

Parental alienation syndrome

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), although it is unlikely to be familiar to most professionals working in the field of mental health, is not new. It was first defined in 1985 and relates to an attempt by one parent (usually a custodial parent, in a divorce setting, and not always the mother) to alienate the child or children from the other parent.¹ In spite of the profound implications of such a syndrome it does not seem to have found its way into the mainstream of psychiatric parlance. In fact a MEDLINE search using the phrase "parental alienation syndrome" yielded only two references relating to PAS.^{2,3} Considering the frequency of divorce in contemporary society and the extent of acrimony in divorce situations one might assume that PAS exists in many of these situations.

Psychiatry is replete with syndromes. One might argue that the discipline is in the process of turning most human behaviour into a collection of syndromes rendering normality an obsolete concept. Possibly this view is too extreme. Nonetheless, the question arises as to whether we have need or capacity to absorb another syndrome, and whether in fact PAS is a clinically relevant syndromal entity. A paucity of empirical data would appear to be a major obstacle to broader recognition of PAS as well as appropriate interventions at both a psychological and legal level.

The core characteristic of PAS may manifest in numerous ways.⁴ The most obvious is the denigration of the alienated parent by the child, with accompanying weak rationalisations to support such sentiments. There is no ambivalence insofar as only negative aspects of the alienated parent are described with no consideration given to the possible existence of positive attributes. The children tend to express themselves in identical ways to the alienating parent. Whilst the child claims rejection of the parent as an independent act, the language used is that of the alienating parent. In contrast to sentiments towards the alienated parent there is an idealised description of the alienating parent and a complete lack of guilt regarding sentiments towards the alienated parent. The animosity extends towards the family of the alienated parent. In essence, the child becomes a collaborator.

A recent discussion paper, from the South African Law Commission⁵, relating to children and divorce makes no mention of PAS, however, it comments that:

"It is not unusual to find that the custodial parent is using the child as a weapon in the matrimonial warfare and is sabotaging the access visits of the non-custodial parent."

Whilst not describing PAS, a number of key elements are contained within the statement i.e. the cynical manipulation of in-

nocents for the purposes of a self-satisfying agenda that appears to relate to power, control and vengeance. Such an agenda need not necessarily be a conscious one. Many questions regarding PAS remain unanswered, not least of which is "why?" The answer may lie in PAS not so much being a syndrome as a pattern of behaviour, symptomatic of an underlying condition, manifesting in a situation specific manner. It is commonly accepted that most alienators are women.³ This may be more a function of the legal system where custody of younger children and girls of any age is more readily awarded to mothers on the basis of the so-called "tender years/ maternal preference" principle.⁵ Accepting the existence of PAS, a major challenge is in recognising its presence and acting swiftly. It has been observed that involvement of mental health professionals who have no insight into PAS tends to exacerbate matters.⁶ Time is a critical issue. The longer the time spent with the alienating parent, the more likely that the process of alienation will be consolidated. In this regard the mental health and legal fraternities need to co-operate. Specifically, that PAS is recognised for what it is i.e., a form of child abuse and accordingly custody may be awarded to the innocent party, with sanctions potentially applied against the alienating party.⁷ Whilst appropriate and timely psychological interventions may be beneficial to all concerned⁶, lack of awareness constitutes a significant obstacle.

References

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