

# Pathway to Parental Alienation or Estrangement

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## ABSTRACT

The behavior of eight residential parents whose children struggle with the visitation-agreements after a divorce, has been explored through in-depth interviews. The interviews indicate that the overt behavior of residential parents may be guided by their feelings towards non-residential parents. Specific experiences in their past are seen to result in a typical dynamic routing directed at influencing the child's loyalty against the other parent. This study also indicates that the parent's feelings may become mirrored by their children, who may consequently internalize them as if they were their own. The outcome of these processes can be a shifting loyalty of the child, which opens up the way to parental alienation.

## Keywords

Parental alienation, parental estrangement, divorce.

## INTRODUCTION

The Parental Alienation Syndrome (hereinafter "PAS") is a disorder of a child, caused by the programming of this child by one parent (often the residential parent, hereinafter "RP") in order to denigrate the other parent (often the non-residential parent, hereinafter "NRP") [1]. Visitation obstruction is found to be a powerful vengeance maneuver of an alienating parent [1]. The programming is combined with self-created contributions by the child in support of the alienating parent. Child-parent relationships after separation are seen to occur and change within a continuum. At its best children have positive relationships with both parents. Further along the line are children who have developed alliances with one parent and at the end of this continuum there are children who completely reject the other parent [2]. PAS cannot be diagnosed in situations in which (sexual) abuse or neglect has occurred; leading to a clear differentiation between PAS and parental estrangement (hereinafter "PE"), the latter being a consequence of family violence, abuse, or neglect [1, 2].

There is consensus over the fact that alienation is harmful, but there is also controversy regarding PAS: there is no empirical evidence of it being a syndrome [3] and many parents engage in indoctrinating behaviors, but not all children become alienated, partly due to temperament and personality vulnerabilities of the child [2]. In relation to this controversy the term parental alienation (in short

"PA") is hereinafter used. Short-term effects of PA may be: troublesome school behavior, more prevalent alcohol abuse, and anorexia problems [4].

Very little factual information is available about the prevalence or incidence of PA in the Netherlands. Childcare institutions in Amsterdam report an alarming increase in "bad divorces" [4]. The estimated incidence-rate of PA varies between 20% of the children [5] and 40% [6], the latter indicating 150,000 PA-children and adults between one and 45 years old. In 2013 there were three cases of fathers in the Netherlands who killed their children as a result of disagreements over the visitation rights. Afterwards they themselves committed suicide.

The alienating parent displays a multitude of programming behavior: wreaking vengeance, assuming and dramatizing danger when others do not, surrounding themselves with others who sympathize with them, displaying their anger and grief in a socially acceptable manner and exaggerating minor psychological problems into bigger disorders [1]. Also having the child name another person "Mum" or "Dad" and call the other parent by their first name is found to be a programming behavior [7]. Parents in conflict over their children even go so far as to falsely report sexual child abuse [4]. Examples of underlying motives for this programming behavior for instance can be: jealousy, a pathological maintenance of the marital bond, frustration as a result of economic disparity, or gathering ammunition for convincing the court [1]. Also having clear views regarding the education of their children is found to be a reason [4].

The covert form of behavioral processes may be viewed as a perception of thinking or feeling which consequently guide the overt actions [8]. Children who experience a loyalty conflict, may struggle to adhere to the visitation-agreement fearing to endanger the relationship with the RP [7]. The RPs tend to overtly justify this non-compliance in declaring that the child feels damaged through the visits. Their covert motives correlate with the feelings and needs of the RP itself, they are not essentially expressed or conscious.

The primary objectives of this research are: filling in gaps in literature regarding PA by: 1) providing insight in the possible existence of dynamic pathways, which may share common features between the self-reported history of the ex-spouses and which may lead to inclusion and exclusion of specific behavior of the parents after the divorce; 2) the overt and covert motives of the RP in relation to visitation-agreements; and 3) to discover the participants' main concerns (covert behavior) regarding the visitation-agreement and how they act on these concerns (overt behavior).

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The following research questions are addressed in this study: 1) Can specific pathways be identified, which is the (c)overt behavior of the parents within these pathways and what are its perceived consequences? 2) What results do the RPs perceive their conduct has on the child's shifting loyalty? 3) Which perceived impact do RP's report their behavior has on the child's shifting loyalty? 4) What is the perceived influence of the environment on the development of PA?

## METHOD

As this subject area is difficult to access with traditional research methods and no prior research into the existence of pathways, or the behavior of RPs has been performed, the grounded theory method was selected [9].

Eight participants were found in searching through various internet groups (linked to psychology and divorce forums) such as within LinkedIn, Facebook or through twitter messages. The search motif was simply: "Residential parents who find that their children do not wish to visit the NRP after a divorce." The interviews (on average two hours) were held between May and August 2013, two at the Open University in Amsterdam and seven at the homes of the participants. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. The interviews were carried out in an open-ended, discovery-oriented method, exploring the participants' feelings and their perspectives as deeply as possible.

The distribution of the participant's sample is: one male and seven females; varying from 21 to 51 in age (average 42.25). The duration of their relations varied from 1 to 30 years (average 14.06). Their children's age (10 boys and 5 girls) varied from 5 to 23 (average 14.13).

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed into computer files and analyzed with Kwalitan computer software and coded according to a grounded-theory approach to data analysis. In order to establish intersubjectivity, two independent assistants were asked to verify the accuracy of the category system. After discussion with the assistants, minor modifications were made to the category system.

## FINDINGS

Research-question 1 refers to the differentiation of pathways which share common features between the history of the ex-spouses and their behavior after a divorce; the (c)overt behavior of the parents within these pathways and its consequences, see Figure 1.

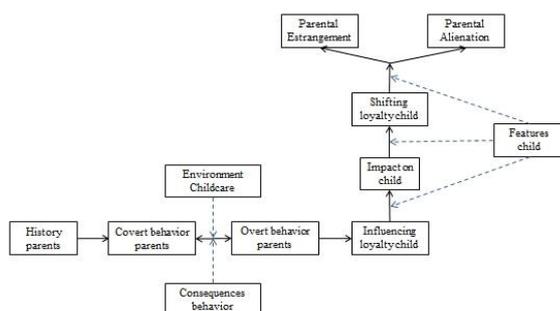


Figure 1. Pathway to parental alienation or estrangement.

Within this study three different pathways with specific common features have been identified:

Pathway 1 (RPs 1-5-6) expressed disaffinity between the partners from the onset of the relationship, leading to a short relationship (duration between one and two years). All RPs in this pathway mentioned physical aggression or (sexual) abuse by the NRPs. RP 1 also spoke of alcohol abuse. The covert motives for non-compliance with the visitation-agreement by the RP were anxiety and the desire to start a new family. Grief for the lost relationship, a feeling reported within the other pathways, remained unmentioned here. Three forms of anxiety can be distinguished: anxiety in relation to the NRP directly (RPs 1-5-6); anxiety when the child visits the NRP (RPs 1-5-6); and anxiety in relation to disclosure by NRP of matters related to RP and RP's family (RP 1). Two RPs (1-6) have found new partners. Both RPs declared that the child sees the new partner as their Father. The child of RP 6 was adopted by the Stepfather after it stopped seeing the NRP. The RPs in this pathway did not report covert motives for compliance with the visitation agreement, as it did within the other pathways. The two overt motives for non-compliance with the visitation-agreement provided by all RPs in this pathway are: alleged (sexual) abuse of the child; and alleged neglect. These allegations were not only denied by the NRP, but they also reflected on the NRP as being a campaign of alienation by the RP. Regarding the overt motives for compliance with the visitation-agreement: none of these three RPs mentioned that the child needs both parents, which was contrarious to pathway 2. The three RPs additionally reported behavior that remains unmentioned within the other pathways: mutual lying (RP 5), alleged disorders of the NRP (RPs 1-5), numerous legal proceedings (RPs 1-5-6) and gathering proof for these proceedings (RPs 1-5). The three RPs also described consequences (four negative and one positive) of their not wishing to comply with the visitation-agreement: the NRP responded with threats or aggression (RPs 1-5-6), the costs of the legal proceedings (RPs 1-6), the legal proceedings being time-consuming (RPs 1-5), anxiety as a result of the non-compliance (RPs 1-5) and the positive consequence: RP 6 experienced that she regained trust in herself. These consequences strengthened the (c)overt motives for non-compliance, which relates to the "sunk cost effect" [10].

Pathway 2 is the pathway after an extramarital affair (RPs 2-4-5-6-7-8). The RPs in this pathway reported that NRP lied about this affair. Four specific covert motives for non-compliance with the visitation-agreement stand out within this pathway: jealousy (RPs 2-3-4-5-6-7), grief for the loss of the relationship (RPs 2-4-5-7), an improved parental bonding (RP 2) and a sense of justification (RPs 2-4). Two specific forms of jealousy can be distinguished: jealousy towards the new partner of the NRP (RPs 2-3-4-5-6-7) and jealousy when the new partner of the NRP starts bonding with the child (RP 4). RP 2 also mentioned that he felt deceived, when he found out that the NRP had an extramarital affair.. RPs 2 and 4 experienced a sense of justification when the child and the environment sides

with the RP. Covert motives for compliance with the visitation agreement, apart from the wish to jeopardize the new relationship with the partner of NRP (RP 4) by exposing her to the hassle of a bunch loud children, are not specifically significant for this pathway. Three specific overt motives for their non-compliance with the visitation agreement were stated: the child disapproves of the conduct of NRP (RPs 2, 4 and 8), the child dislikes the step-parent (RPs 2, 4, 5 and 8) and the child feels discriminated in relation to its step-siblings (RPs 5, 6 and 7). The sparse expressed notion that the child needs both parents (RPs 5-6-7) may be genuine but can also be an indication of induction through PA in cases that the alienating parents verbally express one thing, whilst deep down feeling quite the opposite [1]. Two specific additional overt behaviors strike out within this pathway: inflexibility regarding the visitation-agreement (RPs 4-5-7) and involving third parties to intermediate (RPs 2-4).

RP 3 experienced that love had faded simultaneously, this might be an indication of a third pathway. Specific overt behavior was reported: showing the desire for sexual intimacy by the NRP. This ambiguous behavior led to reported confusion of the child. The fear of losing influence was mentioned as specific covert behavior.

Experiencing specific feelings, resulting from a shared history within these pathways, leads to specific behavior. These specific feelings exclude other covert and overt behavior mentioned by the RPs in the other pathways. Table 1 to 3 present a summary of the relation of overt and covert behavior of the parents in pathway 1, 2 and 3.

Table 1  
*Relation of behavior within pathway 1 (RPs 1-5-6)*

Covert behavior	Overt behavior
The three forms of anxiety	History: short relationship History: threats
Desire to start anew	History: alcohol abuse
Alleged disorder NRP	Alleged abuse of child
Negative financial effects	Alleged neglect
Fight is time consuming	Legal proceedings
Regained trust in oneself	Gathering proof NRP denies the accusations NRP responses with aggression

Table 2  
*Relation of behavior within pathway 2 (RPs 2-4-5-7)*

Covert behavior	Overt behavior
Two forms of jealousy	History: extramarital affair
Grief for lost relationship	History: lying by NRP
Improved parental bonding	Child dislikes stepparent
Sense of justification	Involving third parties
Endangering affair	Child feels discriminated
Child needs both parents	Inflexibility visitation-agreement Child disapproves of conduct NRP

Table 3  
*Relation of behavior within pathway 3 (RP 3)*

Covert behavior	Overt behavior
History: diminished love	
Fear of losing influence	Desire for sexual intimacy

Some reported feelings show no direct relation to either pathway, but appear to relate to specific overt motives for non-compliance with the visitation-agreement within any pathway. Feelings of jealousy regarding financial inequality between ex-spouses (RPs 3-4-5), jealousy of the NRP being a fun-parent (RPs 3-7), frustration of the NRP being a bad role model (RP 3) and the feeling of losing influence on the child (RP 3) show an exclusive relation to the overtly expressed statement that the parents have different values and parenting styles (RPs 3-4). The feeling of frustration when the child returns from a visit to the NRP (RPs 1-3-4-5-7) shows a relation to the expressed motives of neglect or (sexually) abuse of the child by the NRPs 1-5-6). This feeling however also shows a relation with the expressed motive that the parents show different values and parenting styles (RPs 3-4). All RPs unrelated to any specific pathway report feeling lonely when the child is at the NRP's and that the NRP shows indifference to the child's needs or feelings.

Research question 2 refers to the perceived results that the RPs report of their conduct on the child's shifting loyalty. All RPs (with the exception of RP 8) provided indications of their influencing the loyalty of the child. Mentioned ways of doing so are: sharing negative information with the child regarding the NRP or confidential information regarding the reason for the separation (RPs 1-2-3-4-5-6-7), making the child believe that the way the NRP experiences religion has become objectionable (RP 2), showing sad or anxious emotions in relation to the NRP, or to the child visiting the NRP (RPs 4-5-6), showing despise for the partner of the NRP (RP 4), projecting the own alienation campaign to the NRP (RPs 1-5), informing the child the law forces it to visit the NRP (RP 5), telling the child that the NRP does not have time for it (RP 5), or does not pay for it (RP 6). Some RPs (3-4-7) indicate being aware of their behavior of influencing the loyalty of their child and wish to refrain from doing so. They experience a dilemma between their personal negative feelings towards the NRP and their wish to spare the child from a loyalty conflict. All RPs report signs of their child's shifting loyalty varying from mild to severe.

In relation to research question 3 the following perceived impact of the parents' behavior on the child is reported: anxiety (RPs 1-4-5-7-8), anger or aggression (RPs 1-2-3-4-5-7-8), confusion (RPs 1-3-4-7), grief (RPs 1-2-5-6-7-8), insomnia (RPs 1-4-7), withdrawal (RPs 2-3-5-7-8) and deterioration of school results (RPs 1-4-7-8). Some children get psychological treatment (RPs 1-3-4-7-8).

The research question 4 refers to the perceived role that the environment plays in the development of PA. RPs

report the following interactions with their environment: it denounces the conduct of the NRP (RPs 1-2-4-5-6), it disapproves of the new partner of the NRP (RP 2), it supports the non-compliance with the visitation-agreement (RPs 1-2-5-6), it supports the RP (RPs 2-4-5-8), few report support of the NRP (RPs 2-5). RPs who become involved with the official institutions (childcare or court) all report feeling dissatisfied with these institutions (RPs 1-5-6-7-8).

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The relation between the covert and overt behavior of the parents appears to be governed by the consequences of non-compliance with the visitation-agreement and the influence of the parents' environment. When adults express moral judgments and reinforce their children with approval, substantial changes in children's moral judgment can be observed [11]. This supports the most important findings of this study: the parent's alienating behavior, originated from specific happenings and feelings in its history, appears to intertwine with the overt expressions of the child for not complying with the visitation-agreement. The RPs feelings regarding the NRP seem to become mirrored in the child, allowing the risk of the child internalizing these as if they were its own. This appears to lead to a shifting loyalty, opening a dynamic pathway to PA or PE.

The study seems to underline the notion that specific features of the child such as its age, gender or personality may play a moderating role in the development of alienation [2]. Some children of one family seemed more impressionable than others and there also seemed to be a difference in susceptibility between the children of the various families.

The sample size of N=8 means that the enumeration and determination of findings in this study is providing only an indication and generalization of the findings is not applicable. It being a qualitative research indicates that the significance of any found relation or causality cannot be established. The provided causality of the child internalizing the parent's emotions might for instance also be reversed: the parent may internalize the child's emotions and consequently altering her or his memories. The covert motivation of the RPs for attending this research cannot be established and this may have influenced their reporting. Any biases resulting from possible socially accepted reports cannot be eliminated either.

Recognition of the typical behavior of the parents in specific pathways, may help the environment, including the official institutions, to prevent negative impacts (short and long term) on the child. Future research should therefore establish more insight in the variation of pathways to the PA and PE, it should clarify whether internalizing the parent's emotions by the child indeed is a symptom of PA and it should indicate whether the development of PA and PE follow the same pathway.

More profound knowledge of the occurrence and prevalence of PA and PE and of possible moderating effects on the child on the pathway to PA or PE is also required. More insight in the long-term impact on alienated children is furthermore required, thus establishing whether parental alienation is a syndrome or not.

## ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Heleen Koppejan-Luitze was an undergraduate student working under the supervision of dr. Theo Verheggen (Open Universiteit) when the research in this report was performed. The topic was a result of combining the supervisor's initial goal of studying covert motives with the student's aim to perform this study in relation to PA. Heleen designed, executed and reported on this study.

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