

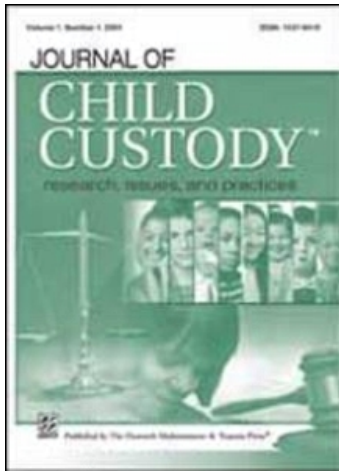
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Evaluating PAS: A Critique of Elizabeth Ellis's "A Stepwise Approach to Evaluating Children for PAS"

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Evaluating PAS: A Critique of Elizabeth Ellis’s “A Stepwise Approach to Evaluating Children for PAS”

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Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is a hydra: chop off its head, and new ones sprout up to take its place. For 20 years, critics of PAS theory have debunked its flawed assumptions, its self-serving methodology, and its inadequacy to assess allegations of child sexual abuse (e.g., Bruch, 2001; Hoult, 2006; Niggemyer, 1998; Neustein & Leshner, 2005). Now, Dr. Elizabeth Ellis, a defender of PAS theory, concedes the most damning of the objections, yet contends that the theory may be salvaged by standardizing the methods by which evaluators detect the elusive syndrome behind complaints of abusive behavior by a parent (usually a father) issuing from a sincere, non-pathological child.

But, arming PAS evaluators with a refurbished “stepwise” methodology does not cure the fundamental defects of the theory; Ellis’s methods only put a new face on the old evils. In fact, nothing will fit PAS for the professional demands of forensic psychology or for the needs of the family court judges who claim to rely on it. What the theory needs is not retouching, but rejection.

As a starting point, consider the failings in PAS theory that Ellis (2007) is prepared to admit. These are serious indeed:

1. *PAS is not a true syndrome.* As Ellis writes: “There are no data establishing incidence rates, familial patterns, course of the problem over time, sex differences, or prognosis.” But if not a syndrome, what *is* PAS?
2. *PAS theory does not permit the inference of alienating behavior from a child’s hostility toward a parent:* “While many parents in high conflict

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divorce engage in ‘brainwashing’ behaviors, only a small proportion of children actually become alienated. . . . Some children . . . may develop a strong alliance with one parent against the other in the absence of alienating behaviors on the part of the custodial parent.” Yet the assumption of a reliable correlation between a child’s fear and dislike of his father and a “campaign of denigration” by the child’s mother was the heart and soul of Gardner’s PAS theory.

3. *What looks like PAS may actually have radically different causes:* “Many children have become estranged from the targeted parent as a result of that parent’s past behavior.” But Ellis’s own terminology—*targeted parent*—emphasizes the irrelevance of such justifications to the alleged dynamics of PAS-defined alienation.
4. *PAS is ill-suited to litigation.* Labels like PAS may easily “be misused in the courtroom as agents of harm toward parents who are already extremely distraught and vulnerable.”

Ellis readily admits all this in “A Stepwise Approach to Evaluating Children for Parental Alienation Syndrome,” yet she continues to promote the very heuristics that she admits have proved so unreliable. In fact, she condones them in precisely those judicial settings where the use of PAS is most disastrous. Even worse, behind the patina of clinical methodology, Ellis advances a dubious social agenda, headed by uncritical promotion of the family courts and something suspiciously like a warmed-over father’s rights orthodoxy.

The flaws in Ellis’s argument begin with her definition of PAS. She says the theory is designed to determine “whether visitations [between children and fathers they do not wish to see] go forward as scheduled, despite the children’s intense emotional distress.” In fact, smoothing over visitation difficulties was never the chief focus of PAS’s creator, Richard Gardner. Even from the titles listed among Ellis’s references (which include two books and two articles by Gardner), it is plain that the theory’s main purpose has always been *to distinguish between true and false allegations of child sexual abuse* by detecting the signs of a syndrome in which a mother’s hostility to her ex-spouse (the *hated parent*) spills over into a false abuse accusation made by her child.

There can be no doubt that Ellis, too, regards PAS theory as a way of assessing abuse accusations in custody battles. Her paper abounds with references to judges, depositions, transcripts, allegations, court orders, and so forth. In one of her sample interviews, she even suggests asking a child what she will do if the judge orders her to live with her allegedly abusive father.

Custody litigation, however, is exactly where PAS has been most convincingly debunked (e.g., Faller, 1998; APA’s Presidential Task Force on Violence and the Family, 1996). As we pointed out in our 2005 book

From Madness to Mutiny, PAS is fatally flawed as forensic psychology because it relies on factors extraneous to psychology to determine the presence of a disorder. Surely it is clear that a so-called expert on heart disease cannot “prove” coronary occlusion from a court order in a medical malpractice case; it should be equally obvious that a psychologist cannot determine whether a child who fears his father is suffering from a “delusion” (Ellis’s word) merely by consulting a judge or court personnel for their (lay) assessment of the child. Yet, like all proponents of PAS theory before her, Ellis is prepared to do exactly that.

Worse, Ellis relies on the paraphernalia of custody litigation to make her clinical decisions for her *even before a trial is over*. PAS evaluations are nearly always part of judicial fact-finding; ordinarily, they are intended to shed light on the credibility of a child’s accusation against a father. How, then, can the evaluator “determine” the legitimacy of the charge without begging the very question she is supposed to help resolve? Ellis’s vague recommendation to “review the allegations” to confirm that “all allegations of physical/sexual abuse” have been “thoroughly investigated,” and “proven to be unsubstantiated” is either naïve or hypocritical. An evaluating psychologist is seldom well situated to assess the thoroughness of an ongoing police or CPS investigation, and no one remotely familiar with CPS agency methods could look to their reports, as Ellis suggests, to conclude that an abuse allegation is “*proven* to be unsubstantiated.” Ellis is really asking psychologists to play judge—an approach that upends the proper relation of expert to fact-finder.

In fact, Ellis does not even recommend *psychological* methods that might help to ensure an unbiased assessment. Nowhere does she suggest that a PAS evaluator might interview the “alienated” father to determine his attitudes toward his children and their mother; she blandly accepts paternal actions at face value, insisting, for instance, that a father’s “trouble and expense” in seeking court orders to expand his visitation is proof of his affection, while no similar inference is drawn from the *mother’s* equal “trouble and expense” in opposing him. Similarly, Ellis finds evidence of PAS in “exaggerated” complaints against fathers but never acknowledges that children’s views of their parents are often oversimplified, and that a contentious divorce is precisely the setting most likely to encourage black-and-white generalizations (quite apart from any parental brainwashing). A forensic theory that can indict a mother for alienating a child on the basis of exaggeration, without taking into account psychological phenomena as basic as these, is utterly unworkable by any measure.

Nor is Ellis’s approach truly standardized. She suggests a series of stepwise, questions for the evaluator to pose but does not say what conclusions result from most of the possible combinations of answers; she enunciates fifteen criteria for which she herself admits “there is no empirical data,” and she claims to carve out exceptions for the effects of domestic

violence without noticing that some of her criteria for PAS—“enmeshment,” for instance—may reflect nothing more than mutual empathy in the face of a shared history of victimization. In short, Ellis’s methods fail her own test.

We are left, finally, with the painfully familiar specter of an unworkable methodology that masks two of the family court system’s deepest institutional prejudices: that fathers know best and that family courts are always right. The iron fist behind the furbelows emerges when, for instance, Ellis advocates asking a mother why she does not punish her children if they “resist” visiting their father, or when Ellis attacks a child for expecting a feared father to pay child support merely because the law requires him to. In one sample dialog, Ellis even takes a turn as court propagandist, telling a child that Mom must be wrong because the judge is angry at her and that the judge and law guardian (“who looks out for you”) know better than the child himself whether he faces any danger from his father’s visits.

At such moments we are reminded of the real and enduring appeal of PAS theory: its seamless marriage with the priorities of family court institutions, too many of which would rather blame father-child abuse allegations on vindictive women (still among America’s favorite scapegoats) than admit that such abuse is a much larger problem with which these institutions can cope. PAS has always been a fig leaf for those priorities; Ellis’s standardized PAS is a fig leaf for a fig leaf.

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