

The articles

The special issue consists of 11 different scientific publications. We will name the titles, authors, purpose and research method.

1. Introduction to the special issue (pages 1-4). Written by Elizabeth Sheehy and Simon Lapierre. This is an introductory article describing the creation of the special issue and its overall content.
2. A history of the use of the concept of parental alienation in the Australian family law system: contradictions, collisions and their consequences (pages 5-17). Written by Zoe Rathus. She describes how the idea of parental alienation has been applied in the family justice system from its introduction in Australia in 1989 to the present day, with the aim of providing insight into this. To this end, Rathus refers to sources, such as legal changes, scientific research, and congress contributions.
3. A genealogy of hostility: parental alienation in England and Wales (pages 18-29).
Written by: Adrienne Barnett. Barnett investigated all 40 reported and published family law judgments in England and Wales mentioning parental alienation. It is a mainly descriptive research involving the social, political and historical background to show how thinking and reasoning is influenced by this concept.
4. The legitimization and institutionalization of 'parental alienation' in the Province of Quebec (pages 30-44).
Written by: Simon Lapierre, Patrick Ladouceur, Michèle Frenette & Isabelle Côté. Lapierre, et al. studied in Quebec, Canada, how people reason about domestic violence and parental alienation in divorce cases. The research consisted of a combination of document analysis (policy texts, case files, court reports, newspaper articles, etc.) and interviews with informants (such as youth protectionists and researchers).
5. Parental Alienation Syndrome in Spain: opposed by the Government but accepted in the Courts (pages 45-55).
Written by: Glòria Casas Vila. The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences, expectations and needs of female victims of violence in family law cases in Spain. To this end, Casas Vila analysed interviews with twenty women who were victims of domestic violence.
6. Parental alienation (syndrome) in child custody cases: survivors' experiences and the logic of psychosocial and legal services in Italy (pages 56-67).
Written by: Mariachiara Feresin. The aim of the research was to gain more insight into the complexity of family law cases and the experiences of mothers who are victims of intimate partner violence with a focus on the role of the theory of parental alienation in this. Interviews with thirteen mothers, fifteen psychologists and psychiatrists working with a court order to evaluate parenting skills and fifteen social workers were used for this purpose. The files of ten of the cases of the participating mothers were also studied.
7. Professional responses to 'parental alienation': research-informed practice (pages 68-79).
Written by: Julie Doughty, Nina Maxwell & Tom Slater. The purpose of this article is to describe the situation regarding the use of the theory of parental alienation in England and Wales, discussing the results of a previous literature study from several disciplines, in which scientific literature and jurisprudence were used.
8. Penalizing women's fear: intimate partner violence and parental alienation in Canadian child custody cases (page 80-91).
Written by: Elizabeth Sheehy & Susan B. Boyd. Sheehy and Boyd examined the available English-language family law case law of 2014-2018 in which parental alienation was mentioned in Canada, with the exception of Quebec. This was 298 cases. The aim was to give a picture of the judgments of family law cases in which accusations of parental alienation are made. The cases were examined both quantitatively and qualitatively.
9. U.S. child custody outcomes in cases involving parental alienation and abuse allegations: what do the data show? (pages 92-105).
Written by: Joan S. Meier. Meier quantified American courts' findings and custody

decisions in cases where mothers or fathers alleged abuse and/or alienation. The analysis included thousands of published opinions by trial courts and appeals courts describing trial courts' decisions between 2005 to 2014 in which there were allegations of domestic violence and/or parental alienation.

10. 'It's Not OK', but 'It' never happened: parental alienation accusations undermine children's safety in the New Zealand Family Court (pages 106-117). Written by: Deborah Mackenzie, Ruth Herbert & Neville Robertson. Mackenzie et al. describe the results of the Backbone Collective, an initiative in New Zealand to make the family justice system safer for victims of domestic violence. The Backbone Collective uses, among other things, online questionnaire surveys to gain insight into the experiences of victims of domestic violence. The second of these is discussed in the article and was aimed at the children. Responses from 291 mothers over 591 children were analysed.
11. The affective burden of separated mothers in PA(S) inflected custody law systems: A New Zealand case study (pages 118-129). Written by: Vivienne Elizabeth. The purpose of this study was to investigate the emotional burden and obligation placed on mothers by the use of the theory of parental alienation. Elizabeth conducted qualitative research in which she interviewed twelve women who responded to advertisements placed at women's centres. The women had gone through a divorce and described domestic violence from their ex and/or exploitation and manipulation.

The theory of parental alienation: no empirical support, but socially accepted

The theory of parental alienation

Sheehy and Lapierre explain in the introductory article that the literature on the theory of parental alienation stems from the work of Gardner. Gardner described the situation where the child has a strong preference for one parent and completely rejects the other parent in an unreasonable or exaggerated way. Gardner originally based his theory on situations in which, according to him, false accusations of sexual abuse were made against the rejected father, where the child would have been brainwashed by the mother to do so. The theory was subsequently used more widely for children who would falsely reject one parent, consciously or unconsciously caused by the other parent. The theory is mainly applied in cases involving accusations of domestic violence and especially used against mothers.

No scientific support

Doughty, et al. indicate that there are very many articles on parental alienation, but that there is a lack of empirical evidence for the theory. There is a lot of writing and discussion about the theory, where it is striking that the concept is poorly defined. When data have been collected, these are often unrepresentative samples, retrospective research (looking back) is often used, the research design does not make it possible to make statements about cause-effects and/or instruments are used which are not credible and have not been validated to determine parental alienation. Moreover, the research done on children who rejected a parent does not give any indications that parental alienation occurs. Literature showed that children who rejected a parent usually did so only temporarily. Young adults who had rejected their father as a child did not remember that they had done this (only) under pressure from their mother, but mentioned their own reasons, such as a lack of interest from their father and being rejected by a new partner. It seems that children can suffer from conflicts and parental behaviour after divorce, but do not develop a false image of their parents, let alone falsely claim to have been mistreated or abused. The various articles refer to literature that shows that false accusations of domestic violence are rare and that it is therefore highly unlikely that parents would coach children in remembering abuse or in making false accusations. Casas Vila mentions that the Spanish Ministry of Justice had an investigation carried out into false allegations of gender violence, from which it emerged in 2016 that only 0.0075% of the allegations were false allegations. It can be concluded that there is no scientific evidence for the theory of parental alienation. From the studies done on the related areas of parental rejection and domestic violence, it can be concluded that if parental alienation happens at all, it will be rare.

How the theory is nevertheless used in the different countries

In the different countries the theory has nevertheless been promoted in a similar way by fathers' rights movements. However, the social, cultural and political context has influenced the way in which and the extent to which the theory has become accepted in different settings (such as among family judges, within child protection services and among policymakers and the government).

Rathus describes how, in Australia, protecting children from domestic violence and striving for contact between the child and both parents after divorce function as two separate pillars in the family justice system. At the end of the twentieth century there were fathers' rights movements that campaigned for the rights of fathers and equal parenthood after divorce. At the same time, people became aware of the harmful effects of domestic violence on children and the importance of protecting them from it. The theory of parental alienation brings these pillars into conflict with each other because victims of domestic violence are not believed when they are accused of parental alienation. This theory was used by the paternal rights movements to bring the discussion away from domestic violence and to shift the focus to contact with fathers and to portray fathers as victims of vengeful mothers, whereby fathers should be protected with more rights in the family justice system.

Barnett describes how research in Britain around the turn of the century also made it clear that contact between children and violent parents can be very damaging and that domestic violence should be seen as a serious failure in parenting. As a result, domestic violence was recognised as a weighty factor in custody decisions. At about the same time, the theory of parental alienation was introduced into family law and this theory was gradually used and accepted more often in family law and mainly by child protection services. Over the years there seemed to be a resurgence of campaigns for the theory of parental alienation from paternal rights movements and mainly by some family lawyers and child welfare professionals in response to concerns about domestic violence in family law.

Doughty, et al. describe for England and Wales that campaign groups and the popular media blame the professionals for not paying enough attention to parental alienation and being insufficiently skilled in this area. They are mainly addressed to the child protection authorities who have to defend the interests of children in family law, which are affected by this. There's a counter-movement on this. In the spring of 2019, a campaign was conducted to protect children from forced contact with violent fathers, following the finding that children had been placed in very dangerous situations by court rulings, which had led to the murder of at least four children since 2014.

Lapierre, et al. explain that the theory became popular and accepted in Quebec (Canada) when two influential Canadian researchers, in collaboration with child protection agencies, published interventions and a toolkit aimed at diagnosing and combating parental alienation. In addition, reports in the media further confirm the image of divorces that would be highly conflictual, with descriptions of parental alienation and references to these researchers. The research by Sheehy and Boyd shows that in Canada, as in the other countries, there is a strong focus on the idea that there should always be contact with both parents, with mothers being held responsible for a good relationship between the children and fathers, even when the fathers have committed domestic violence.

Casas Vila indicates that in Spain several professionals can get involved in custody cases (psychosocial teams) and inform the judge. These professionals work on the assumption that the child has to be in contact with both parents and they do not need to be trained domestic violence. Many of them use the theory of parental alienation and they have introduced the theory into Spanish family law. For both professionals and fathers' rights movements, the theory seems to offer a solution to the desire not to acknowledge the existence of domestic violence perpetrated by fathers. In 2003, however, a girl was murdered by her father during unaccompanied contact, against which the mother had repeatedly resisted. In 2014, Spain was condemned by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. In 2016, Spain was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights. In this case, two girls were forced to deal with their father in 2007, when they refused to do so because of his violent behaviour.

At the Spanish government level, there is attention for gender violence and the fact that the theory of parental alienation is incorrect and used with harmful effects. Spain has had a law on integrated protection measures against gender violence since 2004. Since 2015, children of violent fathers are recognized as direct victims

and not just as witnesses of violence. A paradox has arisen in Spain whereby the government and various organisations reject the theory of parental alienation, but the professionals in family law continue to use the theory. This is blamed on the fact that the government has little control over the functioning and training requirements of psychosocial teams, which may include, for example, psychologists, social workers and parents' coordinators, who do not need to be trained in domestic violence and often do not investigate the presence of domestic violence.

Contrary to Spain, in 2018 Italy considered including in the law the possibility for judges to take urgent measures in cases of parental alienation, such as reversal of the child's principal residence. Feresin describes that it was explicitly stated that it would usually be the alienation of fathers and that it could be determined on the basis of signs of parental alienation in the child without clear behaviour from a parent. This bill was part of a bill that would also make mediation and co-parenting compulsory after divorce. In response to the bill, the Italian Government received a letter from representatives of the United Nations explaining that this proposal would represent a serious step backwards which would contribute to inequality between men and women and would not provide protection for women and children who are victims of violence from fathers. The proposal also contravenes the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which has been ratified by Italy. Italy decided that the draft law should be evaluated.

Meier describes that in America scientific insights do not lead to reduced use of the theory of parental alienation in cases of allegations of domestic violence, despite information and training materials for professionals. Moreover, proponents of the theory have started to disguise the gender background of the theory and claim that fathers and mothers equally often make accusations of domestic violence.

Mackenzie et al. explain that in New Zealand the theory is still used in family law, despite the fact that several scientists have pointed out that the theory of parental alienation has no empirical support. In New Zealand, the slogan 'it's not OK' is used against domestic violence, but there seems to be a social system in which women are seen as unreliable and violence against women is trivialised or denied. The first study of the Backbone collective showed that mothers had the experience that their children and themselves were *less* safe due to family law. New Zealand works with a lawyer for the child and possibly with a psychologist or social worker. Mackenzie et al. found that mothers were accused of parental alienation by all three types of professionals, and most often by psychologists, despite strong criticism of the theory by the New Zealand Psychological Society and the American Psychological Society.

Elizabeth explains that in New Zealand the norm after divorce is now that fathers have their children with them equally (50-50) or a significant part of the time and that it is considered morally correct that fathers strive for this. Within this context, it has become the norm that mothers have the responsibility to facilitate contact between children and fathers. Mothers have to take into account the time schedule of fathers, plan the holidays, take care of the children's things (such as preparing a bag with toys and clothes for father's use) and even risk their own safety. In addition, there are also gender-specific socio-moral norms about emotions related to divorce. Anger is masculine and fear and sadness are feminine. This means that men are more likely to express anger after a divorce and fight for their rights over the children, while women are more likely to express fear and sadness about losing (time with) their children and that this is what is socially accepted. Behavior of mothers that deviates from this is quickly seen as selfish and unkind and as parental alienation.

[Gender bias contributes to acceptance of the theory](#)

From all the articles it becomes clear that the theory of parental alienation is applied by professionals working within the family law system, including youth protectionists and other professionals who have to advise the courts and often also by family judges. This also happens in countries where the government (Casa Vila; Feresin) or official bodies (Meier; Mackenzie, et al.) have taken a clear stance against using the theory. So science does not easily penetrate into practice. This seems to be partly due to the fact that the theory fits in with gender prejudices and ideals (Elizabeth; Feresin; Sheehy & Boyd). The proponents of the theory of parental alienation have created a stereotypical image of inexorably hostile mothers who, through selfishness and unreasonableness, damage their children by stubbornly refusing to allow contact with the father (Barnett). Media coverage contributes to support for

this stereotyped image, as does the large amount of literature published on parental alienation, even though, as discussed, it does not provide empirical evidence for the theory (Doughty, et al.; Lapierre, et al.).

On the one hand, there seems to be a liberal tendency in the various countries to strive for an equal distribution of child care for fathers and mothers, partly achieved through the struggle of the fathers' rights movements (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Rathus; Sheehy & Boyd). On the other hand, mothers continue to be held responsible, which makes them the ones who have to make sure that the contact between fathers and children runs smoothly (Elizabeth; Mackenzie, et al.; Rathus). When children reject a father, it is mainly the mother who is required to do something about it, rather than that one considers the role of the father's behaviour in this (Meier; Mackenzie, et al.). From fathers it is accepted that they are angry when this fails and that they fight for their rights (Elizabeth; Rathus). When mothers get angry, this is seen as parental alienation (Barnett; Elizabeth; Lapierre, et al.; Rathus). However, the emotions that are socially accepted from women, such as sadness and fear, also match the image of mothers who do not dare to entrust their children to fathers and would think too easily that their children are unsafe (Sheehy, & Boyd).

The wrongful assumption of always contact

In addition to these gender prejudices, many professionals have developed the false assumption that contact with both parents is *always in the best* interests of the child, a proposition strongly promoted by the fathers' rights movements and other proponents of the theory of parental alienation (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Rathus; Sheehy & Boyd). For example, in Feresin's research, mothers were told by the professionals that they had to cooperate in dealing with their children with the fathers, even if they had committed violence, including child abuse and even sexual abuse of the child. The professionals confirmed this image. They argued that contact with fathers is always in the best interest of the child and that loss of contact would be detrimental to the development of personality. Almost all mothers who were victims of domestic violence had to share the custody over the children with the violent fathers. The article by Lapierre, et al. discusses an example in which a child protector was of the opinion that domestic violence from the father was the cause of parental alienation by the mother, arguing that the mother was thereby psychologically abusing the child. In other words, some professionals miss the insight that domestic violence is a legitimate reason for children to reject a parent and prefer the safe parent.

All articles point out that domestic violence is harmful to the child and that failure to protect children from it has serious consequences, with many children dying each year because they are murdered during visitation (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Rathus; Sheehy & Boyd). Depending on the situation, it may be necessary to completely stop contact between a child and a violent parent or to establish limited contact, such as minimal and/or supervised visitation. Both the United Nations and the Council of Europe therefore argue that domestic violence should be a major factor in custody decisions and that the best interests and safety of the child should take precedence over parental rights (Feresin). In many countries you see that the government recognises that children should be protected against domestic violence, but does not sufficiently (explicitly) link this to family law and custody decisions (see e.g. Doughty, et al. and Rathus). It is also stated that professionals working with divorced families are not required to be trained in domestic violence (see e.g. Casas Vila). Because of the existence of the always contact assumption it happens that even in the presence of proven domestic violence the other parent (usually the mother) can be accused of parental alienation (Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Feresin; Sheehy & Boyd).

The interwovenness of lawsuits, accusations of domestic violence and parental alienation leads to a distorted picture

From the articles it becomes clear that issues of authority and contact are often intertwined with domestic violence. Research by the Spanish Ministry of Health showed that a good 67% of women divorced because of domestic violence (Casas Vila). Sheehy and Boyd provide a gender-specific picture of interpersonal partner violence. They explain that most women are victims of this and children are also exposed to it. Sheehy and Boyd further explain that leaving a violent partner is a risky step, because the violence of the ex-partner can increase and the ex-partner can continue the (psychological) violence through contact with the children and litigation over custody and visitation

arrangements. In other words: it is statistically logical that domestic violence is over-represented in family law cases and that mothers in particular accuse fathers of domestic violence. The gender-neutral perspective with which one often looks at divorce cases can stand in the way of this insight (Sheehy, & Boyd).

Although the theory of parental alienation can also be used without accusations of domestic violence, it is mainly used in cases of domestic violence (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Rathus; Sheehy & Boyd). This is also the origin of the theory initially used to refute accusations of sexual abuse of children by their fathers (Meier; Sheehy & Lapierre). In response to allegations of domestic violence, it happens a lot that fathers, but also involved professionals, accuse mothers of parental alienation (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Rathus; Sheehy & Boyd). The burden of proof for domestic violence is high, but acceptance of parental alienation is often based on statements by 'experts' (Barnett; Rathus). The problem is that there is no scientific evidence for the theory of parental alienation and therefore no reliable and valid way to determine parental alienation (Rathus). However, proponents of the theory often claim to be able to diagnose parental alienation and are sometimes taken seriously on the basis of their titles or the status of the sources to which they refer without being sufficient to assume the existence of parental alienation (Feresin; Lapierre, et al.). An example of this is that they sometimes refer to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (an internationally used manual describing mental disorders) while parental alienation is not described in this manual (Feresin). When a mother is a victim of domestic violence and/or fears that her child is or will be a victim of domestic violence by the father, everything she says about this and everything she does to protect her child can be interpreted as evidence of parental alienation (Barnett). In some cases even the accusation of domestic violence is seen in itself as evidence of parental alienation (Barnett).

Sometimes people are aware of the fact that there is no scientific evidence for the theory and that its use is criticised, so that, for example, some judges do not accept the theory (Barnett). However, many professionals hold on to their ideas and continue to use the theory, but disguise it. Initially, there was talk of a parental disorder 'syndrome' and much of the criticism focused on the fact that the description did not meet the criteria of a syndrome. In reaction to this, most have started to talk about only 'parental alienation' (Casas Vila; Feresin; Meier). Of course, critics then mentioned the fact that nothing had been solved by changing the term (Casas Vila; Feresin; Meier). Professionals have started to use many other terms and thus obscure the use of the theory. Examples include the terms 'hyper-vigilant' and 'gatekeepers' for mothers (Sheehy & Boyd) and speaking of children 'poisoned' by a parent or 'coached' in accusations of abuse (Mackenzie, et al.). It also happens that professionals not only avoid the term parental alienation, but also deny using the theory when confronted with it, despite the fact that their reasoning fully follows the theory (Casas Vila).

Further confusion may arise due to the changing way parental alienation is defined. For example, parental alienation is sometimes described as a form of psychological violence (Mackenzie, et al.). The term is now also used much more widely for all the behaviour of parents in complex divorces that is seen as a strategy to exclude the other parent without the child rejecting a parent (Sheehy & Lapierre). Also, alienation of a parent by the child is often referred to as parental alienation, regardless of why the child rejects the parent (Sheehy & Lapierre). With all the confusion about the meaning of the term, it can happen that mothers who are victims of domestic violence by the ex-partner, accuse this ex-partner of parental alienation (Sheehy and Boyd).

All this mixing of terms, facts and prejudices, and framing lead to an image of divorcing or separating parents at war with each other and confirmation of the theory of parental alienation in the media, outlining the image that mothers often make false accusations of domestic violence in order to keep fathers as far away as possible from the children (Lapierre, et al.). In reality, complex divorces are often caused by domestic violence, and mothers and children who raise domestic violence run a greater risk of unsafe custody decisions due to prejudice and the theory of parental alienation (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Rathus; Sheehy & Boyd).

Discrimination through the use of the theory of parental alienation

Discrimination against mothers

All articles discuss that the theory of parental alienation leads to reasoning that discriminates against women, despite the fact that some advocates of the theory claim that it is a gender-neutral theory (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Rathus; Sheehy & Boyd). Several articles discuss data showing that family judges and child protectors use the term and the theory of parental alienation in their reasoning, measures and statements in a way that disadvantages women.

Meier's findings confirm that alienation cross-claims powerfully undermine mothers' claims of abuse and increase mothers' losses of custody, especially where child abuse was alleged. Only when it comes to one-sided accusations of parental alienation and there are no accusations of domestic violence are mothers and fathers more or less equally likely to receive a decision in their favour. If the mother accuses the father of domestic violence and it is suggested that she is engaged in parental alienation, there is a great risk that the children will be assigned to the father. This can even happen when the domestic violence is proven and at the same time it is assumed that the mother is trying to alienate the child from the violent father. Mothers are believed in less than half the cases when they accuse the father of domestic violence, and the chances are twice as small when she is accused of parental alienation. The chance that the mother will still be believed is particularly small when it comes to an accusation of child abuse committed by the father and even almost nil (1 out of 51 cases) when it comes to sexual abuse.

Sheehy and Boyd discovered that Canadian judges discriminate against mothers in their reasoning about parental alienation and found the judges show little insight into domestic violence and its impact on women and children. Judges were relatively more inclined to recognize accusations of parental alienation against men than vice versa, but there were many more accusations of parental alienation against women. The consequences of parental alienation were more negative for mothers (such as assigning sole custody to the father, or changing the child's main residence to the father and changing from sole maternal authority to co-parenting) than in the case of fathers. As in the Meier study, it appeared that especially in the presence of (accusations of) domestic violence there were decisions to the detriment of mothers. Sheehy and Boyd illustrate with quotes how judges do not believe mothers or argue that they exaggerate or misinterpret violence (such as a judge reasoning that it was not the father's intention to push the mother down the stairs). Judges may also tend to downplay violence, dismiss it as part of common conflicts, with shared guilt (e.g. stating that the mother's fragile emotional health plays a role in the dynamics, while the father had strangled and kicked her in the ribs, among other things, and she had developed trauma because of his violence). It happened that mothers were accused of parental alienation despite evidence that the father had committed domestic violence, in some cases a causal link was even made (the mother would commit parental alienation because of earlier violence by the father).

Feresin's research showed that the professionals involved (such as child protectors) think about mothers accusing the father of domestic violence after divorce in a similar way as judges do. These mothers often stayed in shelters and expressed serious concerns about the safety of their children. The professionals assumed that the accusations (of ex-partner violence, child maltreatment and/or abuse) stemmed from revenge or jealousy and were fabricated. These views were reinforced when judges did not believe the mothers. Most of them saw parental alienation as a typical female problem and assumed that mothers were manipulating their children so that their opinions would only reflect what their mother had told them. The fathers were seen as the victims. If they were aware of criticism of the theory, they would call it manipulation instead of parental alienation. It happened that they advised to determine the child's main place of residence with the father and give him sole custody on the assumption that the only solution was to remove the child from the environment of parental alienation. Mothers had the experience that their concerns were not taken seriously and that they were punished by taking their children away from them.

Casas Vilas's research showed that mothers are placed in an impossible situation when they do not want to cooperate with contact arrangements because they fear that violent fathers will harm the child, but they must cooperate because otherwise they will be blamed for parental alienation and the children may be placed out of the

home or entrusted to the violent father. Casas Vila describes how mothers are put under pressure by child protection professionals due to accusations of parental alienation and the fear of losing their children as a result. Because of this, they were no longer able to be honest with their children and even forced their children to contact with their fathers, which they considered unsafe in order to avoid the even worse scenario (losing custody to the violent ex). Mothers also had the experience that it didn't help to point out to the professionals that the government disapproves of the use of the theory.

In Mackenzie et al.'s investigation, a large group of women were accused of parental alienation, especially when they reported direct child abuse. This applied most strongly to child sexual abuse. Mothers were less often accused of parental alienation when the father was convicted of violence. Nevertheless, there were mothers accused of parental alienation in spite of restraining orders and convictions of violence and even in the presence of convictions of child abuse by the fathers. In many cases where mothers were accused of parental alienation, the father was not believed to be violent. In other cases it was thought that the father was only violent in the past, only dangerous for the mother, or that the violence was only linked to conflicts over the divorce.

Elizabeth describes how judges condemn mothers to express positive emotions to the children about their violent father. Mothers have to hide their fear and sorrow in order not to lose authority over their children. Judges and professionals within family law therefore not only interfere with visiting rights, custody and other agreements and rules, but, due to the theory of parental alienation, also with how a mother may feel and whether she may be honest with the children. It is seen as the mother's responsibility to ensure that children cooperate and think positively about their father, with insufficient account being taken of the children's own experiences and their father's behaviour. The article gives an example of a mother who experienced this. However, her child had so much resistance that he ran onto the street to avoid having to get into his father's car. Many older children inform their mother, via their phone, when they need support during visitations because of the behaviour of their violent father. After contact with their violent fathers, children also have emotions and stress for which they seek support. It is made impossible for mothers to provide this emotional support and comfort to their children without risking losing their authority and contact with their children.

Discrimination against children

By using the theory of parental alienation, children's opinions are no longer taken seriously and what they have experienced and what they want is not listened to (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Ratus; Sheehy & Boyd). Mackenzie et al. found, for example, that children were forced to visit violent fathers or to live with them even though they indicated that they did not want to. Elizabeth's research also shows that children are not taken seriously because of the theory of parental alienation. An example of this is a teenager who told her lawyer that she wanted to spend less time with her father because this father from anger attacks that lasted for hours. Her lawyer did not believe her and told the judge that the girl's resistance stemmed from unconscious parental alienation caused by the mother.

Moreover, children's interests are placed below those of their parents: the various articles show that it happens that the right of fathers to contact takes priority over the right of children to safety (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Ratus; Sheehy & Boyd). When mothers were accused of parental alienation, in the majority of cases in Mackenzie et al.'s study, professionals recommended unaccompanied contact with the father, arguing that the relationship with the violent father was important for the child's well-being, and arguing that the father's right to contact was more important than what the child wanted.

It may also happen that, in order to punish the mother for what one considers to be parental alienation, one decides to take measures that harm the child, such as changing the main residence to the father, whereby the children fully lose contact with their mother or to a significant degree (Barnett; Casas Vila; Doughty, et al.; Elizabeth; Feresin; Lapierre, et al.; Mackenzie, et al.; Meier; Ratus; Sheehy & Boyd). Feresin's article gives an example of young girls who had not been allowed to see their mother for four years after their mother had not cooperated with visitations to the father because she had noticed bruises and inappropriate sexual behaviour after a visitation to the father.

These are forms of discrimination against children. In addition, this can seriously harm children's development and safety. Elisabeth describes how judges prohibit mothers from giving the emotional support that their children ask of them. Lapierre et al. describe that children can be traumatized by being assigned to a violent parent. Some children become depressed and suicidal (Barnett). The theory of parental alienation leads to an inadequate assessment of children's interests. Serious objections and signals against (unsupervised) visitation are dismissed as parental alienation and/or the prevention of parental alienation and striving for contact are given greater priority. It happens that fathers use moments of visitation to kill their children (Casas Vila). An organisation against domestic violence in England registered between 2005 and 2015 that nineteen children had been murdered by their father during visitation (Barnett). In Spain during this same period, 44 children were murdered by their father, 26 of them during a visitation moment (Cases Vila). Meier also mentions that many American children who were killed by a divorced parent were not protected by family law, despite a request to do so.

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