

MMPI-2 VALIDITY SCALES AND SUSPECTED PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME

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MMPI-2 validity scales of two groups of parents going through child custody evaluations, parents who engage in parental alienation syndrome (PAS) behaviors and parents who do not, were compared. It was hypothesized that PAS parents would have significantly higher L and K scales and a significantly lower F scale than parents who do not engage in these behaviors. Using female subjects, since few males were available, the hypothesis was confirmed for K and F scales, indicating that PAS parents are more likely to complete MMPI-2 questions in a defensive manner, striving to appear as flawless as possible. It was concluded that parents who engage in alienating behaviors are more likely than other parents to use the psychological defenses of denial and projection, which are associated with this validity scale pattern. Implications of this finding regarding possible personality disorders in PAS parents are discussed.

Parental alienation syndrome is a term coined by Gardner (1, 2) for the phenomenon in which a child from a broken marriage becomes alienated from one parent due to the active efforts of the other parent to sever their relationship. Rand (3) recently provided an extensive review of the literature relevant to this phenomenon, broadening the scope to include writing which described the same or similar Concepts without using Gardner's term. Gardner and others (4, 5) have described numerous behaviors the alienating parent may engage in to harm the child's relationship with the other parent, many of which have been described as "programming" or "brainwashing." For example, the alienating parent is likely to make accusations about the other parent in front of the child, describe the other parent as dangerous or harmful, tell the child that the other parent does not love him or her, and greatly exaggerate the other parent's faults (whether real or imagined). More extreme alienating behaviors include making false accusations of sexual or physical abuse and programming the child to believe that the abuse occurred. According to Gardner, the child becomes aware that the alienating parent wants him or her to hate the other parent and, out of the need to please the alienating parent and to avoid abandonment or rejection, the child joins in the denigration of the other parent.

Such dynamics are very familiar to clinicians who work with broken families and who perform custody evaluations. As Rand's review (3) makes clear, an increasing number of theoretical writings, case studies, and anecdotal accounts related to this phenomenon have begun to appear in the literature, some of which use the term PAS (6-8) and others which use different terminology (4, 5, 9, 10). However, little empirical research has yet been reported. A number of questions need to be addressed through research. For example, how prevalent is this phenomenon? Is it correlated with certain personality traits or psychological disorders? What are the short-term and long-term effects on children who are subjected to it? How does a clinician recognize it? Can psychological testing help the clinician discern when it may be present?

Opinions have been expressed about many of these questions by Gardner and others, but they have not yet been subjected to hypothesis testing. Since the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Daubert v. Merrill Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc.* (11), testimony about PAS is not likely to be found widely admissible in court without a solid research base.

The present study is an attempt to gain understanding of parents who engage in alienating tactics through a statistical examination of their MMPI-2 validity scales. It was reasoned that if any patterns emerge in the test results of alienating parents, a better understanding of their behaviors might be gained, as well as a psychometric tool to help in the identification of the phenomenon.

In this study, the MMPI-2 profiles of divorcing parents exhibiting characteristics of parental alienation syndrome were compared with the standard MMPI-2 normative sample and with the profile of divorcing parents who do not exhibit characteristics of the syndrome. The specific hypothesis tested was that parents who engage in parental alienation would have significantly higher elevations on the L and K scales and lower elevations on the F scale than both the standard MMPI-2 normative sample and a sample of divorcing parents who do not engage in parental alienation. It was reasoned that persons who try to alienate their children from the other parent are likely to have a higher degree of the behaviors associated with high L and K scores and a low F score, including a wish to be seen as near flawless, a heavy use of denial defenses (12), a tendency to be rigid and moralistic, and a low degree of awareness of the consequences of their own behavior to other people (13).

Siegel (14) has previously found that males and females undergoing child custody evaluation tend to produce significantly elevated L and K scores and males produce F scores significantly below the MMPI-2 normative sample. If the hypothesis of this study is correct, parental alienators in custody disputes would be expected to follow that pattern to a greater degree than parents in custody disputes who do not use alienating tactics.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects for the study were 34 females who completed the MMPI-2 in the course of child custody evaluations. Thirty of the subjects were evaluated in the authors' practice, while four were contributed by another psychologist who frequently serves as an expert witness for the family courts of Dallas, Texas. All of the subjects were involved in child custody litigation and were referred by their attorneys or by the court for psychological evaluation to assist the court in determining the best interest of the children.

Classification Into Groups

The MMPI-2 results of all the clients involved in child custody evaluations in the authors' practice over the last three years were first removed from the files so that classifications would be made as "blind" as possible. The records of the evaluations were then reviewed and subjects classified into a parental alienation syndrome (PAS) group and a non-parental alienation

(non-PAS) group, according to criteria developed from Gardner's (2) and Turkat's (4) descriptions of alienating tactics commonly used by parents.

The psychologist who contributed four additional PAS subjects' records picked them out of her case files using the same criteria. She did not know the study's hypothesis.

The PAS criteria were as follows:

- 1) Personally involved in, or involving others in, malicious acts against the other parent
- 2) Engages in excessive litigation for the purpose of limiting the other parent's access to their children
- 3) Attempts to obstruct regular visitation with the other parent
- 4) Obstructs the other parent's participation in the children's school life and extracurricular activities by lack of notification or untimely notification
- 5) Lying to the children
- 6) Lying to others (including, but not limited to, child welfare and child abuse workers, school personnel, medical and psychological professionals)
- 7) Violations of law (court orders, enforceable agreed orders regarding access, etc.)
- 8) False allegations of physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse (falsehood determined by collateral information from child protective service agencies, physicians, psychologists, or other reputable sources)

Sixteen subjects met the criteria for classification as PAS parents (age range: 30 years old to 45 years old, mean = 38.1 years), while 18 subjects did not and were placed in the non-PAS subject pool (age range: 27 years old to 44 years old, mean = 36.9 years).

Procedure

The MMPI-2 was administered as part of the standard battery given to each parent in a custody evaluation. Standard MMPI-2 conditions and instructions were employed. Only female subjects were used in the data analysis due to a limited number of male subjects available for the statistical comparison. This limitation is consistent with the previously referenced work of Gardner (2) and Turkat (4), who report that the majority of persons exhibiting alienation behaviors are female.

Analysis

Two tailed t-tests were used to compare parental alienators' mean scores on the MMPI-2 validity scales to the MMPI-2 normative sample and the sample of divorcing parents who do not exhibit alienating behaviors.

RESULTS

The study's hypothesis was confirmed for two of the three validity scales. Results of the t-tests indicate that mothers exhibiting PAS behaviors had significantly higher scores on the K scale and significantly lower scores on the F scale than both the standard MMPI-2 normative sample and the sample of divorcing mothers who do not engage in parental alienation. There was no significant difference in L scale scores between the alienating and nonalienating groups, although both were higher than the published normative sample. The results of these statistical analyses are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Figure 1 presents the results in T-scores as they would appear on a typical MMPI-2 profile.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that females who exhibit parental alienation syndrome behaviors are likely to produce extremely defensive MMPI-2 profiles. They appear to respond to the MMPI-2 items in such a way as to appear highly virtuous and without emotional problems or difficulties. Research has shown that most parents being evaluated in the context of custody dispute produce defensive MMPI-2 profiles (14). The finding that parental alienators answer the test items even more defensively than other parents in custody suits may shed light on their personality tendencies and may be diagnostically useful.

Table 1. Comparison of Validity Scales of Suspected PAS Mothers In Custody Suits With Standard MMPI-2 Norms

Scale	PAS Subjects		Standard MMPI-2 Norms [†]		
	M	SD	M	SD	t
L	5.69	2.8	3.47	1.98	3.17**
F	2.25	1.92	3.39	2.64	2.375*
K	22.44	3.48	15.34	4.47	8.161**

[†] Caucasian normative group from Butcher J et al. (15)

* p<.01

** p <.005

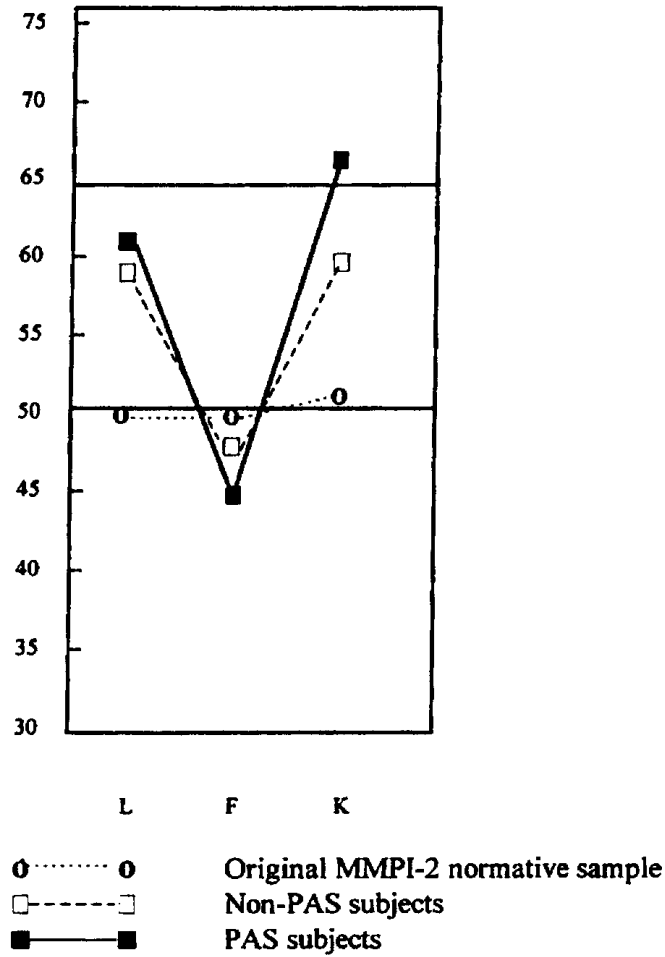
Table 2. Comparison of Validity Scales of Suspected PAS and Non-PAS Mothers in Custody Suits

Scale	PAS Subjects		Standard MMPI-2		
	M	SD	M	SD	t
L	5.69	2.8	5.46	2.41	.329(ns)
F	2.25	1.92	3.23	3.39	-2.042*
K	22.44	3.48	18.92	4.25	4.046**

* p<.01

** p<.005

Figure 1. Comparison of Validity Scale Profiles of Suspected PAS Mothers, Non-PAS Mothers and MMPI-2 Normative Group



Gardner (2) has written that parents who make false allegations of child abuse, perhaps the most extreme expression of parental alienation, are likely to exhibit characteristics of histrionic, borderline, or paranoid personality disorders. Although they did not use the term parental alienation, Wakefield and Underwager (16) found, in a comparison of parents making false allegations in custody disputes with parents not making such allegations, that those making false allegations were more likely to have a diagnosis of a personality disorder, consistent with Gardner's (2) assertions. The findings of this study lend further empirical support to Gardner's belief that PAS may be associated with certain personality disorders and their associated patterns of psychological defense. A highly defensive MMPI-2 validity scale pattern, as was found among PAS parents, suggests psychological defenses which are typically used by people with the externalizing personality disorders (histrionic, borderline, narcissistic, and paranoid).

The tendency to see oneself as "all good" (expressed on the MMPI-2 through high L and K scales and a low F scale) suggests the use of splitting, projection, and denial. People with K scales as high as those produced by the parental alienators in this study are generally described

as psychologically unsophisticated, as using denial heavily, and employing defensive distortions (12, 13).

In the context of a divorce and custody dispute, a person who produces a profile like those in this study would appear to be denying any personal responsibility for the divorce or family problems, seeing themselves as flawless, presumably a victim of the ex-spouse. A person with a more mature defensive structure would be likely to see the matter in more reasonable terms, having less need to deny any responsibility, and be better able to modulate their emotions and give less extreme, more honest answers to the MMPI-2 questions.

Ehrenberg et al. (17) have found that parents with narcissistic personality disturbances were less likely than other parents to cooperate with the ex-spouse after the divorce and to be able to focus on their children's needs. It may be that parents who exhibit parental alienation syndrome are unable to cope with their personal hurt and disappointment about the dissolution of the marriage through a more mature grieving process and finding new ego supports. It is likely that they cope with their hurt and anger by villainizing the ex-spouse and, perhaps unwittingly, by enlisting their children to help repair their damaged sense of self by having the children join in the splitting and projection of responsibility onto the other parent. Johnston (18) has written that parents who are narcissistically vulnerable are more likely to use the more immature defenses of denial and externalization. The results of this study suggest that these defensive operations are likely to be evidenced in the MMPI-2 validity scales.

In child custody related psychological evaluations, the clinician should use multiple sources of data to arrive at conclusions (19). When parental alienation syndrome is a diagnostic possibility in mothers, a highly elevated K scale with a depressed F scale may be evidence of the defensive distortions which are associated with the syndrome. This MMPI-2 pattern may alert the clinician to the possible presence of the syndrome, which should be further evaluated through interviews, observations, examination of collateral sources, and other test data. An examination of the MMPI-2 profiles of fathers who exhibit parental alienation tendencies is needed to determine whether they show the same pattern.

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