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Is it Alienating Parenting, Role Reversal, or Child Abuse?

A Study of Children's Rejection of a Parent in Child Custody Disputes

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Abstract

This study of custody disputing families tests competing hypothesis about the correlates of children's alignment with one parent and rejection of the other. Hypotheses include: a) parental alienation by the aligned parent, (b) abuse by the rejected parent, and (c) boundary diffusion or role reversal in the family. The data were coded from clinical research records of 125 children referred from family courts for custody evaluation or custody counseling. The findings support a multi-factor explanation of children's rejection of a parent with both the aligned and rejected parents contributing to the problem, together with role reversal in parent-child relationships.

Keywords: parental alienation, role reversal, abuse, children, divorce, visitation refusal

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The problem of children's strong negative attitudes and rejecting behavior toward one of their parents after divorce, often accompanied by resistance or refusal to visit, has long perplexed and frustrated parents, family courts, mental health, and legal professionals alike. A proliferation of names for the phenomena reflects an ongoing debate about its causes and correlates. It has been variously referred to as pathological alignments and visitation refusal (Johnston, 1993; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980); parental alienation syndrome (PAS; Gardner, 1987; 1992; 1998a; Warshak, 2001) or parental alienation (PA; Darnell, 1998); and more recently, shifting the focus from the parent to the child, "the alienated child" has been distinguished from the "estranged child" (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Despite the debate, empirical research into the problem has been limited.

Over the past several decades, large representative studies have investigated the frequency with which non-custodial parents visit their children and, in general, have documented significant decline in contact over time following divorce (Bray & Berger, 1993; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). However none of these studies has attempted to elucidate the contribution of the child's attitudes and behaviors to the drop off in parental involvement. Plagued with different definitions and measures, non-probability samples provide varying estimates of the extent of the problem. The frequency of severe cases is relatively low, especially in samples drawn from the broader community. In an early community study of divorce followed five years after separation, 11% of 131 children were reported as being "genuinely reluctant to

visit” their non-custodial parent, usually the father (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 46). In a second community sample followed two three-year post-divorce filing, 15% of 91 children were in “extreme alignments” with one parent against the other, with mothers and fathers rejected at the same rate (Johnston, 2003, p. 164). Among custody disputing families, the estimates are higher. Kopetski (1998a, p. 65) found parental alienation in 20% of 413 such families. In two other custody disputing samples where mother alignments were slightly more common, 21% of 124 children were in “extreme alignments” in a high conflict litigating group (Johnston, 2003, p.164) and 27% of 63 children were classified as having a “strong alignment” within high conflict and violent litigating families (Johnston, 1993, p.126). In general, boys and girls are equally likely to take this stance, with the problem becoming more pronounced with older adolescent children.

Competing Explanations for Children’s Rejection of a Parent

The most prominent theory as to why children reject a parent puts the blame almost entirely upon an embittered divorced spouse who systematically programs or brainwashes their children to do so. Gardner (2001) has written extensively about PAS as “a disorder that arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child’s campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification.” He states that “It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrination and the child’s own vilification of the target parent” (p. 61). Consequently, he advocates court orders that enforce visitation and even change custody to the hated parent in severe cases, as well as punitive measures against the offending parent like fines and incarceration for contempt of court authority (Gardner,

1998b; 1999; 2001). His views of the cause and cures for the problem are largely shared by a number of mental health professionals (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Kopetski, 1998a; 1998b; Rand, 1997a; 1997b; Warshak, 2001; 2002; 2003). It is important to note, that while advocates of this perspective acknowledge that “when true parental abuse and/or neglect is present, the child’s animosity may be justified and so the parental alienation syndrome explanation for the child’s hostility is not applicable” (Gardner, 2001, p. 61). In the murky practice of child custody litigation there is considerable dispute as to what constitutes evidence for such exclusion.

A competing perspective on the problem is that espoused by Kelly and Johnston (2001) who are critical of Gardner’s “overly simplistic focus on the brainwashing parent as the primary etiological agent” (p. 250), and instead propose a model of multiple factors within the marriage, the parental separation, the psychological vulnerability of both parents and child, and the custody litigation context itself, to explain why some children reject a parent. Their view of the problem is largely shared by colleagues who emphasize the need for differential diagnosis to distinguish the specific relevant factors in any given case (Lee & Olesen, 2001), court oversight and case-management (Sullivan & Kelly, 2001), and a family- focused approach to treatment (Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001). Specifically, they stress the need to distinguish an “alienated child” from a host of normal developmental and expectable reactions. An alienated child defined as one who “freely and persistently expresses unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs, such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear, toward a parent, disproportionate to their actual experience of that parent” (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, p.251) is also distinguished from an “estranged child” (defined as one who has

good reason to reject a parent that has perpetrated child neglect or abuse, abandonment, and domestic violence (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, p. 253). An empirical test of this more complex model showed solid support for the idea that children's rejection of a parent is multi-determined with both the aligned and rejected parent contributing to the problem, in addition to vulnerabilities within children themselves (Johnston, 2003).

A third explanation for the problem of children's strong alliance with one parent and rejection of the other parent after divorce involves parent-child boundary diffusion, enmeshment, and role reversal, all of which are processes that have long been recognized by family therapists as the result of break-down in family structure (Ackerman, 1958; Minuchin, 1974). When the co-parental alliance fails along with the marriage, and when parents are emotionally overwhelmed and needy, young children can become overburdened or "parentified" and begin to assume functions for the parent and family that compromise their own development (Charles, 2001; Chase, 1999; Jacobvitz, Riggs, & Johnson, 1999; Jurkovic, 1998; Kerig, 2003; Sroufe, Duggal, Weinfield, & Carlson, 2000). These disturbances in the parent-child relationship have been linked to a growing literature on the adverse effects of parents' psychological control of children, also called "intrusive parenting" (Barber, 2002). The insidious effects of psychological control (i.e., parenting that manipulates and constrains children's feelings, ideas, and attachments) has been isolated from the benefits of behavioral control (i.e., discipline and supervision), reliably measured, and associated with remarkably consistent negative impacts on children's self-processes, internalizing and externalizing problems, and academic achievement (Barber, Bean, & Erickson, 2002; Barber & Harmon, 2002; Nelson & Crick, 2002). Furthermore, boundary ambiguity, role reversal, parentification, and psychological

control have been identified in a number of studies of children of marital conflict and divorce, although to date none of these studies has examined the relationship between these disturbances and the child's rejection of a parent (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buehler & Pasley, 2000; Johnston, 1990; Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001; Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999; Stone, Buehler, & Barker, 2002; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

It is well known that the family environment of highly conflicted, separated spouses is typified by their mutual distrust, fear, anger, bitterness, and blaming of one another. As these disputing ex-partners enter the court, serious and multiple issues of child neglect, sexual and physical abuse, domestic violence, parental abuse of drugs and alcohol, and other criminal activity are typically brandished in custody disputes. (Depner, Cannata, & Simon, 1992; Faller & DeVoe, 1995; Johnston, Girdner, & Sagatun-Edwards, 1999). Hence a fourth perspective as to why children reject a parent after divorce is advocated by specialists in the field of family violence who believe that these allegations are often well-founded. They claim that the extent of real abuse suffered by children and their victim parent, usually the mother, has been largely ignored, dismissed, or greatly minimized by the courts (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Dalton, 1999; Geffner, 1997; Jaffe & Geffner, 1998; Pagelow, 1997). For this reason they believe that the safety of mothers and children has too often been placed at grave risk by custody and access arrangements awarded by the court that favor a controlling and manipulative abuser. It follows that they are particularly hostile towards PAS explanations that blame the victim parent for the child's reluctance or refusal to visit the other parent (Bruch, 2001a; 2001b; Faller, 1998).

In sum, the tangle of questions encompassing the current debate over the causes of children's alignments with one parent and rejection of the other parent after divorce is as follows: (a) Is the problem one of an embittered, hostile, and spiteful ex-spouse who seeks to destroy the child's relationship with an innocent rejected parent (the PAS perspective)?; (b) Is the problem the result of abuse perpetrated by the rejected parent (the abuse perspective)?; (c) Is the problem related to parent-child boundary diffusion and role reversal in the highly conflicted divorce family (the family structure perspective)?; or (d) does the problem arise from multiple sources (i.e., does real abuse or poor parenting by the rejected parent together with abiding distrust and anger harbored by the aligned parent induce boundary dissolution and role-reversals in these families), with the result that these children are at greatest risk from insidious forms of emotional maltreatment (the multi-factor perspective)? It is the purpose of this paper to bring empirical data to bear on the debate, and to explore some ways that parenting may be compromised in high-conflict divorced families by a vicious self-fulfilling prophecy effect.

Methods

Participants

The sample of children from child custody disputing families for this study was drawn from an archival data base of documentary records describing parent-child relationships in separating and divorced families. These data were collected over more than a decade, from 1989 through 2002, with all subjects referred from family courts within several San Francisco Bay Area counties. Half (51%) were referred for a custody evaluation (paid for by the litigants), and half (49%) were referred for custody counseling (offered on a sliding scale fee) with the goal of settling parental disputes and ameliorating

high conflict, chronic litigation, and/or violence. One third of the custody counseling group had previously undergone a custody evaluation.

A total sample of 125 families provided data for this study after a number of selection criteria were applied. To ensure independence between subjects, the oldest or only child was selected for study. Since the custody counseling families only included children under the age of 13 years at baseline, only this age group was selected from the custody evaluation sub-group. Finally, for about 25 % of eligible children, family reports were missing from the files or insufficient data were available. The final sample consisted of 65 girls and 60 boys, aged 2 to 13 years (mean = 7.8, $SD= 3.0$). The average number of children in each family was 1.6 ($SD= 0.7$) and the modal family size was an only child.

In terms of actual living arrangements, 53% of children were in their mother's custody, 10.5% were in father's custody, 35.5% were in joint custody, and 1% was living with another relative. On the average, children saw their fathers 10.5 days per month ($SD= 7.5$). While custody was similar between custody evaluation and custody counseling samples, fathers had more access to their children in the former compared to the latter (12 versus 8 days per month).

The majority of children were Caucasian (85%), and the remainder (15%) included African American, Hispanic, and Asian-Pacific Islander. Average length of marriage was 8 years ($SD= 5.2$) for the 85% of parents who had been married to one another. Length of separation for the total sample varied widely (mean = 39 months, $SD= 30.7$). On the 7- point Hollingshead & Redlich (1958) occupational index, fathers' mean rating was 3.0 ($SD= 1.9$) and mothers' mean rating was 4.1 ($SD= 2.1$). The custody evaluation fathers tended to have higher occupational status.

Procedure

For both the custody evaluation and the custody counseling families, the data gathering consisted of extensive interviews with each family member that included developmental histories of the children and their relationships with each parent; a brief history of each parent's family of origin; a history of the courtship, marriage, and separation; observations of the interactions between parents and children; information from collateral professionals and others close to the family; and reviews of written documentation provided by attorneys and parents. Special attention in both samples was given to the content and the history of the parental disputes with one another, especially the allegations of abuse each party made about the other that precipitated the referral. In addition, for the custody evaluation group, a full battery of psychological tests was conducted with all parents, and with children when indicated. A less extensive and somewhat different set of standardized psychological measures and rating scales were administered to the custody counseling group. Custody evaluations typically required 30 to 50 hours of data collection for each family following with a full written report, documenting all observational and test data, together with a clinical summary that was prepared and made available to the court. On average, the custody counseling families were seen for about 40 hours, including an assessment phase of about 9 to 12 hours. For research purposes, clinicians dictated detailed process records from notes taken during the assessment phase and completed a confidential written family report. In addition, a structured clinical summary at the end of counseling was completed.

Using the materials described above (with the exception of the standardized psychological tests), two experienced clinicians, working independently, completed

clinical ratings of each family utilizing rating scales and a coding manual prepared for the purpose of extracting data for multiple, different studies. They coded significant events in the lives of each parent (especially childhood loss and trauma): (a) the history of the courtship, marriage, and separation; the nature of the ex-spousal relationship; (b) allegations and substantiations of family abuse; (c) parenting behaviors; and (d) the child's attitudes and behavior toward each parent. A total of three clinical psychologists and three clinical social workers were engaged in the task, with one of these rating all cases in the data samples. The second clinical rater on each case in most instances was one who had direct knowledge of the family in the role of counselor or custody evaluator. Where discrepancies of two or more points on the scales arose on any item, and where there were differences in facts reported on a "yes/no" measure, the two raters conferred and attempted to reduce their differences. These discussions helped to produce further elaboration of the coding manual, reducing subsequent discrepancies. It was estimated that this involved less than 8 % of the data points. Inter-rater reliabilities for each item on all clinical ratings were calculated using intra-class correlations (*ICCs*). Any item with missing data on >15% of the total sample or with $ICC < .50$ was dropped.

Factor analyses were then conducted on the remaining items within each conceptual category. Principal-component analysis with varimax rotation was utilized. Factors with eigenvalues >1 were retained, and within each factor, items that loaded >.40 were retained. Items loading together on a factor were evaluated for internal consistency using Cronbach's α . The remaining items for each factor were combined with equal weighting to produce the score for each scale since they were all measured on six-point Likert scales (i.e., from none to very high).

In order to reduce some of the problems associated with same source variance, in all the regression analysis, one rater's scores were used for the dependent variables, and the second rater's scores were used for the independent variables. Then all the analyses were repeated, reversing the source of the data, to check that similar results were obtained to those reported here. The analyses were also done separately with the custody evaluation and custody counseling sub-sets of the data to check consistency of findings. Finally, the samples were divided by gender of child and the analysis repeated. It is important to note that the overall pattern of findings reported below were similar, regardless how the analysis was conducted, with little variation in beta coefficients. Although in some of the smaller subsets of data the significance levels of some independent variables (namely *Warm/Involved Parent*) did not reach $p < .05$, the trends were clearly similar.

Measures

The specific measures used in this study are summarized below; the full scales, together with their psychometric properties, are shown in Appendix A, B, & C. In addition it is noteworthy that since the completion of this study, some support for the predictive validity of the following measures has been obtained by the correlation of these clinical ratings with personality variables on the Rorschach, scored by the Comprehensive System (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2004a; 2004b).

Dependent Variables

Child rejection of parent. This clinical rating was a composite of 13 items, including ones like "expresses overt hatred or strong dislike of parent," "overt scorn, denigration, verbal abuse, and/or harassment of parent," "presents

vague/unspecific/trivial reasons for dislike of parent,” and “cites family legends/borrowed scenarios that justify dislike of parent.” The correlation of this variable with other factors measuring the child’s attitude and behavior toward each parent are as follows: (a) *Child’s Enjoyment of Parent (M/FEEnjoy)* $r = -.57$ and $-.70$, (b) *Visitation Resistance with Parent (M/FVisitResist)* $r = .71$ and $.80$, and (c) *Aligned with Parent (M/FAligned)* $r = -.30$ and $-.36$. See Appendix A for specific items within each of these factors.

Independent Variables

Warm-involved parent. This factor was made up of 12 items, measuring positive parenting capacities. Examples of these items include “parent is able to show love,” “parent is involved in child’s daily activities,” “parent shows confidence in self as parent,” and “parent (does not have) difficulty listening to what child communicates or requests.” This factor was negatively correlated with a second factor measuring each parent’s behaviors with the child, namely *Negative-Angry Parent (Neg-AngryM/F,)* $r = -.60$ and $-.53$. See Appendix B for specific items within both of these factors.

Alienating co-parent (M/FAlienat). This factor was made up of 10 items that measure the extent to which the parent sabotages the child’s relationship with the other parent by using the child to send negative messages, expressing anger if the child shows positive feelings toward the other parent, and modeling hostile and negative behavior toward the other parent. This factor was negatively correlated with *Supportive Co-Parent (M/FSupport)* $r = -.75$ and $-.66$, a second clinical rating measuring the extent to which each parent supports and encourages the child’s relationship with the other parent. See Appendix B for specific items within each of these factors.

Role reversal with parent. This factor was made up of 7 items that measure the extent of boundary problems, role reversal, or psychological intrusiveness between each parent and child. Items include ones like “(parent has) difficulty distinguishing child’s feelings from own,” “child comfort’s parent; parents parent,” and “child is confidante to parent’s adult interests and concerns.” Appendix B lists all of the specific items within this factor. It is important to note that *RolRevM/F* and *M/FAlienat* are highly correlated ($r = .63$ & $.57$) indicating that, as measured, these two concepts overlap.

Allegations of abusive parent. Allegations of abuse against parent were complaints of abuse made by one parent against the other parent during the lifetime of the child. Allegations refer to specific critical events that were believed to have happened in the past while the child was in the care of that parent.

Evidence of abusive parent. Substantiations of abuse against parent were any corroborating evidence of abuse cited to back up the allegations that had not been dismissed as entirely unfounded, such as child protective service reports, self-admissions (partial or complete), eye-witness reports (considering the credibility of witnesses), expert testimony, medical records, police reports, arrests, plea-bargains, and criminal convictions. It also includes abuse identified by persons other than a parent. This variable was used as an indicator of the existence of real abuse in the family.

Several categories of allegations and substantiations were coded: (a) child neglect, (b) physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, and (c) domestic violence between partners. See Appendix C for definitions of these terms and Johnston, Lee, Olesen, and Walters, (2004) for a full report on these findings. Inter-rater reliabilities for the data on allegations and substantiations were subject to an additional check by comparing them with ratings that

had been completed a decade previously on a subset of the sample ($n = 41$). For the purposes of the multivariate analysis, a dummy variable was created for substantiated *Child Abuse* by each parent (*M/FChAbuse*) that included any of the following: (a) child neglect, (b) physical, verbal, and (c) sexual abuse (Yes = 1, No = 0). A dummy variable was also created for substantiated Domestic Violence committed by either parent (scored as Yes = 1 and No = 0).

Control Variables

Age of Child was measured in years and *Gender of Child* was rated (1=girl; 2=boy). *Separation Anxieties from parent* was a clinical rating consisted of two items measuring the degree to which the child was “whiny, crying fretful, weepy at time of leaving a parent for visits;” and “experienced separation anxieties from a parent (i.e., was clingy).” It was included to control for temporary, developmentally expectable behaviors in younger children when separating from a primary parent or transitioning between primary caretakers. ($\alpha = .73, r = .74$).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables are shown in Tables 1 and 2. The frequency with which a child rejected either parent was low. The mean level of *Child Rejection of Father* was 1.47, $SD = .98$ and the mean level of *Child Rejection of Mother* was 1.37, $SD = .85$ on the six-point scale (with a possible range of 0-5). Only 11.2% of children had a mean score of 3 or higher and only 4.8% scored 4 or higher on *Rejection of Father*. Fewer (7.2%) scored 3 or higher and a mere 1.6% scored 4 or higher on *Rejection of Mother*. In sum, this represents 19% of the total sample as fairly consistently rejecting one of their parents (scoring 3 or higher) and only 6.4% as

extremely rejecting of either father or mother (scoring 4 or higher). By contrast, the degree to which parents were alienating their child from the other parent was more frequent: the mean for alienating by mother was 3.06, $SD = 1.03$, with 50% of mothers scoring 3 or higher, and the mean for alienating by father was 2.79, $SD = .97$, with 45% of fathers scoring 3 or more on the six-point scale.

<<<Insert Table 1 and Table 2 about here>>>

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent allegations were of domestic violence (55% against fathers and 30% against mothers), with the majority of those against fathers substantiated by some means, and half of those against mothers substantiated. With respect to child abuse, fathers were about equally alleged to have perpetrated neglect, physical, and sex abuse (24%, 21%, & 24% respectively), but seldom were these forms of abuse substantiated (6%). Mothers were more likely accused of child neglect (26%), less frequently alleged to have been physically abusive (15%), and rarely was sex abuse alleged (6%). Some form of substantiation of child neglect, physical, or verbal abuse by the mother was found in about 9% of cases, and only in 3% of cases was there evidence that mother was responsible for child sex abuse.

Multiple regression was undertaken to test the competing hypotheses as to what are the best predictors of children's rejection of a parent: (a) an alienating co-parent (the PAS perspective), (b) substantiated *Child Abuse* by the rejected parent (the abuse perspective), (c) the child's *Role Reversal* with the aligned parent (the family structure perspective), or (d) all of the above factors jointly (the multi-factor perspective).

Due to a high correlation between alienating and *Role Reversal*, posing the threat of multicollinearity, it was not possible to include both these variables in the regression

model simultaneously. For this reason, two parallel regression models were tested separately to see which one explained more variance in the dependent variable. In Model 1, the dependent variables, *Child Rejection* of father/mother, were regressed on *Warm-Involved* father and *Warm-Involved* mother, alienating mother/father, substantiated *Child Abuse* by father/mother, and Domestic Violence. Control variables included *Age*, *Sex* of child, and *Separation Anxieties* with mother/father. In Model 2, the same set of variables was used except that *Role Reversal* with mother/father was exchanged for the alienating mother/father variable.

An additional hypothesis that *Warm-Involved* parenting would moderate the impact of and *Role Reversal* was tested by including interaction terms after these independent variables were entered in each model. To minimize the problem of multicollinearity, these independent variables were centered before creating multiplicative interaction terms (Aiken & West, 1991). Table 3 displays these findings.

<<<Insert Table 3 about here>>>

In Model 1, *Child Rejection of Father* was jointly predicted by six of the eight independent variables: (a) alienating by mother, (b) *Separation Anxieties* with mother, (c) mother's *Warm/Involved* parenting, (d) lack of father's *Warm/Involved* parenting, (e) older *Age* of child, and (f) father's *Child Abuse*. In addition the interaction term *MWarmXAlien* was marginally significant, indicating that alienating behavior by the mother in the context of her high levels of warm-involvement with her child tended to predict higher levels of the child's *Rejection of Father*. The model as a whole explained 50% of the variance in the dependent variable. In Model 2, where mother's *Role Reversal* was substituted for alienating by mother, the child's *Rejection of Father* was predicted by

Role Reversal and the same set of independent variables as Model 1, explaining almost the same amount (49%) of the variance. However the interaction between *MWarmXRoleRev* was not significant. These findings remained the same when we repeated the analyses after excluding all cases of substantiated abuse by fathers. Overall, these findings support a multi-factor explanation of children's rejection of their father.

With respect to the child's *Rejection of Mother*, in Model 1 it was predicted by three of the eight independent variables: (a) Alienating by father, (b) *Separation Anxieties* with father, and (c) *Child Abuse* by mother. Older *Age* of child was shown to be marginally significant. In addition, the interaction term *FWarmXAlien* was statistically significant, indicating that higher levels of the father's alienating behavior, in the context of his *Warm/Involved* parenting, were associated with more rejection of the mother. Altogether, 41% of the variance in the dependent variable was explained by this model. In the corresponding Model 2, 36% of the variance was explained when father's *Role Reversal* was substituted for alienating by father. In this model, the child's *Rejection of Mother* was predicted by father's *Role Reversal* and the same set of independent variables as Model 1, in addition to lack of mother's Warm/Involvement (which was marginally significant). However the interaction term, *FWarmInvXRoleRev* was not a significant predictor. These results remained the same when we repeated the analyses after excluding all cases of substantiated abuse by mothers, with the additional finding that lack of *Warm/Involved* parenting by mother was significant. In sum, the multi-factor perspective of the child's rejection of the mother was supported by this data.

It should be noted that in none of the analyses was Domestic Violence a predictor of *Child Rejection* of either parent. The question that arises is whether a history of

domestic violence and the perpetration of child abuse by a parent have indirect effects on the dependent variable? That is, the perpetration of both kinds of abuse by the rejected parent may contribute to the attitudes and behaviors of an alienating parent, who in turn encourages and supports the child's rejection for good reason. To explore this possibility, alienating mother/father were regressed on *Age*, *Sex*, *Child Abuse* by father/mother, and Domestic Violence. The findings were that *Alienation* by mother was not predicted by any of these variables. However, alienating by father was jointly predicted by both Domestic Violence ($\beta=.29, p<.001$) and *Child Abuse* by mother ($\beta=.20, p <.05$), explaining 13% of the variance in the dependent variable. Since Domestic Violence was a composite measure of whether the father *or* the mother had a history of substantiated violence against the other parent, it was important to further explore the data to determine specifically whose violence was associated with alienating by father. Another regression analysis with this variable decomposed (i.e., Domestic Violence M/F) revealed that it was fathers' Domestic Violence and not mothers' that predicted his alienating behavior. In sum, the extent to which mothers alienated their children had no relationship to the spousal abuse that they had experienced, nor is it related to child abuse perpetrated by the rejected father. However, fathers' alienation of their children from their mother is predicted by his own abusive behavior as a spouse, as well as by the mother's abuse of the child.

Discussion

In this study of custody disputing families, according to clinician's ratings, a minority of children (about one fifth) showed indication of being consistently negative and only about 6% were extremely rejecting of one of their parents. These more extreme

forms of rejection included sustained expressions of anger, dislike, scorn, denigration, and complaints about the parent that were at times backed up by the child citing family legends or allegations of maltreatment, often accompanied by resistance or refusal to visit. Fathers tended to be more strongly rejected by their children than were mothers. Sons and daughters were about equally likely to take this stance and align with one parent against the other.

It is remarkable that so few children were rejecting of a parent, especially in the face of their parents' negative attitudes and behaviors toward one another. These findings support commonly held views that pre-adolescent children's ties to both their parents are remarkably resilient in the context of family conflict and divorce. In this study, alienating behavior by both mothers and fathers was quite common, ranging from mild to severe or egregious. Almost one half of these custody-litigating parents showed fairly consistent indicators of behavior that could have sabotaged the child's relationship with the other parent, for example, by telling negative stories and blaming the other parent, modeling hostile demeaning behavior in the child's presence, using the child to convey these messages, and responding with anger if the child was inclined to express positive feelings about the other parent. Although one parent was more likely to behave in an alienating manner than the other, to some extent reciprocal alienation occurred, exposing the child to the stress of escalated conflict. Actively supportive co-parenting behaviors, where a parent reassured the child of the other parent's love, conveyed the expectation that the child could enjoy time spent with the other parent, and encouraged the child to work out problems directly with the other parent, were relatively rare. Hence these children are expected to be at risk for a host of emotional, behavioral, and learning problems that are

typically associated with marital and divorce conflict (Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1999; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

The overall findings of the study clearly support a multi-factor explanation of children's rejection of a parent after divorce. By themselves, the PAS perspective, the child abuse perspective, and the family structural perspective are incomplete explanations. Alienating behavior by a parent undoubtedly has the potential to manipulate the child's feelings, ideas, and attachments. This study links the problem to a growing literature on psychologically controlling or intrusive parenting where the pathological impact of this kind of emotional abuse on children's development has been documented (Barber & Harmon, 2002). One might expect that children subjected to alienating parenting behaviors would experience similar developmental pathologies. This hypothesis has been supported in one exploratory study of this particular sample of children (Johnston et al., 2004a) and deserves further research.

Furthermore, this study found that parents who were alienating were also those who had poor boundaries and engaged in role reversal with their children. They had difficulty distinguishing their own feelings from those of their child, and the child often became the parent's confidante, comforting and admonishing other family members, thus assuming an inappropriate executive or parenting role in the family. This finding concurs with our clinical experience that parents' psychological neediness, quite apart from their feelings of hostility toward the ex-spouse, may propel children toward alignments with one parent and possibly influence their rejection of the other. Further research is needed to determine whether alienating behavior by a parent is a precursor or an outcome of boundary problems, intrusiveness, and role reversal between parent and child.

The study's findings also show support for the idea that some of the children who were rejecting of a parent may have had their own good reasons for doing so. According to the study's criteria for substantiated family abuse, indications were that some form of child abuse (neglect, physical, or sexual abuse) had occurred in about one fourth of these families (27%), with mothers and fathers just as likely to be perpetrators. However, even when these cases were excluded from the analysis, our overall findings remained the same. Domestic violence had occurred in more than two-fifths of the families (44%), with fathers almost three times more likely to be perpetrators than mothers, however, it was not directly related to children's rejection of a parent.

The multivariate analysis clearly shows how multiple factors are contributing to children's strident negativity toward one parent in favor of the other. According to these findings, children are more likely to reject their father when the mother's parenting involves role reversal and warm-involvement with her child, when the mother engages in alienating behaviors, and the child experiences separation anxieties from her (common in younger children, but also possible with older ones). In this context, rejected fathers are not only lacking in warm involvement with their children (either a precursor or a consequence of their rejection), they are also more likely to have neglected or abused their children in the past. Children's rejection of their mother after divorce is likely to be associated with the father's alienating behavior, the child's role reversal, and separation anxieties with him, and the mother's history of neglect or abuse of the child. As found in prior research, older children are more likely to be rejecting of a parent than their younger counterparts, probably because their increased cognitive abilities make them more vulnerable to intense loyalty conflicts and greater pressure from the adults to take sides

(Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Most interesting is the finding that the more warm and involved the aligned parent, whether mother or father, the more effective he or she is in alienating the child's affections from the rejected parent. Empirically, warm involved parenting and alienating behavior are negatively correlated, but when they co-occur they more powerfully shape the child's feelings, ideas, and attachments.

Although a history of domestic violence did not predict children's rejection of a parent directly, some interesting indirect effects were found. Men who engaged in alienating behaviors, demeaning the child's mother, were more likely to have perpetrated domestic violence against their spouses, indicating that this kind of psychological control of their child could be viewed as an extension of their physically abusive and controlling behavior. Perhaps more understandable is that men were more likely to be alienating of mothers who had abused their children. With respect to women undermining their child's relationship with the father, this study found no relationship between domestic violence, fathers' abuse of the child, and the extent to which mothers engaged in alienating behaviors. In this respect, women's alienating behavior lacks a reasonable explanation. On the other hand, there is no evidence that female victims of domestic violence, as a group, tend to alienate their children from their batterers.

Methodological limitations of this study need to be discussed prior to drawing conclusions. First, because this is a new area of research, most of the measures are new ones, and have been derived from clinical ratings of case records, albeit from unusually detailed ones focused on parent-child relationships. All of the measures were drawn from clinical reports, and not directly from parents and children. This raises the problem of shared-method variance and possibly contributes to the high proportion of explained

variance in the models. Although there was an attempt to validate the measures from concurrent clinical ratings and inter-rater reliabilities were adequate, agreement could have been achieved because raters were evaluating clinicians' reconstructed views of families rather than family relationships directly. In future research there is a need to develop or adopt standardized and normed instruments that can reliably distinguish relevant parenting behavior like alienation, psychological control and intrusiveness, role reversal between parent and child, and especially child neglect, abuse, and family violence. Recent developments in measurement of some of these concepts may prove useful (Jurkovic, Morrell, & Thirkield, 1999; Howes, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2000; Morris et al., 2002). Moreover, to elucidate what is going on in these complex family situations, data needs to be gathered from multiple perspectives, that is, mothers, fathers, children, and third party observers. This is especially important in highly conflicted families where parents' views are likely to be wildly discrepant from one another and from those of their children.

Second, the methods of recruitment to the study may have resulted in a non-representative sample, making the generalization of the findings to other populations of custody-disputing families problematic. In California more than half of custody disputes are resolved in state-mandated mediation so that those referred for custody evaluation or court-ordered counseling are likely to involve more severely troubled families, with higher incidence of alleged and substantiated abuse and more resistance to settlement (Johnston, et al., 2004; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Third, this is largely a concurrent analysis of family relationships, with historical data on domestic violence and child abuse collected retrospectively, making it difficult to determine whether parents' alienating

behaviors, poor parenting capacities, and critical incidents of child abuse preceded or followed the child's rejection of a parent. Moreover, although careful attempts were made to define and standardize "substantiations" of family abuse, critics may disagree, arguing that the categories are over or under inclusive. Finally, the results described herein are aggregate or common patterns and must be used judiciously in interpreting any specific family situation. A well-conducted custody evaluation of an individual family is likely to be more valid, and it may reach very different conclusions from those reported in this study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when highly conflicted custody-disputing families enter the court with a child who is reluctant or refusing to visit a parent, they set in motion an adversarial system that seeks evidence-facts-to prove definitively, one way or another, whether one of two scenarios prompting the child's behavior are supported. *Either* the allegations of family abuse and poor parenting are well-founded in which event protective measures need to be taken, *or* the allegations can be dismissed as symptoms of spitefulness, hostility, and strategic ploys in the legal disputing. There is less willingness to concede that real abuse, abiding distrust, and blaming between parents contribute to polarized, negative views of one another and undermine any capacity they have to co-parent. Parenting capacities are compromised in a self-fulfilling prophecy effect when parents feel under attack so that burdened children may be at greatest risk from insidious forms of emotional maltreatment. In accord with a previous study (Johnston, 2003), the results of this study support a multi-dimensional explanation of children's rejection of a parent, with both parents as well as vulnerabilities within the child contributing to the problem.

Alienating behavior by an emotionally needy aligned parent, who offers the child warm involved care in return for unquestioned loyalty, together with critical incidents of child abuse and/or lack of warm, involved parenting by a marginalized rejected parent, jointly explain why some vulnerable children lose their emerging sense of self and their capacity for realistic judgment, become psychologically enmeshed, and form a pathological alliance with one parent against the other. Even when child abuse is ruled out, deficits in the parenting of both mothers and fathers are implicated in children's alienation.

The findings of this study point to the need for differential diagnosis of the many strands that are woven together to make up the fabric of a highly conflicted custody dispute with a child who rejects a parent, in order to unravel the distorted pattern of family relationships that put the child's healthy psychological development at risk (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Lee & Olesen, 2001). Moreover, these findings eschew a simplistic focus on single or primary causes of an alienated child and an adversarial stance that polarizes the family around fault-finding, assigning blame, and metering punishment (Bancroft & Silverman, 2002; Gardner, 1998b; 1999). Instead, there is a need for collaborative legal and therapeutic interventions that are family focused and include all parties involved in the dynamics (i.e., the child and both the aligned and rejected parents), in order to support divorced parents and rebuild their parenting capacities (Johnston et al., 2001; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001)

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Footnote

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Table 1.

Frequency of Allegations & Substantiations of Abuse

Percentages (N=125)

Type	Against Father		Against Mother		Total Families	
	Alleg	Subst	Alleg	Subst	Alleg	Subst
Child neglect	23.6	5.7	26.4	9.1	43.8	14.0
Child physical	21.1	5.7	14.8	9.0	29.5	13.9
Child sex abuse	23.8	5.7	5.8	3.3	26.5	8.9
DomesticViolence	55.0	40.8	30.0	15.0	60.9	44.2

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables (N=125)

	Mean	SD	FRej	MRej	Age	Sex	FSep	MSep	FWar	MWar
FReject	1.47	.98	1.00	.07	.21*	-.05	-.14	.37**	-.41**	.10
MReject	1.37	.85		1.00	.15	-.07	.33**	-.03	.02	-.40**
AgeChild	7.77	3.04			1.00	-.02	-.23**	-.27**	-.06	-.09
SexChild				1.00	-.05	-.04	-.18*	-.14
FSepAnx	1.56	.82					1.00	.21*	.13	-.14
MSepAnx	2.04	1.18						1.00	-.17 ⁺	.25**
FWarmInv	2.84	.68							1.00	.18*
MWarmInv	3.12	.72								1.00
FChAbuse	.17	.38								
MChAbuse	.15	.36								
DomViol	.46	.50								
FAlienat	2.79	.97								
MAlienat	3.06	1.03								
RolRevF	2.33	.83								
RolRevM	2.56	.85								

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed)

continued.....

Table 3.

Multiple Regression of Child's Rejection of Parent on Independent Variables & Selected Interactions. (Standardized β Coefficients).

	Rejection of Father		Rejection of Mother	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Age of Child	.23***	.20**	.12 ⁺	.13 ⁺
Sex of Child	-.04	-.04	-.02	-.06
FSepAnx	---	---	.26***	.26***
MSepAnx	.28***	.27***	---	---
FWarmInv	-.22**	-.20**	.12	.05
MWarmInv	.23**	.17*	-.11	-.16 ⁺
FChAbuse	.23**	.23**	---	---
MChAbuse	---	---	.27***	.29***
DomViol	-.03	-.03	-.00	.01
MAlienat	.38***	---	---	---
FAlienat	---	---	.33***	---
RolRevM	---	.36***	---	---
RolRevF	---	---	---	.24***
MWarmXAlien	.13 ⁺	---	---	---
FWarmXAlien	---	---	.19**	---
MWarmXRolRev	---	.09	---	---
FwarmXRolRev	---	---	---	.08
Adjusted R^2 for model	.50***	.49***	.41***	.36***
F -value	14.76	14.03	10.70	8.89
df	9,115	9,115	9,115	9,115

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Appendix A

Child's Attitude and Behavior Toward Parents

Factor 1. Child Rejection of Parent ($\alpha=.95$, $ICC = .83$)

- Expresses overt hatred or strong dislike of parent
- Demonstrates overt fear of parent
- Overt scorn, denigration, verbal abuse, and/or harassment of parent
- Freely discusses his/her dislike of parent with others
- Generalizes dislike of parent to associated family/pets/friends
- Conveys that parent is unsupportive, harsh, and/or mean
- Presents vague/unspecific/trivial reasons for dislike of parent
- Highly reactive to any negative incident with parent
- Cites family legends/"borrowed scenarios" that justify dislike of parent
- Makes allegations of abuse by parent
- Expresses angry feelings about parent
- Covert denigration, dislike of parent
- Morally indignant at parent for her/his behavior

Factor 2. Child Enjoyment of Parent ($\alpha=.87$, $ICC = .77$)

- Looks forward to seeing parent (i.e., is excited, pleased about prospect)
- Enjoys the contact with parent by 2 hrs after returning to parent
- Able to remember good times with parent
- Able to acknowledge positive attributes of parent
- Able to express love for parent

Factor 3. Child Visitation Resistance with Parent ($\alpha=.88$, $ICC = .83$)

- Physical resistance to visits with parent; screams, refuses to leave, holds on, and/or hides
- Refuses any contact (e.g., telephone, letter) with parent
- States desire to terminate his/her relationship with parent
- Verbally resistant to access with parent, complains about leaving for visits or returning to parent

Factor 4. Child Aligned with Parent ($\alpha = .75$, $ICC = .81$)

- Idealizes parent – who is viewed as “good, wonderful, perfectly understanding”
- Sees parent as victim of other parent and in need of support
- Expresses preference for parent (as more understanding, supportive but not necessarily perfect) compared to other parent

Appendix B

Parenting Behaviors

Parenting Behaviors vis-à-vis Other Parent

Factor 1. Alienating Co-Parent ($\alpha = .93$, $ICC = .76$)

- Overtly angry if child is inclined to express positive feelings about other parent
- Tells child the other parent is responsible for the litigation
- Discusses personality/parenting flaws of other parent in child's presence or hearing
- Ridicules other parent in child's presence or hearing
- Tells stories about other parent's failures/violations during the marriage
- Tells stories about history of other parent's failures as a parent
- Blames other parent for divorce/separation that destroyed the family
- Gives child hostile messages to convey to other parent
- Demonstrates hostile demeaning behavior to other parent in child's presence/hearing
- Suggests that other parent is emotionally abusive to child

Factor 2. Supportive Co-Parent ($\alpha = .91$, $ICC = .80$)

- Tells the child that the other parent loves him/her
- Comments on other parent's positive attributes to child
- Encourages child to work out his/her problems directly with other parent
- Conveys expectation that the child can enjoy him/herself with other parent
- Intervenes and stops other family members/new partners talking negatively about other parent in child's presence or hearing

- Prepares and supports the child's access to other parent
- (does not) Become withdrawn/emotionally unavailable if child is inclined to be positive re other parent

Parenting Behaviors with Child

Factor 1. Warm/Involved Parent ($\alpha=.91$, $ICC = .69$)

- (does not) Tend to be inept and uncomfortable in nurturing child
- (does not have) Difficulty listening to what child communicates or requests
- (does not have) Difficulty responding to child's needs
- Parent is involved in child's daily activities
- Parent is able to show love
- Parent cognitively understands child's current situation and feelings
- Parent shows confidence in self as parent
- Parent encourages verbal exchange and use of reasoning
- Parent-child relationship has quality of warmth/love
- Parent shows capacity for concern
- Parent attempts to enrich child's life
- Parenting mode adequate for needs of child

Factor 2. Negative-Angry Parent ($\alpha = .86$, $ICC = .73$)

- Highly reactive to insult or innuendo of child's rejection
- Demonstrates anger/frustration in response to child's behavior
- Has engaged in physical struggles with child
- Tends to be harsh and rigid in parenting style
- Tends to be critical and demanding of child

- Blames child for parental difficulties
- Difficulty acknowledging child's feelings as an individual (separate from other parent)

Factor 3. Role Reversal with Parent ($\alpha = .84$; $ICC = .77$)

- Difficulty distinguishing child's feelings from own
- Parent identified with child as a child
- Child comforts parent; parent's parent
- Parent allows child to discipline/admonish parent or siblings
- Child is confidante to parent's adult interests and concerns
- Erratic role reversal between parent and child
- Child has assumed an inappropriate executive role in family/with parent.

Appendix C

Allegations and substantiations: Categories of abuse

Child neglect includes neglect of the child's care and protection, exposing the child to dangerous environments, lack of supervision and control, abandonment, and failure to provide for child's physical needs (food, clothing, medical attention, & schooling, etc.). It also includes failure to provide for the child's emotional needs for love, attention and appreciation as a person of value. In general, unless it is a very serious incident, neglect is not a one-time issue; rather, it is a pattern of behavior that is ongoing.

Child Physical/Verbal Abuse includes all forms of physical violence as well as any inappropriate or excessive physical punishment of a child. It also includes overtly rejecting and demeaning behavior of a parent that actively attacks the child's sense of integrity (e.g., name calling, put-downs, & terrorizing the child with threats). In general, verbal abuse should be ongoing or particularly severe in order to be rated here.

Child Sexual Abuse includes allegations of sexual assault/incest, and fondling of the child's genitals, breast, mouth, and tongue, etc. It also includes inappropriate sexual behavior and boundary violations if it results in the parent being sexually aroused *or* the child being sexually stimulated (e.g., like allowing child to watch pornographic movies, parading naked or sleeping naked with child, exposing child to adult sexual activity, intrusive involvement and interest in child's bodily functions, toileting, & bathing). It should also be rated as positive where a parent (e.g., a mother) allows a child to be molested/stimulated/exposed to, or takes no steps to protect a child from a third party (e.g., her boyfriend).

Child neglect, physical abuse, and sex abuse are rated as such if the behavior violates community standards of what are acceptable behaviors or parenting practices toward a child, and qualifies for what is considered reportable to Child Protective Services. It does not include the wide range of life-style or child-rearing differences (e.g., diet, discipline, household rules, etc.), about which parents may disagree. Child neglect does *not* include the emotionally abusive behaviors of a parent who engages in alienating the child from the affections and trust of the other parent. Note that this kind of emotionally abusive behavior is rated separately in the parenting behavior measures. (Allegations $ICC = .81$; Substantiations $ICC = .73$ for child neglect, physical abuse, & sexual abuse).

Domestic Violence includes any act of physical aggression or coercive control (i.e., the use of physical restraint, force, or threats of force by one parent to compel the other parent to do something against his/her will). It includes but is not limited to assault (pushing, slapping, choking, hitting, biting, etc.), use of or threat to use a weapon, sexual assault, unlawful entry, destruction of property, infliction of physical injury, suicide, and murder. It also includes psychological intimidation and control, which may be maintained through such means as stalking, threats to hurt children or others, violence against pets, or destruction of property. Note that emotional abuse often precedes, accompanies, and follows physical abuse, but it is not included in this definition. (Allegations $ICC = .90$; Substantiations $ICC = .95$ for domestic violence).