to comb through the forty-page appellate decision to draw their own conclusions. Judges and forensic evaluators are human and can err, sometimes significantly. A handful of bad decisions are not indicative of a massive movement of PA claims to “sidestep” credible evidence of abuse. Be that as it may, it is difficult to investigate the validity of Meier’s claim in this case since it does not appear that either the trial court or appellate court could definitively discern whether the abuse or alienation allegations were actually true in the case she cited. Harman & Lorandos (2021) and Harman, Giancarlo, et al., (2023) also failed to find support for Meier’s claims about the misuse of PA allegations in family court by “abusive” fathers in some of her other publications (e.g., Meier, 2019), so it is difficult to trust her interpretation of this particular case.

Meier also provides Silberg and Dallam (2019) as a citation in her quotation. The reliability of this source is questionable. Silberg is an ardent advocate against PA and has a record of inflating claims under testimony to advance her cause (Lorandos, 2020a). The Silberg and Dallam study, which was published in the low tier *Journal of Child Custody*, reports on 27 cases where US trial court decisions that did not acknowledge abuse were overturned. Given the number of trial court decisions made each year, and human error and biases always being a factor, 27 cases (if their interpretation of the cases can be trusted) is not an indication that there is an “epidemic” of abusive parents sidestepping abuse claims by claiming to be alienated. False allegations of all forms of abuse are common in high-conflict family law cases (e.g., Harman, Giancarlo, et al., 2023). The solution to this problem is not to totally discredit one type of claim, but to implement proper training and forensic techniques to differentiate between all types of false and legitimate allegations.

Meier also quotes herself (2010), in an article where she quoted a case study from the 2005 book *From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers Are Running from the Family Courts – And What Can Be Done about It*, by Neustein and Leshner. Meier’s use of this reference is disturbing. First, this book was not peer-reviewed. Also, Neustein herself had made repeated and “specious” abuse allegations and ultimately had her child removed from her care. Finally, Leshner (the co-author) was Neustein’s attorney. Leshner had his license suspended from 1998 through 2005. These facts, taken separately or together, certainly call into question the weight of the source’s authority (Lorandos, 2020b).

Mercer uses a similar strategy as Meier by describing cases that she has allegedly encountered, and provides no details from which to verify them, and no citations to support her claims:

*“I have encountered one or two cases in which preschool children were said to display child avoidant behavior and to have avoided one parent because of the actions of the other parent. I believe this is rare in the United States but may be more common in other countries. Published work on parental alienation-related cases suggests that the lower limit of the age range for child avoidant behavior cases is about nine years (and even this may apply only when older siblings are in the picture). The upper limit is normally the 18th birthday, after which the young person is no longer a minor.*

(Mercer, p. 176)

The reader of this quotation is supposed to accept Mercer’s assessment of her non descriptive “case” studies, yet Mercer cannot even remember if she has “encountered” one or two cases. She then asserts her “belief” that this case of preschool avoidant behavior is rare in the US but might be more common in other countries. No details are provided for the basis of her belief about the US or why she thinks the situation might be different in other countries. Mercer also asserts that “*published work on parental alienation-related cases suggests that the lower limit of the age range for child avoidant behavior cases is about nine years.*” She does not reference what this “published work” is, and we are not aware of any research that suggests there are age limits on this behavior.

## Summary

The authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* consistently misuse case studies and inject hyperbole into the cases in order to elicit fear and undermine our legal institutions. The authors often fail to provide context and sources for the cases, and it is therefore not possible for the reader to validate the facts of the cases. The authors also take the liberty

to interpret the cases to their benefit by omitting important information about the cases and distorting details. Likewise, the veracity of these anecdotes is questionable based on the problematic nature of some of the sources that the authors use. The anecdotal evidence that this book relates is typical of the techniques that deniers of science use—they rely on personal experience or isolated examples instead of sound arguments supported by empirical evidence.





## Use of Extreme Overstatements and Distorted Facts

The chapter authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* also use numerous strategies to distort the scientific evidence or truth. One way that this was done is through exaggeration. For most readers of this book, this style may be very misleading. For example:

*This means that **most if not all** alienation “diagnoses” or labels are largely **speculative** and could be masking legitimate, justifiable estrangements from a destructive parent.* (Meier, p. 225)

*The recent statements of the APSAC, mentioned earlier, make it clear that a major organization rejects the parental alienation belief system and warns against its use in child custody decision-making, **thus showing that such beliefs are not generally accepted in relevant professional fields.*** (Mercer & Drew, p. 16)

*Although some of the authors of parental alienation treatments have described parental alienation as “emotional abuse,” **there is no definition within the literature beyond theoretical descriptions to support this point of view.*** (Trane, Champion, & Hupp, p. 153)

Meier claims, without any support, that “most if not all” alienation diagnoses are just speculative, and the other authors claim without any supporting citation that PA is not accepted by professional fields. The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) is an advocacy organization that does not have the ability or expertise to determine what is generally accepted in professional fields, nor does it speak on behalf of other professional fields. It is totally incorrect to say that “such beliefs are not generally accepted in relevant professional fields.” Bernet (2020) summarized the evidence that PA theory has been accepted by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, and the American Academy of Pediatrics; and has been discussed in numerous textbooks and encyclopedias intended for professional audiences. A joint statement published in August 2022 by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges explicitly states that legal and mental health professionals should consider all factors that may contribute to parent-child contact problems, including “parental alienating behaviors” and “an alignment with a parent in response to high-conflict parenting” (AFCC & NCJFC, 2022).

In a study examining consensus of terminology about PA, custody evaluators who were recruited from the American Academy of Custody Evaluators (PACE) reported very

high agreement with terminology about PA and the behaviors that cause it (Bernet, Baker, et al., 2021). Numerous important studies and research reviews about PA have been published in top psychology journals. PA as a concept has acceptance across many professional and scientific organizations. APSAC as an organization has rejected PA because their leadership consists of child advocates who view PA as an impediment to their efforts.

The authors of the chapters also use language to incite fear (as with the anecdotal examples in the previous section), and they often tied their statements to conspiracy theories related to gender biased beliefs about violence. For example:

*On this reading, the concept of the ‘aligned child’ may have been one aspect of the **powerful symbolism often used by conservative and religious groups of endangered childhood, under threat when society abandons its traditional values.*** (Doughty & Drew, p. 25)

*Since their invention, the “parental alienation syndrome” and “parental alienation” belief systems have enjoyed increased recognition by the legal system, **to the point of becoming a significant threat to women’s and children’s safety and autonomy.*** (Zaccour, pp. 190–191)

*Parental alienation ideology seems particularly **useful for attacking the parental capacity of good mothers: if the mother were violent or negligent, the father would not need the parental alienation** argument to obtain custody of the child. Parental alienation beliefs thus support fathers’ and professionals’ attempts to paint caring mothers as inadequate. Reliance on the child’s best interest by proponents of the parental alienation belief system is all the more ironic given that many cases “have resulted in the **total estrangement of the child from the mother in the name of [parental alienation syndrome] prevention**” (Meier 2009, 243). (Zaccour, p. 195)*

*In other words, **courts are preventing children from seeing their mothers under the pretext that children need both parents!*** (Zaccour, p. 196)

*PAS differed from earlier observations on alignment or alliance because Gardner argued, in florid language, that children who rejected one parent during or after divorce had been coerced into doing so by the other parent, and consequently the child suffered from a syndrome exhibited by a combination of behaviours by the preferred parent and the child. **Language in Cold War propaganda about brainwashing and mind control in communist regimes that had caught the public imagination in the 1950s was appropriated to enliven his idea that some mothers induced false memories and beliefs in their children.*** (Doughty & Drew, p. 26)

These quotations illustrate the use of fear tactics and distortions of fact. There is no empirical support for the claim that there is an ideological threat to “good mothers.” PA rarely involves “violent” or even “negligent” mothers, which is falsely equated with the idea that fathers must be fabricating their alienation from their children. This gendered depiction of the problem is also not supported in the empirical data: mothers and fathers are just as likely to be the targets of parental alienating behaviors and to be alienated from their children (see Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022, for a review of this research). The language used by the authors across the entire book suggests PA is some kind of anti-feminist conspiracy. Yet, there is no data to support this conspiracy theory other than the opinions of the authors.

Zaccour’s and Meier’s statements completely distort the intent of no-contact orders used by legal and administrative systems to protect children from abusive parents. No-contact orders are made when it is determined the child is being seriously harmed by the abusive behaviors of a parent, psychologically or physically. Such orders, whether they are made by Child Protection Services or courts, contain a therapeutic plan to help the abusive parent (whether mother or father) stop their abusive and harmful behavior so the child has the benefit of a relationship with both parents when they are healthy. The depiction of these orders as being a strategy to take children away from mothers indefinitely (who presumably are never abusive) is a gross mischaracterization of the intervention and serves to strike false fear and feelings of injustice in the reader.

The use of exaggeration is also evident in a statement made in the forward of the book:

*I came to recognize, as well, that **most lawyers and judges are not sufficiently educated** on intimate partner abuse and how those dynamics play out in court.*  
(Bowles, p. xiii)

This statement made by Bowles is just a subjective opinion. While there is variability in educational requirements of the judiciary across states, most states require judges to receive continuing education on topics related to their field of practice, including training on domestic violence. It is not clear what Bowles would consider “sufficient” training and, given the book’s failure to present a gender-inclusive approach to understanding domestic violence, it is likely that any training that does not focus exclusively on gender-based violence would be considered insufficient by her.

Most lawyers and judges are not experts on domestic violence (or any other mental health issue for that matter), but this is one of the many reasons that forensic experts are used in complex litigation. No professional can be an expert on all issues, and the courts

often rely on subject matter experts whose testimony assists in understanding the trier of fact. Such experts are often required to take ongoing domestic violence classes in order to continue to conduct custody evaluations in their jurisdictions, and many are academics who publish peer-reviewed, scientific research that can help inform decisions.

In addition, Mercer and Drew also distort and exaggerate arguments made by PA advocates:

*Parental alienation advocates argue that **a child who disagrees with all or part of a parenting plan is mentally ill**, that the mental illness was caused by inappropriate parental influence, and that the preferred parent is thus by definition a child abuser and should not have contact with the child. If this argument is accepted by the court, the preferred parent is labeled as abusive, **an event that may have the most serious repercussions socially and professionally, especially if the preferred parent works with families or children in any capacity.** (Mercer & Drew, p. 7)*

PA scholars have never argued that a child who disagrees with a part of a parenting plan is “mentally ill,” nor is there evidence to suggest that the “label” of child abuser is pervasively used in alienation cases. In cases where a finding of child psychological abuse is made, by either the court or other institutions such as Child Protection Services, this could potentially affect the abusive parent in the way alleged by Mercer and Drew, but such a finding would not be made without a close examination of the evidence. The label is not assigned to a parent haphazardly, as implied in the statement.

Other authors in *Challenging Parental Alienation* also distorted research and writings of PA scholars. For example,

*Unfortunately, this theoretical complexity is not generally carried over into practice where **evaluators tend to be overly ready to identify alienation** (Warshak 2020). (Milchman, pp. 107–108)*

This example represents a gross misrepresentation of what Warshak (2020) wrote. Milchman cites Warshak regarding evaluators being “overly ready” to identify PA, yet she failed to address the larger point made by Warshak, in that it is only those providers who are not educated or up to date on the scientific literature that are more likely to make such mistakes. In addition, there are many professionals who fail to recognize PA when all of the signs are evident.

Exaggerated and inflammatory language was used in conjunction with conspiracy theories to incite fear in the reader by numerous authors. Several authors also used the slippery slope science denial tactic again here. Here are just a few additional examples that reflect a strong gender bias regarding family violence:

*As this chronology of parental alienation in the United States shows, **there was a close association and interdependence** between the courts and mental health professionals who found alienation occurring in separated families. Courts needed psychologists to identify the problem and recommend a solution; psychologists needed courts to identify the families that they could then diagnose and/or treat. In other words, **parental alienation did not exist outside court proceedings**—and perhaps not far beyond wealthy divorcing couples and their children. (Doughty & Drew, p. 32)*

*Within the **paradigm of shared custody**, each parent is equally important and equally responsible for the child—no matter who was the primary caregiver while the parents resided together. The parental alienation belief system has thus greatly benefitted from the **empirically dubious idea** that fathers' involvement should be increased and that children benefit from frequent and regular contact with both parents (Meier 2009, 244; see also Shaffer 2007), an idea that has gained in traction because of its seemingly egalitarian quality. **Fathers' rights groups have adopted the parental alienation vocabulary and managed to convey in popular discourse the myth that fathers are the underdogs in custody litigation** and that this is a grave injustice to be redressed. (Zaccour, p. 194)*

***Parental alienation ideology seems particularly useful for attacking the parental capacity of good mothers:** if the mother were violent or negligent, the father would not need the parental alienation argument to obtain custody of the child. Parental alienation beliefs thus support fathers' and professionals' attempts to paint caring mothers as inadequate. Parental alienation beliefs thus support fathers' and professionals' attempts to paint caring mothers as inadequate. (Zaccour, p. 195)*

*One concern of parental alienation critics is gender bias: even though proponents sometimes use gender-neutral language, in practice, **it is mothers who are most often accused of alienation.** (Zaccour, p. 201)*

*We have seen that alienation ideology has planted deep roots in legal systems across Europe and America, causing a plethora of problems and **putting mothers and children at risk.** (Zaccour, p. 211)*

Aside from characterizing fathers as being part of a conspiracy to take custody away from mothers, Zaccour provides no evidence for her opinions about the risks that mothers and children face, or that mothers are accused of PA more than fathers. Her statement also completely overlooks research by numerous scientists that there are not gender differences in the perpetration of PA (e.g., Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019).

There were also many examples of exaggerated false claims made by the authors. For example:

*Lawyers and psychologists rarely put together cases challenging parental alienation-based claims based on their general acceptance in the field (the Frye standard) or the acceptability of the scientific concepts (the Daubert Standard).* (Mercer, pp. 15–16)

When admitting scientific evidence in the judicial system, the most common admissibility standard in the United States is the *Daubert* threshold test, which asks several key questions to help determine if the proffered evidence is reliable and relevant to the case, as well as how much the court can rely on the evidence to assist in its decision. Mercer’s unsupported statement implies that PA theory does not meet *Daubert* standards, and flatly ignores the fact that in almost 1,200 trial and appellate records in the United States between 1985 and 2018, the concept of PA was found to be “material to the proceedings, probative of important facts, relevant to the court’s deliberations, admissible, and worthy of discussion” (Lorandos, 2020c, p. 332).

There were also many other false and exaggerated statements made by authors in the book:

*Finally, we reflect on the underlying reasons that the concept of parental alienation has survived in both jurisdictions despite its poor fit as an essentially North American concept.* (Doughty & Rathus, p. 40)

*The Cafcass (England) guidance is heavily reliant on books published in the US by Amy Baker, which are unhelpful in promoting the diagnosis of a condition for which there is no cure.* (Doughty & Rathus, p. 57)

*The Psychology and Law Division of the American Psychological Association dates only to 1980, and forensic psychology was recognized as a specialty within the field of psychology only in 2001 (Varela and Conroy 2012, 411).* (Erickson, p. 92)

Research on PA has been published in 10 languages using samples from 32 countries across 6 continents (see Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). The authors of the first statement omit this research to mislead the reader into thinking PA is only something applicable in North America. The authors also provide no support for their statement that Cafcass relies on the books written by Dr. Amy Baker, and falsely claim that there is no “cure” for PA. Creating PA in a child is abuse, so to make this statement implies there is also no cure for child abuse. Erickson’s statement is also inaccurate. While the APA started recognizing forensic psychology as a field in 2001, forensic psychology practice dates back almost a century. In fact, one half of APA divisions were added between 1960 and 2007 and this does not mean that the fields of study and practice were not “valid” until APA recognized them formally as a division (APA, <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/archives/apa-history>).

## Summary

A common technique that deniers of science employ is hasty generalizations. Out of a rush to have a conclusion, the arguer stereotypes, exaggerates, or overstates without sufficient evidence to support their statements. In the case of *Challenging Parental Alienation*, the generalizations seem to be made very hastily. There is a recurrent theme among the authors to exaggerate, overstate, distort facts, and use inflammatory language to incite fear into the reader in regard to gender biases and injustices that are done to “good” mothers.





## Evidence by Citation and Out of Date Citations

Rather than cite any of the empirical studies published on PA by scholars from around the world (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022), the chapter authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* continuously cite the *opinions* of other PA critics as “evidence” to support their arguments. For example, rather than reading and citing primary sources (such as Gardner, 1985), the authors rely on secondary and even tertiary sources (such as other PA critics) for their information. This has been called a misinformation echo chamber (Törnberg, 2019), when proponents of an ideology rely on their friends and colleagues for their data. Bernet (2021) has demonstrated how this secondary and tertiary source material has created the illusion that the statement is true and has been vetted by the scientific community.

One of the chapter authors, Joan Meier, frequently cites her own misinformation and opinions as evidence of problems with PA. There are opinion articles published in 2003 and 2017 where Meier misquotes Gardner, and then cites these articles in subsequent opinion publications as if these 2003 and 2017 articles were “evidence” (which implies science was used, when it clearly was not) of problems with Gardner’s foundational work on PA. This evidence by citation is not acceptable in scientific, peer-reviewed journals, which is likely why the authors of the book chapters have not published their opinions in such outlets. Meier is an attorney and advocate, not a scientist, and so her academic position at a law school would not likely evaluate her professional success based on publications in scientific journals as professors in fields of science are.

Another example of Meier’s quoting herself and thereby giving the appearance that many sources validate her position is found in the following statements:

*After years of advocacy by certain proponents for inclusion of the renamed “parental alienation disorder” (“PAD”) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-V, it was rejected as lacking sufficient scientific support (Crary 2012; Milchman, Geffner and Meier 2020). ... Moreover, the widespread discrediting of Gardner and PAS (and the DSM’s rejection of PAD) (Crary 2012; Meier 2013) should preclude reliance on any alienation expert or construct utilizing the same criteria. (Meier, p. 218)*

Meier cites three references for her comments about the DSM, but they are all actually from one source. The first citation is from Crary (2012). There are some concerning things about this citation. First, it is from an AP press release. Meier does not even take the release from a major newspaper; rather, she cites the *Kingsport Times News* (an unknown Tennessee newspaper).

More disturbing is the actual content of the article:

*NEW YORK (AP) — Rebuffing an intensive lobbying campaign, a task force of the American Psychiatric Association has decided not to list the disputed concept of parental alienation in the updated version of its catalog of mental disorders. **The term conveys how a child’s relationship with one estranged parent can be poisoned by the other parent, and there’s broad agreement that it sometimes occurs in the context of divorces and child-custody disputes.** However, debate has raged for years over whether the phenomenon should be formally classified as a mental health disorder by the psychiatric association as it updates its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders for the first time since 1994. The new manual won’t be completed until next year, but the decision against classifying parental alienation as a disorder has been made.*

[https://www.timesnews.net/news/local-news/american-psychiatric-association-parental-alienation-is-not-mental-disorder/article\\_41d93374-1bb3-5230-9803-73e734580aea.html](https://www.timesnews.net/news/local-news/american-psychiatric-association-parental-alienation-is-not-mental-disorder/article_41d93374-1bb3-5230-9803-73e734580aea.html)

Crary totally misconstrues the definition of PA in the article. A relationship with an “estranged parent” is not “poisoned by the other parent.” This definition assumes that the parent was already estranged before the other parent poisoned the relationship. This definition also seems to somehow equate estrangement with alienation, which are not the same terms. In addition, besides the *Kingsport Times News* being an obscure newspaper, it only quotes half of the original AP post. Meier could have quoted the AP post from *The Washington Times* (<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/sep/21/psychiatric-group-parental-alienation-no-disorder/>) which is better known and also contains Crary’s whole article where he does mention some of the political motivations involved in the DSM decision.

Meier’s second citation is from Milchman, Geffner, and Meier (2020):

*Their objections, along with those of many others who sent letters objecting to PAS/PAD/PA inclusion were recognized, and the concept of parental alienation in every form that advocates proposed (i.e., a child mental disorder; a specific relational problem; a relational problem subtype or specifier, for example as a shared psychotic disorder; and a diagnosis in need of further study) was rejected for inclusion in DSM-5. The CADWG chairperson even held a press conference to make the position of the DSM-5 committee clear and public (Crary, 2012).*

The source of the Milchman et al. citation is the very same AP release from Crary (2012).

Meier's third citation (Meier 2013) is from an online article that Meier wrote for an advocacy website that often features her written opinions, VAWnet ([https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-09/AR\\_PASUpdate.pdf](https://vawnet.org/sites/default/files/materials/files/2016-09/AR_PASUpdate.pdf)):

*Thus, PAS has been rejected multiple times by the American Psychiatric Association as lacking in scientific basis and therefore not worthy of inclusion in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The most recent all-out campaign by PAS proponents for inclusion of (the re-named) "Parental Alienation Disorder" (PAD) was flatly rejected by the DSM-V committee in 2012 (Crary, 2012).*

The source for this citation is again the same AP news release written by Crary (2012). Therefore, Meier's three cited sources are actually only one flawed and inaccurate source.

Mercer also engages in evidence by citation, stating in Chapter 1 that "Treatments proposed by PA advocates have been referred to as potentially harmful therapies for children" where she cited Mercer, 2019a and 2019b, as well as for her statement: "suggesting that at least some aspects of these treatments are ACEs that may be expected to cause ill effects" (Mercer, p. 13). Mercer has never conducted or published any program evaluation studies regarding the efficacy or effectiveness of treatments for PA. Indeed, Harman, Saunders, and Afifi (2022) found absolutely no support for Mercer's self-cited claims of the therapies being harmful or traumatic after evaluating a program for severely alienated children and their families. Instead of looking at relevant source material, like the studies that have been conducted on treatment for PA (e.g., Templer et al., 2017), Mercer instead cites herself as part of a circular feedback loop.

The various chapter authors in *Challenging Parental Alienation* cite other PA critics as the bases of their misinformation. For example,

*The study showed that mothers were far less likely to be awarded custody when parental alienation claims countered allegations of mother or child abuse (Meier et al. 2020, 3). (Drew, p. 169)*

Drew quotes Meier (2020), who in that paper quoted her own paper (Meier et al., 2019), a secondary source. Notably, the secondary source's findings have failed a

replication by other scientists who had their study published in peer-reviewed, scientific journal (e.g., Harman & Lorandos, 2021).

Zaccour provides more examples of this problem, also choosing to cite Meier as her source:

*In fact, it is likely that parental alienation has become so popular exactly because it provides an alternative explanation to the difficult realities of domestic and child violence (Meier 2009, 243).* (Zaccour, p. 205)

*This is increasingly so since parental alienation proponents have begun insisting that alienation can be done unconsciously and **can be caused by warm and involved parenting (see Meier 2009, 248).*** (Zaccour, p. 195)

Regarding the last statement, no PA scholar has stated that warm, involved parenting creates PA. Rather, it is the use of coercively controlling, abusive behaviors that can create PA (see Harman et al., 2018; Harman & Kruk, 2022). Yet, Meier (2009) has stated this misinformation, and it is then cited by Zaccour in *Challenging Parental Alienation* as if it is empirical support for her statement.

There were also numerous examples of authors relying on outdated citations to support their arguments, while simultaneously omitting advances in research knowledge:

*While Meier et al.'s empirical study itself does not and cannot verify the truth of any abuse allegations, extensive other independent research has found that **allegations of child abuse, even during custody litigation, have historically considered valid 50–72% of the time (Faller 1998; Thoennes and Tjaden 1990).** The study's findings that courts reject such allegations at far higher rates thus indicate that many children are being put in harm's way by courts.* (Meier, p. 220)

*In a context where there is "little empirical research evidence to support any specific intervention, such as changing custody" and "no empirical data that indicates whether entrenched alienation and total permanent rejection of a biological parent has long-term deleterious effects on children's psychological development" (Sullivan and Kelly 2001, 313), **the drastic interventions recommended by parental alienation "experts" in contested custody cases are truly damaging.** Johnston also acknowledges that "[t]he long-term outcomes [of therapeutic work with alienated children and their parents] are a matter of conjecture and currently unknown" (Johnston, Walters, and Friedlander 2001, 329).* (Zaccour, p. 206–207)

The Johnston, Walters, and Friedlander (2001) article cited by Zaccour is not an empirical work of science but a theoretical opinion article. The Faller (1998) and Thoennes and Tjaden (1990) articles are older still, and a number or more recent studies (e.g., Webb et al., 2021) have been published over the last decade documenting the opposite of what is argued by Meier. Given the bulk of the research on PA has been published in the last 20 years (40% of what is known having been published since 2016; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022), it irresponsible and unethical for such authors to provide outdated citations for their arguments and completely ignore the contemporary research available to them.

There are many other examples of very old, outdated sources throughout the book:

*One study indicates that 98% of women's allegations of sexual abuse of children are credible reports (Everson & Boat 1989, 231).* (Drew, p. 161)

*Carol Bruch also observed in 2001 that courts that considered the admissibility of parental alienation syndrome evidence mostly concluded that the test for scientific reliability was not met, yet, in the vast majority of cases, it seems that no one thought to question the admissibility of expert evidence (Bruch 2001a, 540).* (Zaccour, p. 199)

Aside from these citation problems, there were large sections of text that provided no supporting citations at all. For example, page 301 has one large paragraph describing the work of Dr. Richard Gardner, and not one reference is provided to support Mercer's arguments.

## Summary

*Selectivity* is a common tactic that deniers of science rely upon. Selectivity involves drawing on isolated papers that challenge the dominant consensus or highlighting flaws in the weakest papers to discredit the entire field. The authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* frequently engage in selectivity. They also continue to cite outdated sources that are no longer relevant due to the advancement of PA research since the time of their original publication. The references and citations used by the authors are not reliable, comprehensive, or accurately used.



## Other Science Denial Techniques

Aside from the primary mis/disinformation themes and science denial tactics (e.g., conspiracy theories, slippery slope, slothful induction, strawman) we have identified so far, *Challenging Parental Alienation* relies upon many other science denial techniques. We provide only a few examples here, but these techniques, and more, were used pervasively throughout the book. Unfortunately, time constraints and the importance of completing this critique in a timely manner preclude our ability to outline every problem we have identified in the book.

### False Consensus

*Nonetheless, the leading advocates for treating parental alienation as a mental health disorder (Bernet, Baker and Morrison 2010) have rolled Gardner's eight criteria for PAS into their criteria for "diagnosing" parental alienation. As has been thoroughly explored by Madelyn Milchman (2019), these criteria are nothing more than subjective interpretations of a child's and parent's attitudes and behaviors toward the other parent, which could just as reflect children and parents seeking to avoid an abusive or otherwise destructive other parent. Moreover, **the widespread discrediting of Gardner and PAS (and the DSM's rejection of PAD) (Crary 2012; Meier 2013)** should preclude reliance on any alienation expert or construct utilizing the same criteria. (Meier, p. 218)*

The author of this statement makes it appear that many people have discredited Gardner and PAS, yet her citations are her own opinion article published in 2013 and a popular press article written by Crary (2012), published for the Associated Press (see previous section on "Evidence by Citation"), which is not a scientifically peer-reviewed publication. As the latter article is an indirect source, it mainly serves as a **reference dilution** ("hope nobody checks"). This strategy was used by many of the authors in the book: citing many references to impress the reader and make them falsely believe there is valid scientific support and consensus among other "experts" for their arguments. Similarly, there are other authors who have claimed there is "no" consensus in the field about PA:

*There is **no single agreed-upon definition of parental alienation**. As Jaffe et al. observe, "[d]epending on the knowledge, orientation and training of the professionals involved, the term alienation may have different meanings, with variation in diagnosis and intervention" (Jaffe, Ashbourne, and Mamo 2010, 137). **This lack of consensus is mirrored in the law.** Courts might not distinguish parental*

*alienation from parental alienation syndrome, apply inconsistent tests and definitions, and order remedies that are no longer recommended by alienation researchers. (Zaccour, pp. 199–200)*

*Despite over 20 years of research and scholarship, to this day “parental alienation” still lacks a universal clinical or scientific definition (Johnston and Sullivan 2020). (Meier, p. 216–217)*

There has been remarkable consensus among scholars about terminologies regarding PA (see Bernet, Baker, et al., 2021; Saini et al., 2016), and the authors failed to discuss or reference it in their chapters.

## **Ad Hominem**

Numerous authors of chapters in *Challenging Parental Alienation* made ad hominem statements, particularly towards Dr. Richard Gardner. For example, Doughty & Drew made numerous false statements about him and his work:

*It was only when Richard A. Gardner (1985) **created and marketed PAS**, as a means of refuting mothers’ claims of child abuse, that courts began to take notice. ... Gardner was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who **self-published several books about divorce** from the 1970s onward. It appears that he was medically trained and worked at one time as an army psychiatrist, but he mainly practiced in a private capacity. **There are continuing doubts as to whether he held any academic or research posts** during his career. For example, a position he stated he held at Columbia Medical School was a voluntary one and not a professorship. (Doughty & Drew, p. 26)*

When scientists publish their research and work, they are not “marketing” it to others. Dissemination is part of the scientific research process, and yet the authors of the above statement use language to imply that Dr. Gardner was attempting to mislead others by marketing his ideas for his own iniquitous purposes. Dr. Gardner published 21 peer-reviewed papers and research on PA (<https://bit.ly/3Nwk6gX>), which the authors curiously omit in their statement, and instead, make it seem that others doubt the credibility of this work because he had, in the past, self-published some books about PA.

Doughty and Drew also claim that there are “doubts” about Gardner’s academic posts. They do not reference any source or specific details about the “doubters” and



grounds for their doubt, and they downplay scientific papers by calling them “posts.” By suggesting that there are “doubts” about his work, the authors try to plant seeds in the reader’s mind that something is “fishy” about Gardner. Gardner himself addressed this claim in 1999 (<http://www.fact.on.ca/Info/pas/misperce.htm>):

*The implication of this statement is that I am somehow misrepresenting myself. I have been on the faculty of the Columbia Medical School since 1963. In earlier years I did more teaching than I have in recent years, but such reduction in teaching obligations is common for senior medical school faculty members. More importantly, people who do significant research and writing generally do far less teaching. This has been my position. When I was promoted to the rank of full professor in 1983, I was the first person in the history of Columbia’s Child Psychiatry department to achieve that rank who was primarily in private practice (rather than full-time faculty). I had to satisfy all the same requirements necessary for the promotion of full-time academics. And this was also true when I was promoted to the associate professorial rank some years previously.*

Another example of an ad hominem is the use of subtle and inflammatory language to portray legal and mental health professionals with expertise in PA as being unprofessional and biased:

*Custody of children is a high stakes challenge for judges. A misassessment of custody placement can result in serious harm to children. Incorporating mental health assessments into the custody process can give judges a greater sense of certainty when making custody and parenting time decisions. Relying on other **presumably qualified** professionals injected an appearance of legitimacy to custody decisions. This is not to say that judges knowingly affirm faulty recommendations made by mental health professionals, but in essence, family court judges have relinquished their decision-making authority to “neutrals” who legally should have only a limited role in determining the credibility of the parties. **But parental alienation advocates often assign sinister intentions to mothers**, thus discrediting the mother before she can have an opportunity to fully present her case to the court. (Mercer & Drew, p. 14)*

The authors of the chapters also use inflammatory language to mischaracterize the work and intentions of others. For example, Doughty and Rathus refer to PA as a “street myth” (p. 48), and Doughty and Drew refer to PA reunification programs as an “industry” (pp. 32-33) and specific programs as “businesses” (p. 32), implying that they are just a cottage industry to make money at the expense of families rather than the programs being

developed based on evidence-based practices by mental health providers dedicated to helping such families. That the mental health providers are paid for their services does not mean their intent is to capitalize on the pain of others. Mercer also implies that the programs are not regulated, which is misleading. The providers are licensed mental health practitioners, who are regulated through their licensing boards. The programs themselves do not need to be regulated.

## Appeal to Ignorance

There were numerous examples across the book where the authors appeal to the reader's ignorance on an issue to support an argument. One example is the portrayal of the role of legal professionals in family court proceedings:

*The increasing use of mental health professionals had several serious consequences for custody litigants, particularly for mothers in abusive relationships. **Lawyers are trained investigators and factfinders.** In the era when judges appointed lawyers as guardians ad litem and custody evaluators, reports were focused on substantiating assertions of the parties. Fact finding assisted the judges in assessing the parties' claims so then the judges could apply the applicable law. Recommendations typically were not within the purview of the attorney-investigators unless the parties requested them. (Mercer & Drew, p. 14).*

While it is true that *some* attorneys serve as guardians ad litem in family court cases, they are not trained custody evaluators, and they do not act as investigators or factfinders when in the role of an attorney representing a client. Rather, they advocate for their client's position, do not often have graduate training in family systems, psychology, or other related fields, and do not play a neutral role in the case. Mercer's statement appeals to the ignorance of the reader who may not know the particular training requirements or role expectations for the legal professional, to make it appear that custody evaluators, who are mental health professionals trained and appointed to be neutral fact finders for the court, are not the appropriate people for the task. Indeed, later in the same paragraph, Mercer calls these mental health professionals "neutrals," using quotes to imply that they are not neutral, and inaccurately implies that the attorneys representing the parents are more neutral by comparison.

## Fake Debate

Fake debates occur when authors present science and pseudoscience in an adversarial way to give the false impression of an ongoing scientific debate, such as section in the Doughty and Drew chapter titled “Ongoing Debate” (p. 35). The authors also refer to PA researchers as “high profile advocates,” which causes one to ponder if the authors are in reality projecting their own modus operandi onto the general PA scientific research community.

## Blowfish Fallacy

Blowfish fallacy refers to laser-focusing on a tiny methodological aspect of scientific research, blowing it out of proportion to distract from the bigger picture. One example of this strategy was made by Meier:

*Small studies have asserted that adults who reported that one parent turned them against the other when they were a child suffered from a “range of adverse outcomes, including: lower self-esteem; depression; manipulative behaviour; attachment and identity issues; and relationship problems” (Doughty et al. 2020, 72, citations omitted). But because these studies take self-reports at face value and are incapable of excluding other possible causes of these outcomes, which may not have been known to the individuals when they were children, they “do not allow a causal relationship between adverse outcomes and alienation to be established” (Doughty et al. 2020, 72).*

(Meier, p. 226)

By using this blowfish strategy, Meier attempts to persuade the reader to focus hard on specific details of one method used in some studies and miss the bigger picture. There are numerous problems with Meier’s quote. First, there have been many studies on the long-term impact of PA on children (see Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022). Second, of the studies that have been conducted, they have employed a wide variety of methods, not just self-report (e.g., clinical interviews and assessments). Third, it is unethical to test the causal relationship between adverse outcomes and alienation. Causal relationships can only be established through experimentation, and it would be highly unethical to randomly assign children to an abusive relationship versus a healthy one. Indeed, of the decades of research on Adverse Child Experiences (ACEs), correlational and cross-sectional designs are used because experimentation is unethical.

Yet, Meier and several other authors (e.g., Mercer, p. 239) claim that causal relationships are necessary to establish before PA can be accepted as causing adverse outcomes. The standards of evidence required by these authors for these areas of research are not the same: they criticize the methods used by scientists who study PA, even though they are the same used by others who study child abuse and domestic violence. This tactic illustrates other science denial techniques: **impossible expectations** and **moving goalposts**, where the authors demand higher levels of evidence after they receive the evidence that they requested.

## Logical Fallacies

Logical fallacies are arguments where the conclusion does not logically follow from the premise. These fallacies are also known as non sequiturs. This book is replete with logical fallacies. Here are a few examples:

*The recent statements of the APSAC, mentioned earlier, make it clear that a major organization rejects the parental alienation belief system and warns against its use in child custody decision-making, **thus showing that such beliefs are not generally accepted in relevant professional fields.** (Mercer, p. 16)*

Mercer often makes such leaps of logic in her writing. The fact that one organization rejects PA (especially when it is an advocacy group that is controlled by people who have a vested interest to deny PA) does not imply that PA is “*generally not accepted in relevant professional fields*”.

Another example of a logical fallacy is found in a chapter by Meier:

*While Meier et al.’s empirical study itself does not and cannot verify the truth of any abuse allegations, extensive other independent research has found that allegations of child abuse, even during custody litigation, have historically considered valid 50–72% of the time (Faller 1998; Thoennes and Tjaden 1990). The study’s findings that courts reject such allegations at far higher rates thus indicate that many children are being put in harm’s way by courts. (Meier, p. 220)*

The validity of allegations is crucial to Meier’s claims that court rejects domestic violence claims when PA is alleged. If courts determined that domestic violence allegations were false, her argument has no basis. It does not logically follow that because her outdated citations used to support her claim that historically 50-72% of the time allegations

are true, that they must be true in the cases in her unreviewed, 2019 paper. This is a leap of faith. Furthermore, her alleged independent research also allows for the possibility that only 50% of allegations are true. If so, 50% of the cases in Meier's research would not support her hypothesis.

Another example of a logical fallacy is found in a chapter by Doughty and Drew:

*Bernet has stated that practitioners who diagnose and treat the alleged disorder are already too busy to be promoting it for self-interested reasons. It is **however difficult to separate the aggressive determination of current campaigns for parental alienation to be recognised, or even criminalised, from the financial incentives.*** (Doughty & Drew, p. 35)

Aggressive determination is not an indication that the reason for the campaigning is financial incentive. There can be many reasons why a researcher can be very proactive for a cause without financial motivations. Besides the fact that this argument is illogical, it illustrates the science denial identified in an earlier section, *nefarious intent*, in which it is assumed that the motivations behind any presumed conspiracy are nefarious (e.g., for monetary gain).

Another denial technique that this statement personifies is *tu quoque*. *Tu quoque* is pointing out hypocrisy in the opponent's position to deflect criticism from oneself, usually accusing the opponent of something similar or comparable. It is an attempt to divert blame. This is a common theme among the critics of PA theory. An example of *tu quoque* is a statement by Mercer:

*Pseudoscientific material can differ in its specifics, just as scientific work can, but there are some traits that have been described as helping to identify pseudoscience (Grimes and Bishop, 2018; Hupp, Mercer, Thyer, and Pignotti, 2019). Here are some that are especially relevant to the parental alienation belief system: The research that is reported has no outside source of funding, so the researchers have a financial interest in showing that they have safe, effective methods. (Outside funding is not reported in published research related to parental alienation cases.) **Exaggerated claims** of effectiveness are made without support by adequate research and may involve **publication in journals with low standards**. (The research claimed to support the parental alienation belief system does not meet the criteria for evidence-based treatments.) **Findings are misrepresented**. (For example, studies of adults' reports of their parents' behavior are said to provide clear evidence that children who avoid a parent have had similar experiences.) The way a treatment is said to work is **not congruent with well-established existing knowledge**. (For example, attitude change*

*does not necessarily result from new information or from intense motivators like threats.) Treatments have not been shown to work by a discipline's usual standards of evidence but are claimed to be effective anyway. (Evidence for parental alienation treatments does not meet usual standards.) Treatments have not only not been tested but are also **based on implausible ideas**. (As there is no evidence that children who avoid a parent have been "brain-washed", it is implausible that they can be "deprogrammed" by the methods used.) Treatments are potentially harmful, either directly or in terms of side effects. (It is plausible that experiences with the treatments could be harmful, and there is anecdotal evidence that they have been harmful.) (Mercer, pp. 245–246)*

Mercer's statement comparing PA to the telltale traits of pseudoscience would be comical if not for the potential damage it will cause if it is taken seriously by the legal and mental health professions. The statement is filled with logical fallacies, false statements and what seems like a projection of Mercer's own modus operandi in order to deflect blame. We have already described how research on PA has been published in some of the most respected professional journals in the field, while critics of PA often publish in low tier journals or are not reviewed at all. When one considers the frequent non sequiturs, misrepresentations, exaggerated and even manipulated statistics that are common in the writings of PA critics, it causes one to wonder if Mercer is not projecting her own foibles onto the legitimate body of PA research. Likewise, in regard to financial gain, the domestic violence industry receives billions of dollars in government funding—domestic violence advocates certainly have a vested interest in discrediting research on PA.

Another denial technique that is used by Mercer is **ambiguity**, which is the use of ambiguous language in order to lead to misleading conclusions. Mercer writes:

*Technical terminology is used to **obfuscate** rather than to clarify the discussion. (Esoteric terms such as "targeted parent" and "aftercare professional" imply a body of knowledge that does not exist.) (Mercer, p. 246)*

It is not clear how the terms "targeted parent" and "aftercare professional" obfuscate the discussion or exactly what "implying a body of knowledge that does not exist" have to do with obfuscating the discussion. The intent of her statement is not clear, and the use of the impressive word "obfuscate" gives the reader the impression that she must know what she is talking about.

## Summary

*Challenging Parental Alienation* is replete with numerous techniques that the deniers of science utilize in order to discredit well established science. These fraudulent techniques likely violate the ethical standards of professional practice of the authors. The expressed intent of this book is to help lawyers, judges, social workers, child protection court workers and mental health professionals involved in custody decisions, so the book's perversion of the scientific process is of particular concern. It is especially alarming when legislative change is promoted based upon these scientific distortions. The danger that this denial of PA science presents to the welfare of alienated children is real and is grounds for the removal of this book from circulation and publication.





## Plagiarism

There are many forms of plagiarism, with the most commonly known type being “complete” or “direct” plagiarism involving the presentation of entire passages or sections of written text as one’s own without crediting the original author. Another form of plagiarism is “paraphrasing” plagiarism, which is when the author takes a section of text and changes only a few words to make it appear as if it is their own words and failing to credit the original source. “Patchwork” plagiarism is another form that entails taking plagiarized work and interweaving it with the author’s own words. This latter form is often hard to identify without software programs that can match text with databases of other published materials.

Our review of *Challenging Parental Alienation* resulted in the identification of significant portions of text that are examples of direct, paraphrased, and patchwork plagiarism. We have selected just a few illustrative statements here, highlighting the plagiarized text in bold. We used Google searches and plagiarism detection tools (e.g., Turnitin; <https://www.turnitin.com/>) to accomplish this task.

For example:

*First, PAS focused **almost exclusively on the alienating parent**. Second, the lack of a 'commonly recognized, or empirically verified pathogenesis, course, familial pattern, or treatment selection' of the problem meant that it could not be considered a diagnostic syndrome as defined within psychiatry. (Doughty & Drew, p. 28)*

This example of patchwork plagiarism by Doughty and Drew does not sufficiently paraphrase the original work of Michael Bütz (2020; whose work was not referenced at all) who, according to the Turnitin software, stated “First and foremost, PAS focused almost exclusively on the alienating parent.

Doughty and Drew also said, apparently in reference to an important article by Kelly and Johnston (2001):

*It was the use of the **terminology of a medical syndrome** that had created **controversy amongst mental health professionals** and fueled the continual debate on the validity of PAS. Finally, there was hardly **any empirical or research support for the reliable identification of PAS**, apart from Gardner's own clinical*

*experience and expert testimony, nor for the efficacy of the drastic solutions he re commended.* (Doughty & Drew, p. 28)

However, Doughty and Drew did not explicitly cite Kelly and Johnston (2001) and did not provide page numbers from the original source to refer to for accuracy.

In the same paragraph, Doughty and Drew took almost verbatim another statement from Kelly & Johnston (2001, p. 262) without (again) providing the page number or directly quoting it:

*The core feature of alienated children was extreme disproportion between the child's perception and beliefs about the rejected parent and the actual history of the relationship.* (Doughty & Drew, p. 28)

On the following page, Doughty and Drew mention the work of Johnston, Walters, and Friedlander (2001), but do not directly quote the words used by the original authors or paraphrase the original work sufficiently:

*Johnston, Walters, and Friedlander (2001) also wrote in the same journal issue that, where parental alienation was identified, court orders would need to specify the **roles of all the professionals, lines of communication, limits of confidentiality, and decision-making authority**, in order to ensure a **coordinated, rule-governed process for managing ongoing family conflict and implementing therapeutic intervention.*** (Doughty & Drew, p. 29)

The original source stated: "Second, a stipulation of court order that specifies the roles of all professionals, lines of communication, limits of confidentiality, and decision-making authority is necessary to ensure an overarching, coordinated, rule-governed process for managing the ongoing family conflict and for implementing the therapeutic intervention" (Johnston et al., 2001, p. 317). By not placing long phrases and strings of words used by the original authors into quotation marks or providing the page of the original source, Doughty and Drew make it appear that the co-opted language is their own.

Likewise, Drew directly plagiarizes a news article written by Bekiempis (2020) but was only referenced as the internet news source where it was published (*The Guardian*).

*Petitioners were victims of non-consensual, medically unindicated, and/or invasive gynecological procedures, including unnecessary surgical*

*procedures under general anesthesia, performed by and/or at the direction of [gynecologist Dr Mahendra Amin], the petition said. 'In many instances, the medically unindicated gynecological procedures Respondent Amin performed on Petitioners amounted to sexual assault' (Guardian, 2020). (Drew, p. 165)*

This example makes it appear that Drew has paraphrased a section of the article when she had not done so. Drew also does not provide a specific source for the *Guardian* citation in the reference section for that chapter.

Another form of plagiarism is “self-plagiarism,” which is reusing language that the author wrote in other publications without citing their original work. Self-plagiarism refers to “authors who reuse their own previously disseminated content and pass it off as a ‘new’ product without letting the reader know that this material has appeared previously” (The Office of Research Integrity, n.d.). While self-plagiarizing is not considered an act of research misconduct, it is a problematic practice because scientific and professional writings are read by an audience with an assumption that the presented ideas are accurate and new.

We found numerous examples of this form of plagiarism across the book’s chapters, such as the chapter by Milchman:

*In foster care cases, where children **may either remain in the care of their abusers or be removed from both parents by the state**, the love they proclaim for their abusers may be rationalizations made to convince themselves that they are safe. It might be intended to convince authorities that they can return home. It might express their wish that the abuse will not happen again. In contrast, in custody cases, **children who remain in the care of loving protective parents and are only removed from abusive parents might not have to convince themselves that they love and need their abusers.** (Milchman, p. 128)*

In the statement above, Milchman fails to cite her own paper (Milchman, 2021), from which several sections of her statement were taken verbatim. By not sufficiently paraphrasing or even citing her original work, it makes it appear to the reader that her argument is a new one. This duplication of material creates a larger impression that there are many publications that dispute or fail to support PA theory, when in fact the same arguments are recycled over and over across multiple publications.

Another example of plagiarism and “cut and paste” citation is illustrated by the following quotation from the chapter written by Meier:

*The same review states “most importantly, although the majority of researchers purport to exclude from their studies cases where abuse of the child had occurred, few have reported working definitions of child abuse and systematic methods for excluding them from their samples.” In fact, several of the studies they reviewed found that, even where one parent was identified as engaging in ‘parental alienating behaviors’ the other purportedly alienated parent was “more prone to actual abuse of the child” (Saini et al. 2016, 431). (Meier, p. 224)*

The quotation attributed to Saini et al. (2016) could not be found on page 431 of the Saini et al. chapter, but a similar phrase was instead found on pages 417 and 418:

*Although the majority of the researchers purport to exclude from their studies cases where abuse of the child had occurred, few have reported working definitions of child abuse and systematic methods for identifying and excluding these from their samples. (Saini, pp. 417–418)*

The actual statement in the Saini book does not contain the words “most importantly.” Using a computer-based plagiarism search engine, we unearthed the *exact* quotation (including the words “most importantly”) taken from a PowerPoint presentation from Kuehnle and Drozd (2012, p. 18) that is available on-line, which appears to be Meier’s actual source. Therefore, it appears that Meier directly quotes Kuehnle and Drozd (2012) and inaccurately attributes the source to Saini et al. (2016).

Another Saini et al. (2016) citation that Meier quotes could not be found anywhere in the cited source:

*Moreover, Saini et al.’s research review concluded that “**there is a lack of clear, empirical evidence that children who resist or refuse contact with one of their parents are universally emotionally disturbed or necessarily at risk for long-term negative outcomes,**” rendering any long-term effects of alienation “inconclusive” (Saini et al. 2016, 436–437). (Meier, p. 226)*

However, the *exact* words in bold appear in the same Kuehnle & Drozd (2012) PowerPoint on page 18.

## Summary

Plagiarism is a breach of academic and professional integrity. Stealing others' words or presenting one's own words as new ideas when they are not is considered not only dishonest and reckless, but it is a sign of poor scholarship and at times academic fraud. The chapters in *Challenging Parental Alienation* contained many statements that had been published elsewhere and were not appropriately referenced or acknowledged. We have barely begun to scratch the surface of the multitude of misuse of citations and plagiarism within this book. From what we have observed so far, such practices are pervasive throughout the book and in the other writings of this book's authors. Presenting duplicate material without citation misleads the reader into believing that significant portions of the content in *Challenging Parental Alienation* constitute a new contribution to the scholarly discussion about PA. Plagiarism is punishable as a misdemeanor in academic institutions, and it can carry more dire consequences for publishers (e.g., financial damages), which is another of the many reasons we strongly recommend that this book be withdrawn from publication immediately.



## Typographical Errors

Of less concern to us from a content perspective, but as evidence of the sloppy and careless approach to their work overall, numerous typographical errors occur in *Challenging Parental Alienation*. These errors add another layer to the book's unreliability as a source of information regarding PA. For example:

Page 23: "Mental health guardians ad litem and evaluators ...." probably should be "Mental health professionals, guardians ad litem, and evaluators ...." The lawyers contributing to this book who attempt to write about the role of mental health professionals in custody cases do not appear to know or understand the language or the various roles such professionals play in this process.

Page 36: "American Psychiatric Association" should be "American Psychological Association." Again, the lawyers writing about the mental health field do not even appear to know the difference between these two organizations and what they have contributed to the field of PA theory.

Page 45: "Dr Kenneth" should be "Dr. Kenneth."

Page 45: Figure 3.1 is misplaced. It should be on page 49.

Page 49: There are three numbers in [ ] at the end of paragraphs for no apparent reason (e.g. [83], [72], [63]). There is another example on page 48 ([85]). Figure 3.1 is missing from the page.

Page 52: Bracketed number [49]

Page 54: Bracketed number [133]. These bracketed numbers apparently indicate that each quotation was cut and pasted from other material (such as a published court case), but most readers would not be able to figure that out.

Page 171: "Meier, Joan, et al. 2020" should be "Meier, J. 2020," without the "Joan" or the "et al."

Pages 189–192: There are six paragraphs that begin on page 189 with "So where does parental alienation come in?" and end on page 190 with "... European and American jurisdictions when such literature is available. The same six paragraphs are repeated on pages 191–192.

Page 218. “DSM-V” should be “DSM-5.”

Page 221: The book says: “Contrary to these assertions, and despite the passage of nearly two decades since Johnston and colleagues’ first call for credible research, multiple recent research reviews have convergently concluded that existing alienation studies tend to be small, “methodologically weak,” non-random, not generalizable, and based on unreliable applications of the label (Saini et al. 2016, 435).” That quotation does not come from page 435 of the Saini et al. chapter.

Page 222: The book says: “Saini et al., while forthrightly and admirably acknowledging that there is no legitimate scientific evidence or support for the alienation premise, nonetheless assert that there is a broad consensus among forensic psychologists about what constitute “parental alienation behaviors” (“PABs”), which “have the capacity” to harm a child’s relationship with the other parent (Saini et al. 2016, 430). That quotation does not come from page 430 of the Saini et al. chapter.

Page 225: The book says: “In short, there is no research that differentiates, and no validated method for differentiating in individual cases, the reasons why a child might become “alienated” or estranged from one parent (Saini et al. 2016, 431).” That quotation does not come from page 431 of the Saini et al. chapter. It is not clear where that quotation is from.

Page 226: The book says: “Moreover, Saini et al.’s research review concluded that “there is a lack of clear, empirical evidence that children who resist or refuse contact with one of their parents are universally emotionally disturbed or necessarily at risk for long-term negative outcomes,” rendering any long-term effects of alienation “inconclusive” (Saini et al. 2016, 436–437).” That quotation does not come from pages 436–437 of the Saini et al. chapter.

Page 237: The book states: “Clawar and Rivlin examined cases of child avoidance of a parent as they appeared in the records of the Chicago courts ....” Actually, Stanley W. Clawar and Brynne V. Rivlin did not work in or near Chicago. Their office was near Philadelphia, and their cases came from Pennsylvania, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, California, and Delaware. Mercer’s statement is alarming for several reasons. The Clawar study in 1991 was one of the early watershed studies in PA research. It was expanded upon and a second edition was published by the ABA in 2013. The second edition contains an appendix (pages 409–420) that describes the research techniques and sample characteristics in great detail. All of the subjects were taken from Clawar’s private practice of which only 26% were court ordered. Any expert about PA is surely aware of the nature of this watershed study, yet Mercer confuses Chicago court cases with private practice



forensic cases in Philadelphia. It is incomprehensible how any qualified scientific scholar could make such a gross blunder in discussing such a seminal research study.

Page 240: “Rad” should be “Road.”

## **Summary**

The lack of attention to detail and accuracy in the publication of this book is evident from the sampling of errors cited above. It is indicative of the faulty scholarship in general of the authors. When the book as a whole is taken into consideration, it causes one to wonder if it is primarily a poorly constructed cut and paste job of many of the authors’ previous works. The considerable typographical errors, compounded with the content errors, misrepresentations and fraudulent statements that abound in this book, deem this book unsalvageable and requires immediate withdrawal from publication.



## Conclusions and Recommendations

Taylor & Francis has been an active and influential member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). That organization has published a document, “Retraction Guidelines,” which provides direction on how to handle these complaints regarding *Challenging Parental Alienation*. The “Guidelines” state:

“Editors should consider retracting a publication if ... they have clear evidence that the findings are unreliable, either as a result of major error (e.g., miscalculation of experimental error), or as a result of fabrication (e.g., of data) or falsification (e.g., image manipulation). These guidelines are intended to apply primarily to journal articles but may be **applicable to book chapters, abstracts, preprints, and other published documents.**”

The COPE Retraction Guidelines also state that retraction should occur “as soon as possible after the editor is convinced that the publication is seriously flawed .... Prompt retraction should minimize the number of researchers who cite the erroneous work, act on its findings, or draw incorrect conclusions ....”

*Challenging Parental Alienation*, a book published by Routledge, is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group. The purpose of this non-exhaustive review of the book was to bring to their attention, as members of COPE, the serious flaws that are pervasive through all its chapters. The conclusions stated in the book are unreliable and distorted; scientific evidence is either omitted or grossly misrepresented; large segments of the chapters are plagiarized, and there are hundreds of examples of science denial techniques used by the authors to discredit an entire field of scientific study. Not only did Routledge fail to respond adequately to our communications, COPE failed in requiring Routledge to assess and answer our concerns.

A chapter from *Challenging Parental Alienation* is already referenced on the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) website (<https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications/questioning-scientific-validity-parental-alienation-label-abuse-cases>) and it has appeared in other media ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360745175 Parent Alienation and How To Survive Attacks](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360745175_Parent_Alienation_and_How_To_Survive_Attacks)). These citations indicate how quickly this flawed book may become an influential source of misinformation.

This book needs to be pulled immediately from publication and circulation so as to minimize the number of researchers who cite the work, legal and mental health

professionals who act on its content, and on the media and other scholars from drawing wrong conclusions about PA.

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## Appendix A: Organizational Endorsers

The principal creators of this document are two international organizations, the Parental Alienation Study Group ([www.pasg.info](http://www.pasg.info)) and Global Action for Research Integrity in Parental Alienation ([www.garipa.org](http://www.garipa.org)). The following organizations have also endorsed this document:

Alienated Children First, Ireland, <https://alienated.ie/>

Asociación Mexicana de Padres de Familias Separados, A. C., Mexico, [www.ampfs.com.mx](http://www.ampfs.com.mx)

Associação Portuguesa para a Igualdade Parental y Direitos dos Filhos, Portugal,  
<https://igualdadeparental.org/>

Canadian Association for Equality, Canada, <https://equalitycanada.com/>

Changes: Counseling & Psychotherapy, Ltd., Ireland, [www.changes.ie](http://www.changes.ie)

Children & Parents United, United States, <https://www.therespondent.com/pages/charity>

Coalition to End Domestic Violence, United States, <http://endtodv.org/>

Colibri-Italia, Italy, <https://www.colibri-italia.it/>

Con mamá y con papá por siempre, Bolivia,  
<https://www.facebook.com/conmamayconpapaporsiempre/>

Family Access – Fighting for Children’s Rights, United States,  
<https://www.familyaccessfightingforchildrensrights.com>

Family Advocacy Network, PAC, United States, <https://www.fanpacnj.org/>

Family Reunion, United States, <https://www.familyreunionusa.org/>

Familias Unidas por Nuestros Niños, Uruguay, [www.familiasunitas.net](http://www.familiasunitas.net)

Fathers for Children (Isät lasten asialla ry), Finland, <https://www.isatlastenasialla.fi/>

Figli per sempre Nazionale, Italy, <https://www.figli per sempre.com/>

Find My Parent, United States, <https://findmyparent.org/>

Fundación Ayudar y Crecer, Argentina, <http://www.ayudarycrecer.org>

Fundación Padres por Justicia, Ecuador and Italy, [Fundación Padres por Justicia - Home \(facebook.com\)](https://www.facebook.com/fundacionpadresporjusticia)

Héroes Invisibles A.C., Mexico, [www.heroesinvisibles.org](http://www.heroesinvisibles.org)

Infancia Compartida, Argentina, <https://infanciacompartida.org>

International Council on Shared Parenting, International, [www.twohomes.org](http://www.twohomes.org)

International Support Network of Alienated Families, United States, <https://isnaf.info/>

La Dolce Vita, Ireland, [www.la-dolce-vita-project.com](http://www.la-dolce-vita-project.com)

Lawyers for Shared Parenting, Canada, <https://groups.google.com/g/l4sp>

Lazos Protectores de Familia, A. C., Mexico, <https://lazosprotectoresdelafamilia.wordpress.com/>

Leading Women for Shared Parenting, Canada, <https://lw4sp.org/>

Lygiavertės tėvystės asociacija, Lithuania, <https://bit.ly/3vmluLl>

Materia Familiar, Mexico, <https://materiafamiliar.wordpress.com/>

Mothers Against Child Abuse, United States, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/moms4children/?ref=share&fs=e&s=cl>

National Parents Organization, United States, <https://www.sharedparenting.org/>

Padres Autoconvocados del Noa, Argentina, <https://www.facebook.com/APAu-Agrupaci%C3%B3n-de-Padres-Autoconvocados-del-NOA-340380967359786/>

PAS-Intervention, United States, <https://www.pas-intervention.org/>

Parental Alienation Awareness Network, Trinidad & Tobago, <https://www.paain.net>

Parental Alienation Europe, Ireland, [www.parentalalienation.eu](http://www.parentalalienation.eu)



Parental Alienation UK, United Kingdom, <https://parentalalienationuk.info/>

Parental Alienation Legislative Group, United States, <https://www.palg-pasi.org/>

Respectfully PAC, United States, <https://respectfullypac.org/home/>

Servicemembers and Veterans for Children's Rights, United States,  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/3701784229929531/>

The Change for Children, United Kingdom, <https://www.thechangeforchildren.com/>

The Fatherless Generation Foundation, United States, <https://www.tfgf.org/>

The Hero's Circle, United States, <https://theheroscircle.com/>

The ManKind Initiative, United Kingdom, [www.mankind.org.uk](http://www.mankind.org.uk)

Vårdnad Boende Umgänge i Sverige, Sweden, <https://vardnad.se/>

Victim to Hero, United States, <https://victimtohero.com/>

#1000Pelotasparati, Mexico, <https://milpelotasparati.org>



## Appendix B: Correspondence

This appendix reproduces the correspondence that occurred among the authors of this analysis, the leadership of Routledge and Taylor & Francis, and personnel at the Committee on Publication Ethics. The individual correspondents are:

- Sabina Alam, Ph.D., Director of Publishing Ethics and Integrity, Taylor & Francis  
[sabina.alam@tandf.co.uk](mailto:sabina.alam@tandf.co.uk)
- William Bernet, M.D., President, Parental Alienation Study Group  
[william.bernet@vumc.org](mailto:william.bernet@vumc.org)
- Claire Jarvis, Senior Editor for Health and Social Care, Routledge  
[claire.jarvis@informa.com](mailto:claire.jarvis@informa.com)
- Alysa Levene, Operations Manager, Committee on Publication Ethics  
[alysa@publicationethics.org](mailto:alysa@publicationethics.org)
- Jeremy North, Managing Director of Books, Taylor & Francis  
[jeremy.north@informa.com](mailto:jeremy.north@informa.com)
- Iratxe Puebla, Facilitation and Integrity Officer, Committee on Publication Ethics  
[cope\\_assistant@publicationethics.org](mailto:cope_assistant@publicationethics.org)

### August 12, 2022 – William Bernet to Claire Jarvis and Jeremy North

It is my understanding that y'all were administratively responsible for the recent publication of *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*, edited by Jean Mercer and Margaret Drew.

My colleagues and I are extremely concerned about the pervasive misinformation and other misleading content of this book. We are recommending that the book be immediately removed from publication before it seriously damages children and families in the U.S., U.K., and other countries. Please review the attached letter and document, "A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation and Other Inaccuracies in *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*."

We are also mailing hard copies of the cover letter and the document, which should arrive at your offices in a few days. Please acknowledge receipt of this message and the attached materials. The best way to get back to my colleagues and me is at [william.bernet@vumc.org](mailto:william.bernet@vumc.org).

### August 12, 2022 – Letter from William Bernet and Alejandro Mendoza-Amaro to Jeremy North and Claire Jarvis

Freedom of speech is a fundamental axiom of democracy. People are free to express and publish provocative and outrageous opinions and even to claim that they represent the normative opinions of the scientific community. Nevertheless, responsible academic publishers (such as Routledge) maintain a high level of academic integrity and will not publish works that claim the Earth is flat and whose intent is to challenge the “Earth-is-round belief system.” Therefore, we are extremely concerned by Routledge’s recent publication of such a book, *Challenging Parental Alienation*, edited by Jean Mercer and Margaret Drew.

This letter comes to you from the individuals who wrote the enclosed document—“A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation and Other Inaccuracies in *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*”—and the two principal organizations that developed this document, the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) and Global Action for Research Integrity in Parental Alienation (GARI-PA).

This document unequivocally demonstrates that *Challenging Parental Alienation* (which coins the term “parental alienation belief system”) contains numerous forms of misinformation, misquoted sources, and plagiarized text, relies heavily on secondary and even tertiary sources as well as nonexistent sources, and features many editorial errors that are indicative of its substandard and sloppy scholarship. Among the misrepresentations that are made are: there is no empirical research about parental alienation; parental alienation theory assumes all children who manifest contact refusal are alienated; there are no scientifically based methods for distinguishing parental alienation from estrangement; and many other false statements. This is not simply a difference of opinions among professionals with contrasting perspectives on a controversial topic. Rather, our critique centers on factual errors such as distortions of the writings and opinions of other scholars.

Considering the reputations of the chapter authors and their outspokenness on the topic of parental alienation, they are no doubt aware of the major published literature on the topic. Yet they chose to ignore parental alienation research literature or to misquote and misconstrue it. The book borders on (if not treads on) scientific/professional fraud. The book is intended to inform lawyers, judges, mental health professionals, and others about challenging the “parental alienation belief system.” It is likely that many children and families will be damaged by this book if evaluators, attorneys, and judges are misled by it. This type of work is unethical and may even be seen as criminal (since creating parental alienation in a child is a serious form of emotional/psychological child abuse).

The legislative recommendations that this book advocates are already being advanced in numerous federal and state laws in the United States and across the globe. The scientific community and victims of parental alienation are attempting to explain to legislatures the fallacies upon which these laws are based. Books like *Challenging Parental Alienation* exacerbate this already formidable task and place children at risk.

The misrepresentations of *Challenging Parental Alienation* and other problems are so pervasive that it is impossible to merely publish corrections; rather, the book must be withdrawn from publication. We request and demand that Routledge recall all existing copies of this book in both digital and written form.

Please acknowledge receipt of this letter. The best way to communicate with us is at [william.bernet@vumc.org](mailto:william.bernet@vumc.org). Within 30 days, please send us your detailed plans to correct this publishing catastrophe. Currently, we are not revealing this document to the general public. However, if we do not arrive at a satisfactory resolution, we will distribute this material widely through websites, journal articles, and book reviews.

#### **August 12, 2022 – Claire Jarvis to William Bernet**

My working days are Monday-Thursday.

#### **August 24, 2022 – Claire Jarvis to William Bernet**

Many thanks for your email relating to the title *Challenging Parental Alienation*. Having checked back through our records, we can see that the proposal was externally reviewed by experts in the field and received two supportive endorsements. Although we appreciate that the field is a contested one, we are happy with the book's content and will not be withdrawing it from sale.

#### **August 28, 2022 – William Bernet to COPE Contact Us portal**

My colleagues and I are concerned about a book recently released by a large publishing company, which is a COPE member. A committee of experts analyzed the book in detail and prepared an 80-page report, which was endorsed by 40 organizations of professionals and child/family advocates. We thought that the misinformation in the book was so

extensive, that it should be withdrawn from publication. We sent the report to the leadership of the publishing company, who basically blew us off. Within a few days, they said, "Many thanks for your email relating to .... Having checked back through our records, we can see that the proposal was externally reviewed by experts in the field and received two supportive endorsements. .... [W]e are happy with the book's content and will not be withdrawing it from sale." The company executives obviously did not review our report in detail and did not attempt to establish the underlying facts. They obviously did not refer our report to independent experts for their assessment of the situation. We want to refer our concerns to COPE regarding (1) the book and (2) the company's method of handling complaints from readers. How do we do that?

### **August 30, 2022 – Alysa Levene to William Bernet**

Thank you for your email to COPE.

We do have a process for dealing with concerns or issues regarding our members. Please see the details of our process on our website and complete and submit the form to the Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee <https://publicationethics.org/facilitation-and-integrity-subcommittee>

Any concerns should have been raised to the attention of the publisher, and this process must be exhausted before COPE can evaluate the concerns.

The primary role of the Facilitation and Integrity Subcommittee is not to adjudicate complaints, but instead to facilitate the resolution of disputes in a manner that is consistent with COPE's Mission. They do not undertake investigations, and they cannot consider cases that are the subject of ongoing legal procedures.

### **August 31, 2022 – William Bernet to COPE Facilitation and Integrity Committee**

My colleagues and I submitted an elaborate complaint (80 pages) to Taylor & Francis regarding their book, *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*. We thought the book had pervasive misinformation about parental alienation, a serious mental condition experienced by many children whose parents are divorced. After a few days, one of the senior editors at the publisher (Ms. Claire Jarvis) send this perfunctory message: "Many thanks for your email relating to the title Challenging Parental Alienation. Having checked back through our records, we can see that the proposal was

externally reviewed by experts in the field and received two supportive endorsements. Although we appreciate that the field is a contested one, we are happy with the book's content and will not be withdrawing it from sale." It was obvious that personnel at Taylor & Francis (1) failed to take this complaint seriously; (2) failed to assess the underlying facts, e.g., the book vs. the complaint, and (3) failed to consult with independent experts regarding our complaint.

We would like the subcommittee to help us communicate with Taylor & Francis in terms of (1) their consulting with independent experts in assessing our complaint, which will take the form of (2) investigating the underlying facts, i.e., our conclusion that the book is full of false and misleading information. We will attach the document called "A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation and Other Inaccuracies in *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*." We will also attach the cover letter that we sent to Mr. Jeremy North (at Taylor & Francis) and Ms. Claire Jarvis (at Routledge).

Failure to adequately peer review, prior to acceptance for publication, a book that takes a highly controversial position regarding a highly controversial topic. Note: We are not talking about a difference of opinions among scholars, but factual errors and misrepresentations. (2) Failure to assess in a serious manner an elaborate complaint submitted by a group of experts in the field of study discussed in the book. (3) Failure to enlist competent, independent experts to help them in this task.

Parental alienation theory is a serious field of study that pertains to a mental condition that affects hundreds of thousands of children in the U.S. The editors and authors of this book have been determined for several years to undermine public confidence in parental alienation theory, which is likely to injure the children and families affected by this condition.

### **September 1, 2022 — Iratxe Puebla to William Bernet**

I am writing regarding your submission to COPE in relation to concerns about the book 'Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents'. I confirm receipt of your submission. I have raised this matter to the attention of a member of the Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee for their input.

In your submission form you made reference to two files, the submission only included the file 'review\_of\_mercer\_drew\_2022-08-12.pdf', if there is another file you would like to have considered with your submission, please could you send it over email.

**September 1, 2022 – William Bernet to Iratxe Puebla**

Thanks for your message. Attached is the second pertinent document, which is the cover letter that my colleagues and I sent to Mr. Jeremy North (for Taylor & Francis) and Ms. Claire Jarvis (for Routledge). Let me know if you have any additional questions.

**September 2, 2022 – Iratxe Puebla to William Bernet**

Thank you for sharing this additional file, I raised it to the attention of the member of the Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee.

**September 5, 2022 – Iratxe Puebla to Claire Jarvis and Sabina Alam**

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) has been contacted by William Bernet - ccd - in relation to the publication 'Challenging Parental Alienation -New Directions for Professionals and Parents' (<https://www.routledge.com/Challenging-Parental-Alienation-New-Directions-for-Professionals-and-Parents/Mercer-Drew/p/book/9780367559762>).

As you know, COPE's role is to provide advice for member editors and journals and to promote a better understanding of publication ethics. When concerns are brought to COPE's attention, we provide guidance on whether any procedures followed/actions taken are inconsistent with the COPE Core Practices or COPE guidelines, and provide advice and facilitation in resolving disagreements between the reader/author and the editor or publisher. We do not interfere with specific editorial decisions.

In this context, we write in the hope that we can facilitate a dialogue in relation to Dr Bernet's concerns. In order for the process to be as transparent and constructive as possible, Dr Bernet is copied in this email. We request that you do the same in your reply. Dr Bernet has raised concerns that the book mentioned contains errors and inaccuracies about parental alienation. Dr Bernet considers that the publisher should consult independent experts in assessing his concerns and withdraw the book from publication. We include below a summary of the concerns raised by Dr Bernet.

We would appreciate hearing your comments in relation to Dr Bernet's concerns and the process that the publisher has followed in handling those concerns. Could you please provide comments on the following points:



- Details of the process for the handling of the concerns raised by Dr Bernet, and comments on whether the book was peer reviewed prior to publication.
- Clarification on whether the publisher has sought a further review of the book by experts. If this step was taken, please provide comments on the procedural aspects of this review, if the step was not taken, could you provide some brief comments on the context for this.
- An update on the current status of the follow up and whether a resolution has been reached regarding the concerns about the book.

Many thanks for helping us address Dr Bernet's concerns. We look forward to hearing from you.

### Concerns raised by William Bernet

We would like the subcommittee to help us communicate with Taylor & Francis in terms of (1) their consulting with independent experts in assessing our complaint, which will take the form of (2) investigating the underlying facts, i.e., our conclusion that the book is full of false and misleading information. We will attach the document called "A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation and Other Inaccuracies in Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents." We will also attach the cover letter that we sent to Mr. Jeremy North (at Taylor & Francis) and Ms. Claire Jarvis (at Routledge). What aspects of the Core Practices do you believe that the member is contravening, and why (1) Failure to adequately peer review, prior to acceptance for publication, a book that takes a highly controversial position regarding a highly controversial topic. Note: We are not talking about a difference of opinions among scholars, but factual errors and misrepresentations. (2) Failure to assess in a serious manner an elaborate complaint submitted by a group of experts in the field of study discussed in the book. (3) Failure to enlist competent, independent experts to help them in this task.

### September 15, 2022 – Claire Jarvis to Iratxe Puebla and William Bernet

I have further discussed these concerns with our editorial and publishing directors. They asked me to reiterate the first reply we gave to you which was that we are happy with the reviews we obtained for this project and also with the academic credentials of both editors. Because of this, we will not be withdrawing this book from sale.

### September 15, 2022 – William Bernet to Claire Jarvis

Thank you for responding to the inquiry that Ms. Iratxe Puebla recently sent to you regarding our concerns about *Challenging Parental Alienation*. However, your brief response was flawed for these reasons ...

1. Although you make global and generic statements of support for the book, you have made no attempt at all to investigate the numerous claims in our 80-page document, “A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation and Other Inaccuracies in *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*.” For example:

>> On page 11 of our “Comprehensive Review,” we quote, “There has never been even a single published complete case study that would show how identification of a parental alienation case was accomplished.” That is a false statement. E.g., the paper by Harman, Warshak, Lorandos, and Florian (2022) lists 33 case studies among the numerous examples of parental alienation research that they reviewed.

>> On page 15 of our “Comprehensive Review,” we quote, “[A]lienation advocates argue, a child’s unwillingness to be with a parent creates a presumption that the (typically) mother’s actions cause the child’s choice.” That is a false statement. The paper by Bernet (2021) explains in detail the history of that particular example of misinformation.

>> On page 20 of our “Comprehensive Review,” we quote, “There remains no objective or reliable measure for identifying and distinguishing alienation from legitimate estrangement.” That is a false statement. In that section of our document, we cited fourteen papers published in peer-reviewed journals that describe various test instruments for identifying parental alienation.

Those are only a few examples. In our “Comprehensive Review,” my colleagues and I identified over 200 false statements. The only way that you can truly assess our extensive critique of *Challenging Parental Alienation* is to ask independent experts to determine the underlying truth. Is the actual truth in the pages of *Challenging Parental Alienation* or in the statements made in the “Comprehensive Review”? As we stated previously, we are not talking about a difference of opinion among scholars; we are talking about hundreds of factual errors in the book edited by Mercer and Drew.

2. In your brief response, you say, “[W]e are happy with the reviews we obtained for this project ....” Of course, I have no idea who did the reviews or what they said. If

the reviewers of this highly controversial manuscript were suggested by the editors, Mercer and Drew, it seems obvious that the reviewers would endorse the work of their friends and colleagues. If the reviewers were truly independent experts, you might want to send our “Comprehensive Review” to them and see what they say.

3. In your brief response, you say, “[W]e are happy with ... the academic credentials of both editors.” Yes, no doubt they have impressive CV’s. But you do not seem to be aware that Jean Mercer and Margaret Drew (and most of the chapter authors) have spent years publishing derogatory comments and vast misinformation regarding parental alienation theory. If you want, we can send you a compilation of their false and misleading statements over many years. The book you published, *Challenging Parental Alienation*, is simply the culmination of a long campaign to discredit parental alienation theory.

If this book continues to be available to the public, it seems obvious that hundreds of children and families will be damaged by erroneous legal judgements based on the false information that it promotes. Information about *Challenging Parental Alienation* has already been posted on influential websites. Please let me know quickly how you intend to truly investigate the numerous criticisms that my colleagues and I explained in our “Comprehensive Review.”

#### **September 15, 2022 – Claire Jarvis to William Bernet**

Routledge's UK offices are closed for the Queen's funeral. I will be back at work on Tuesday the 20th of September.

#### **September 16, 2022 — Iratxe Puebla to Claire Jarvis and William Bernet**

Thank you for your emails, I have raised them to the attention of the member of the Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee who is reviewing the matter and I will be in touch in due course.

### September 19, 2022 – Iratxe Puebla to Claire Jarvis

Thank you for your response to our request for comments on William Bernet's concerns about the publication 'Challenging Parental Alienation - New Directions for Professionals and Parents'.

COPE's review of concerns raised to our attention focuses on the procedural aspects of the publisher's follow up. With that in mind, we would appreciate receiving further clarification from you on the procedural items of the follow up on this matter. Could you please provide a response to each of the two additional items below included in our correspondence:

- Details of the process for the handling of the concerns raised by Dr Bernet, and comments on whether the book was peer reviewed prior to publication.
- Clarification on whether the publisher has sought a further review of the book by experts. If this step was taken, please provide comments on the procedural aspects of this review, if the step was not taken, could you provide some brief comments on the context for this.

Many thanks again for your attention to this matter. We look forward to hearing from you by October 3.

### October 17, 2022 – Iratxe Puebla to Claire Jarvis

I am writing to follow up on our correspondence regarding William Bernet's concerns about the publication 'Challenging Parental Alienation -New Directions for Professionals and Parents'.

As I indicated, we would appreciate further clarification on the procedural items of the follow up on this matter. We asked for your comments on the two items below but we have not heard back from you, can you **please provide your response by October 31**.

- Details of the process for the handling of the concerns raised by Dr Bernet, and comments on whether the book was peer reviewed prior to publication.
- Clarification on whether the publisher has sought a further review of the book by experts. If this step was taken, please provide comments on the procedural aspects

of this review, if the step was not taken, could you provide some brief comments on the context for this.

We look forward to hearing from you.

### November 3, 2022 – William Bernet to Iratxe Puebla

I gather you have not had a response from Ms. Claire Jarvis regarding our concerns about the book *Challenging Parental Alienation*. You suggested a deadline of October 31 for a response. What is the next step?

As I understand your communications with Ms. Jarvis, you were not expecting to see the RESULTS of any investigation regarding our concerns. Instead, you were simply asking for an explanation of the PROCESS by which the publisher would investigate our concerns. I think the publisher has had plenty of time to provide that information.

### November 5, 2022 – Iratxe Puebla to William Bernet

We have not yet received a response from the publisher regarding the request for comments about the publication 'Challenging Parental Alienation - New Directions for Professionals and Parents'. I have raised this to the attention of the member of the Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee, and I will also pursue a further contact with the publisher.

### November 9, 2022 – Iratxe Puebla to Claire Jarvis

I am writing to follow up on our correspondence regarding William Bernet's concerns about the publication 'Challenging Parental Alienation - New Directions for Professionals and Parents'.

The COPE Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee acknowledges your response dated September 15. As we indicated, our review focuses on the procedural aspects of the follow up on concerns raised to the publisher, and with this in mind, we require some further information regarding the process for follow up on this matter. **Please provide a response to the two items listed below by November 22:**

- Details of the process for the handling of the concerns raised by Dr Bernet, and comments on whether the book was peer reviewed prior to publication.
- Clarification on whether the publisher has sought a further review of the book by experts. If this step was taken, please provide comments on the procedural aspects of this review, if the step was not taken, could you provide some brief comments on the context for this.

Thank you for your time. We look forward to hearing from you.

### **November 28, 2022 – William Bernet to Iratxe Puebla**

Apparently, Ms. Claire Jarvis and her colleagues at Taylor & Francis have ignored the second deadline that you set for their response regarding their book, *Challenging Parental Alienation*. (The first deadline was October 31; the second deadline was November 22.) What happens now? Shouldn't the Board of Directors of COPE consider whether to allow Taylor & Francis to continue membership in COPE, since the publishing company is not abiding by the basic principles and rules promulgated by COPE?

You may have seen the article by Dr. Peter Wilmshurst, "Has COPE membership become a way for unprincipled journals to buy a fake badge of integrity?" It was published on the Retraction Watch website. Dr. Wilmshurst makes the point that COPE may be unable or unwilling to sanction large publishers because COPE needs the funds/dues provided by these publishers. Taylor & Francis is the third largest dues-payer at COPE. (Springer has 3097 member journals; Elsevier has 1861; Taylor & Francis has 1711.)

My colleagues and I started this conversation with COPE on September 1, so three months have elapsed. Please let me know if there is any hope that your office can help us resolve our disagreement with Taylor & Francis. If COPE is powerless to help sort this out, we may need to proceed with some other approach.

### **November 29, 2022 – Iratxe Puebla to William Bernet**

I acknowledge receipt of your email. I have raised it to the attention of relevant members of the Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee.

**December 16, 2022 – William Bernet to Iratxe Puebla**

Regarding the book published by Taylor & Francis, *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*:

My colleagues and I initially submitted a very elaborate and detailed critique of the book to senior staff at Taylor & Francis on August 12, 2022. They have never responded to our concerns in a substantive manner. They have never indicated how they reviewed the book prior to publication and how they intend to investigate the various concerns raised by my colleagues and me.

My colleagues and I initially contacted COPE on September 1, 2022. You set two deadlines for Taylor & Francis to respond to your inquiries (October 31 and November 22, 2022). The staff at Taylor & Francis have apparently ignored your requests for more information about their procedures for addressing concerns like this.

What happens next? We can't let this drag on indefinitely. If COPE is not able to take any action at all (e.g., suspend Taylor & Francis's membership in COPE), please let us know sooner rather than later. My colleagues and I will need to take other steps to address the pervasive misinformation in this outrageous book.

**December 19, 2023 – Iratxe Puebla to William Bernet**

I acknowledge receipt of your email. This matter is under discussion by relevant members of the Facilitation and Integrity subcommittee. I should note that the COPE office will be closed for a good part of the next two weeks and thus, we may only be able to provide a further update in January.

**December 19, 2022 – William Bernet to Iratxe Puebla**

Thanks for the information.

**January 1, 2023 – William Bernet to Iratxe Puebla**

I want to bring important new information to your attention -- regarding our concerns about the book, *Challenging Parental Alienation*, published by Routledge.

A few days ago a pertinent paper was published in a peer-reviewed journal, *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*. Attached is the article, "Scholarly Rumors: Citation Analysis of Vast Misinformation Regarding Parental Alienation Theory," by Bernet and Xu. Also, Appendix A for that paper, which includes 94 quotations of the *same misinformation* published between 1994 and 2022. Appendix A quotes four chapters from *Challenging Parental Alienation* (Items 89-93 in Appendix A). This same recurrent information was discussed in the document, "A Comprehensive Review of Misinformation," that my colleagues and I sent to y'all in August 2022.

The point is that the numerous errors made in *Challenging Parental Alienation* were not random or accidental. Instead, they were the current culmination of a campaign to discredit parental alienation theory, which started in 1994. The chapter authors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* made the same false statements that were stated over and over again in journal articles, book chapters, formal presentations, and government documents. It is important that this cascade of false information be interrupted, which is why the offensive book needs to be removed from publication.

It is interesting that Routledge has published several books that promote parental alienation theory in a positive way. It is unclear how this book with pervasive errors got through their review process. They may claim that they are simply publishing various books by qualified professionals with different perspectives on the same topic. That is incorrect. We are not talking here about different opinions of scholars talking about the same topic. We are talking about false statements, misquotations, and numerous other factual errors.

Please let us know the next step in your procedure for situations like this. It seems obvious that if Routledge does not respond to your inquiries after all this time, the COPE Board of Directors should consider suspending the membership of Routledge in your organization.

**January 1, 2023 – Iratxe Puebla to William Bernet**

Thank you for your email. I will be away until January 3 and will only have intermittent access to email. I will respond to your message as soon as possible upon my return.



## February 1, 2023 – William Bernet to Iratxe Puebla

As you know, my colleagues and I are very concerned about a book published by COPE member, Taylor & Francis, *Challenging Parental Alienation: New Directions for Professionals and Parents*, edited by Jean Mercer and Margaret Drew. Another month has gone by, with no substantive response from Taylor & Francis and no substantive response from COPE. Here is the timeline of our correspondence ...

>> August 12, 2022 – My colleagues and I submitted our initial statement of concern to senior personnel at Taylor & Francis and Routledge. Ms. Claire Jarvis responded in a perfunctory manner, but it was clear that no one at the publishing company investigated the concerns itemized in our 80-page “Comprehensive Review of Misinformation.”

>> September 1, 2022 – My colleagues and I contacted COPE regarding our concerns about *Challenging Parental Alienation*.

>> September 5, 2022 – Ms. Iratxe Puebla contacted Ms. Claire Jarvis (at Routledge) and Dr. Sabina Alam (at Taylor & Francis) regarding our concerns. Ms. Jarvis responded in a perfunctory manner, but it was clear that no one at the publishing company investigated the concerns raised by my colleagues and myself.

>> September 19, 2022 – Ms. Puebla sent a further request to Ms. Jarvis with a deadline of October 3, 2022, for a response. As far as I can tell, there was no response from Ms. Jarvis.

>> October [17], 2022 – Ms. Puebla sent an additional request to Ms. Jarvis with an extended deadline of October 31, 2022. As far as I can tell, there was no response from Ms. Jarvis.

>> November 5, 2022 – Ms. Puebla told me that she has raised the issue to the attention of the Facilitation and Integrity Subcommittee, and she said she pursue further contact with the publisher. As far as I can tell, there was no response from Ms. Jarvis.

>> December 19, 2022 – Ms. Puebla reported to me, “This matter is under discussion by relevant members of the Facilitation and Integrity Subcommittee. I should note that the COPE office will be closed for a good part of the next two weeks and thus, we may only be able to provide a further update in January.”

>> February 1, 2023 – I have received no further communication from Ms. Puebla or from anyone else at COPE. In the meantime, however, the editors of *Challenging Parental Alienation* have been promoting the book through book reviews in journals, websites, and government documents in the U.S.

Here are our questions: Does the Facilitation and Integrity Subcommittee have any further suggestions as to how my colleagues and I might resolve this serious dispute with the publishers of *Challenging Parental Alienation*? Has the Subcommittee given up all discussion and negotiations

with Taylor & Francis? Is the Subcommittee ready to recommend that Taylor & Francis be suspended from membership in COPE for failure to comply the organization’s basic expectations regarding the resolution of serious complaints? Also, are you ready to proceed with the next step in your flow chart of processes for handling this type of problem: “Subcommittee member and Facilitation and Integrity Officer reviews all correspondence and drafts report”?

Finally, does COPE have any objection if my colleagues and I decide to publicize and promote our concerns about *Challenging Parental Alienation* through websites, social media, and professional publications? We have refrained from taking that step because that seems to be discouraged on the COPE website as long as negotiations are occurring. But now – after all this inaction – do you agree that it is appropriate for us to spread the word that this is an extremely poorly researched, sloppily written, and dangerous book?

#### **February 4, 2023 — Iratxe Puebla to William Bernet**

I acknowledge receipt of your email. I have raised this correspondence to the attention of relevant members of the Facilitation and Integrity Subcommittee and I will be in touch as they provide advice.

**Final Note:** The authors of this review of *Challenging Parental Alienation* received no further correspondence from the publishers or from COPE as of the date of publication of this report, i.e., March 20, 2023.







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