

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Scholarly rumors: Citation analysis of vast misinformation regarding parental alienation theory

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## Abstract

Misinformation is widespread in political discourse, mental health literature, and hard science. This article describes recurrent publication of the *same misinformation* regarding parental alienation (PA), that is, variations of the statement: "PA theory assumes that the favored parent has caused PA in the child simply because the child refuses to have a relationship with the rejected parent, without identifying or proving alienating behaviors by the favored parent." Ninety-four examples of the same misinformation were identified and subjected to citation analysis using Gephi software, which displays the links between citing material and cited material. The recurrent misinformation reported here is not trivial; these statements are significant misrepresentations of PA theory. Plausible explanations for this trail of misinformation are the psychological mindset of the authors (i.e., confirmation bias) and the authors' writing skills (e.g., sloppy research practices such as persistent use of secondary sources for their information). The authors of this article recommend that publications containing significant misinformation should be corrected or retracted.

## KEYWORDS

citation analysis, disinformation, misinformation, parental alienation theory, retraction

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[Scholarly rumors involve] a cohort of scholars who misquote research and then quote one another, without checking back to the original source. This is a problem typically caused when authors who have strong ideological or activist views rely primarily upon secondary data sources .... The rumor may begin when there is simply some misunderstanding and miscommunication of research findings, or it may originate in more egregious use of strategies that discredit others' research findings.

Janet R. Johnston (2007, p. 18)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This insightful definition by Janet R. Johnston aptly describes the topic of this article. The scholarly rumor documented in this research consists of 94 false statements pertaining to parental alienation (PA), which occurred in peer-reviewed journals, government documents, legal briefs, books intended for professional audiences, and presentations at national conferences over a period of almost 30 years. The remarkable feature of these data is that the *same misinformation* was passed down from one author to the next author to the next author—almost all PA critics—thus relying on secondary sources rather than on the original writings of PA scholars.

This article is included in a special issue of *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, which pertains to advances in forensic psychiatric assessment. This research relates to the assessment of PA in both clinical and forensic settings. Although there have been advances in the systematic identification of PA—such as the introduction of the Five-Factor Model for the diagnosis of PA (Bernet, 2022)—it will be hard to apply these new approaches if there is widespread misunderstanding regarding basic principles of PA theory.

### 1.1 | Misinformation landscape

During a time when public trust in institutions is trending downward due to the influence of misinformation, public trust in scientists has recently been described as “somewhat tepid” (Funk, 2017, p. 86). Scientific misinformation about climate change, vaccines, food production, and pharmaceutical products flourishes in social media, entertainment news, and the internet. It is remarkable that not only is misinformation abundant on the internet, it is often more popular than accurate information (Wang et al., 2019). A recent article (Kupferschmidt, 2022) in *Science* with a provocative title—“On the Trail of Bullshit”—describes the work of biologist Carl Bergstrom and his colleagues in identifying and suppressing misinformation and disinformation. For example, West and Bergstrom (2021) said, “Misinformation has reached crisis proportions. It poses a risk to international peace, interferes with democratic decision-making, endangers the well-being of the planet, and threatens public health” (p. 1). This issue has significant implications for topics that traverse psychology, law, and the resulting public policy.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017)—in a report for the Council of Europe—developed a comprehensive, interdisciplinary understanding of misinformation and what to do about it. They introduced a new term, *information disorder*, which has three components: the agent (the individuals or groups that created, produced, and distributed the misinformation), the message (its type of communication, format, and characteristics), and the interpreter (the person who read the message, their interpretation of the message, and the action they took). For the purposes of this article, the most important component is the recipient of the message and how they are influenced by “motivated cognition, which refers to the unconscious tendency of individuals to process information to fit conclusions that suit some internal goal” (p. 44). Whether or not the receiver believes misinformation depends on a number of factors, such as the reputation of the source, the apparent intent of the source, the repetition of the message by multiple sources, the plausibility of the message, and, of course, confirmation bias. As people position themselves in information silos, they are more likely to encounter misinformation that personally appeals to them, and they are more likely to believe it.

The research reported here operates from the perspective that any one piece of scientific literature is not isolated. Scientific literature consists of the body of the scientific work and the references that reflect the author's

engagement with certain ideas, methods, and techniques proffered by other authors. The citing behavior of authors is an indisputable part of scientific communication. These references trace the history of scientific development; they can also trace the history of misinformation.

In a classic article in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, Weinstock (1971) identified 15 reasons authors cite other authors' work, such as "paying homage to pioneers" and "correcting the work of others" (p. 19). Any scientific study must be based on the achievements of predecessors, so it is important for authors to acknowledge and respect the labor of others. Within that realm, scientists are trained to cite both supporting and opposing findings or perspectives within a certain discipline since both pros and cons contribute to the broader conversation of scientific knowledge.

Taken together, the reasons and motivations for citing, failing to cite, or improperly citing the works of others provide the basis for why misinformation threatens scientific objectivity. By studying the citation relationship among sources of misinformation, scientists will be better equipped to combat the root of misinformation, understand the motivations to disseminate it, and provide recommendations for dealing with this problem. It is hoped the current study can provide a template for other researchers at the intersection of law and psychology to investigate and deal with this problem. To demonstrate this process, the current study investigates the origins and repetitions of misinformation in citations concerning PA theory.

## 1.2 | Parental alienation theory

*Parental alienation* is a mental condition in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—aligns strongly with one parent (the favored parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without a good reason. The most common cause of PA is the child's indoctrination by the favored parent to dislike or fear the alienated parent (Bernet, 2020a, pp. 5–6), although it is possible that some other person—such as a grandparent or a therapist—has influenced the child to reject a parent.

*Parental alienation syndrome* (PAS) was identified by Richard Gardner (1985) in *The Academy Forum*, a journal of news and opinion published by the American Academy of Psychoanalysis. Subsequent writers have generally referred to PA rather than PAS. The basic principles of PA theory are widely accepted among mental health and legal professionals who deal with child custody disputes and related aspects of family law. For example, at a national conference of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, a survey of attendees found that 98% of respondents agreed that, "Some children are manipulated by one parent to irrationally and unjustifiably reject the other parent" (Baker et al., 2011). Also, several studies of mental health professionals have shown that forensic and clinical practitioners generally accept the reality of PA and that they identify PA in some of their clients (Baker, 2007; Bow et al., 2009; Cox, 2010). PA theory has also been widely accepted in legal settings. Lorandos (2020) analyzed 34 years of published opinions of trial and appellate courts in the United States; he found 1181 cases in which PA was found to be material, probative, relevant, admissible, and discussed in a trial. The research by Lorandos primarily considered appellate cases, so the number of trial cases involving PA would have been much higher.

A recent survey of child custody evaluators revealed a strong level of endorsement regarding terminology related to PA theory, such as the definitions for "contact refusal," "parental alienation," "estrangement," "alienating parent," "alienated parent," and the "Five-Factor Model" for the diagnosis of PA (Bernet et al., 2022). Thus, there appears to be general agreement regarding the criteria for the diagnosis PA. The components of the Five-Factor Model are: (1) the child manifests contact resistance or refusal; (2) the presence of a prior positive relationship between the child and the rejected parent; (3) the absence of abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient parenting on the part of the rejected parent; (4) the use of multiple alienating behaviors (ABs) on the part of the favored parent; and (5) the child exhibits many of the eight behavioral manifestations of PA (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022).

The differential diagnosis of contact refusal includes PA, among other possibilities, such as a child's normal preference of one parent over the other; severe loyalty conflict; a child avoiding a loyalty conflict by gravitating to the side

of one parent; a child with separation anxiety; an unusually stubborn child who objects to their parents' divorce; child maltreatment, as seen in parental estrangement; and shared delusional disorder (Freeman, 2020). Furthermore, the diagnosis of PA requires the identification of specific ABs by the favored parent; that is, the existence of an alienating parent cannot be assumed or inferred simply because the child manifests contact refusal. This feature of PA theory was clearly stated by Baker (2020):

[N]ot all children who reject a parent are alienated, that is, have been exposed to alienating behaviors (ABs) on the part of the favored parent that foster their unjustified rejection of the other parent. ... Nowhere is it written in any legitimate treatise that all rejecting children are alienated.

(p. 208)

Thus, PA theory holds that ABs (by the favored parent) and behavioral signs of PA (in the alienated child) are each necessary but not sufficient for a diagnosis of PA. It is possible for a child to manifest contact refusal, but not be alienated; it is common for children to experience ABs by Parent A, but not reject a relationship with Parent B.

### 1.3 | Misinformation regarding parental alienation

The persistent, recurrent misinformation reported in this article was variations of the following statement:

Parental alienation theory assumes that the preferred parent has caused parental alienation in the child simply because the child refuses to have a relationship with the rejected parent without identifying or proving alienating behaviors by the preferred parent.

This recurrent misinformation is a serious false representation of PA theory. No PA scholar—since the seminal description of PAS by Gardner (1985)—has stated that all children who manifest contact refusal were indoctrinated to fear the rejected parent by the favored parent. Instead, every pertinent article or book chapter by a PA scholar explains that some children of high-conflict parents manifest contact refusal, which have several possible causes. Of course, PA is only one of the possible causes of contact refusal or resist/refuse dynamics.

### 1.4 | Research hypotheses

Based on what was already known about published misinformation regarding PA, two hypotheses guided the current research project: *First hypothesis*: An extensive review of PA literature will produce numerous examples of the *same misinformation*, that is, the notion that PA scholars assume that all instances of a child's contact refusal are caused by alienating activities of the favored parent. *Second hypothesis*: Citation analysis will demonstrate a continuous flow of the same misinformation from early publications to recent publications in the mental health and legal literature. This research project was examined by a university-based Institutional Review Board, which determined, "IRB approval is not required."

## 2 | METHOD

Widespread misinformation regarding PA—published in journal articles and presented at conferences for mental health and legal professionals—was previously described (Bernet, 2015, 2020b). In 2020, however, it was apparent that a recurrent pattern of the *same misinformation* was published and presented by several known PA critics (Geffner

& Sandoval, 2020; Johnston & Sullivan, 2020; Mercer, 2020; Milchman et al., 2020; and Sandoval & Geffner, 2020). It appeared that this specific form of misinformation had a history and may be widely believed by PA critics. While previous research documented the recurrent pattern of the same misinformation (Bernet, 2021), the current article explores the proliferation of PA misinformation more broadly and seeks to depict graphically the amount of misinformation and its method of expansion. It is hoped that this will serve as an example for other areas of study with a goal of combatting misinformation as it leaps between social media and scholarly literature.

This research project occurred in two stages. The first stage had two purposes: (1) to review the writings of known PA critics and work backward from recent publications to citations to earlier work to identify variations of this misinformation and (2) to search the literature for similar statements made by PA scholars, which would explain the occurrence of misinformation among the PA critics. The first stage of this research identified 40 articles or presentations between 1994 and 2020 in which a PA critic stated some version of the relevant misinformation; also, a few writings by PA scholars that could have been misunderstood or misconstrued to say that some practitioners diagnose PA simply based on the child's contact refusal without specifically identifying ABs by the favored parent. The results from the first stage of this research project—including 40 quotations of misinformation—were reported by Bernet (2021).

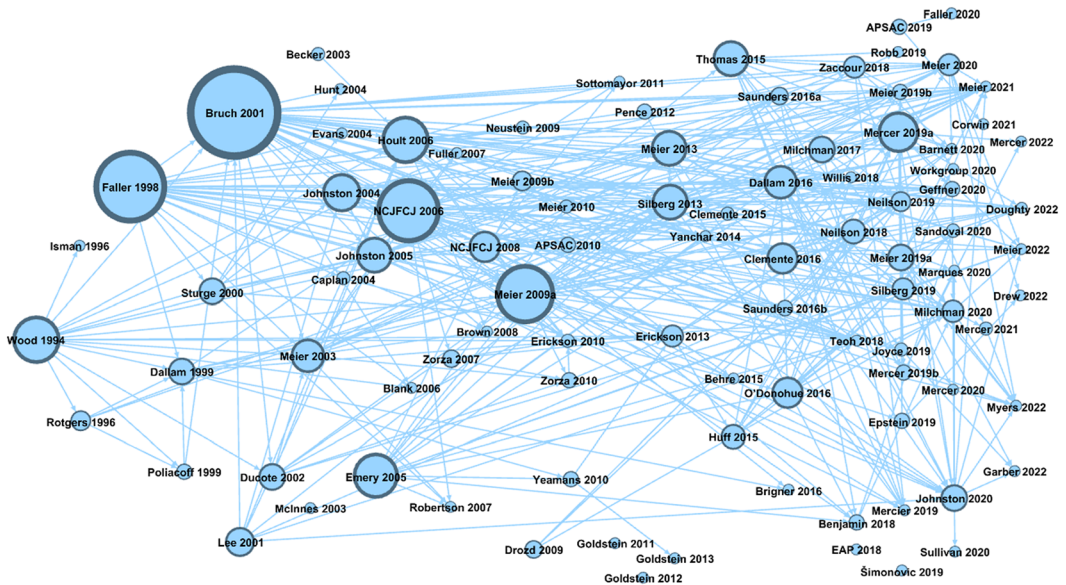
The second stage of this research project—reported here—also had two purposes. The first goal was to start with the earliest known example of this specific misinformation in Wood (1994), work forward to identify later documents that cited Wood, and continue with that iterative process to the present time. Articles and chapters and other documents containing the same misinformation were identified through Google Scholar and Web of Science. During both stages of this project, the authors located and reviewed approximately 400 articles, presentations, and other documents that pertained to PA; this process identified 94 documents containing the same misinformation. After the 94 documents were identified, they were reviewed manually to determine whether each document cited other documents with the same misinformation.

The additional goal during the second stage of this research project was to demonstrate through citation analysis that a continuous flow of the same misinformation occurred from Wood (1994) to the most recent examples of PA misinformation (Meier, 2021; Mercer & Drew, 2022). Citation analysis is a technique used in bibliometric research, which identifies and analyzes the relationships among a group of references (De Bellis, 2009; van Eck & Waltman, 2014). The relationships can then be presented visually, which reveal the flow of information from earlier publications to subsequent ones and other hidden patterns in the citation network. In this study, the data listed in Appendix A were used to construct a representation of *nodes* and *edges*, the components of a citation network. That is, each document was extracted as a node. Each citation relationship between two documents was extracted as an edge between the two nodes. A node list and an edge list were created and imported into Gephi software (Bastian et al., 2009) for analysis and visualization (Figure 1).

A directed citation network was created with edges pointing from the cited publications to the citing publications; the arrow direction of the edges represents the flow of the misinformation. This method of citation analysis is similar to what attorneys do when they “Shepardize” a case; they create the genealogy of a specific legal finding through several trials and appellate cases. In the citation analysis presented in this article, out-degree and betweenness centrality of all publications were calculated. Out-degree is the number of edges directed out of a node in a directed network. Betweenness centrality is the number of shortest paths in the network that pass through the node. To better visualize the misinformation flow, nodes were arranged based on the chronological order from the left to the right of the network.

### 3 | RESULTS

Research data are available online at the Center for Open Science (<https://osf.io/d83rw/>). Appendix A includes the 94 examples of recurrent misinformation. Appendix B lists the out-degree scores and betweenness centrality scores of



**FIGURE 1** Citation analysis demonstrating a pattern of recurrent misinformation in journal articles, books, presentations, government documents, and legal briefs. Publications and other materials are indicated in chronological order from left (1994) to right (2022). Node size indicates out-degree score, the number of times an item is cited by subsequent items. Arrow direction of the edges represents the direction of the misinformation. Thus, the earliest example of misinformation (Wood, 1994) only has outgoing edges; the most recent examples (e.g., Doughty, 2022) only have incoming arrows

each document. Appendix C is a visual representation of the citation network with node size representing betweenness centrality.

### 3.1 | Examples of misinformation

The current study greatly expanded the previous research on PA misinformation. Bernet (2021) identified 40 examples of the same misinformation published between 1994 and 2020. The current research identified an additional 54 examples published between 1996 and 2022, for a total of 94 examples of the same misinformation. Each example is listed in Appendix A (available online at <https://osf.io/d83rw/>), which includes the citation, the reference, a brief quotation of the misinformation, and previous articles containing the same misinformation that were cited by each reference in Appendix A. The *first hypothesis* (An extensive review of PA literature will produce numerous examples of the same misinformation.) was supported.

### 3.2 | Variation in expression of misinformation

While most of the examples of misinformation reported here constitute explicit, unambiguous repetition of the recurring false statement (i.e., the idea that PA scholars assume that all cases of contact refusal were created by ABs of the favored parent), a few examples cited are not explicit, but imply very strongly the same misinformation in their underlying premises. For example, Epstein and Goodman (2019) said: “Judges tend to conclude, typically with no evidence other than the perpetrator-father’s uncorroborated assertion, that women are fabricating abuse allegations as part of a strategic effort to alienate the children from their father” (p. 431). These authors were not directly discussing

PA theory, but were relating their understanding of how judges interpret PA theory. Although stating the notion in a roundabout manner, Epstein and Goodman were repeating misinformation regarding PA theory.

### 3.3 | Citation analysis

*Out-degree centrality.* This metric of the citation network refers to the number of times a publication is cited by subsequent publications. The flow of misinformation between 1994 and 2022 is presented visually using Gephi software, which exhibits the links between citing publications and cited publications (Figure 1). The genealogy of this scholarly rumor is clearly portrayed. The *second hypothesis* (Citation analysis will demonstrate a continuous flow of the same misinformation from early publications to recent publications.) was supported.

In total, there are 94 nodes (publications) and 411 edges (citations) in this directed citation graph. The size of the nodes in Figure 1 indicates the out-degree centrality (0–36) of the nodes, that is, the number of times the given publication is cited. Publications with high out-degree centrality are cited more often than others and are thus characterized as more influential. That is, the size of the nodes reflects the magnitude of their impact. The articles with the highest out-degree scores are Bruch (2001), Faller (1998), Dalton et al. (2006), and Meier (2009).

*Betweenness centrality.* This metric of the citation network measures how often a node appears on the shortest paths between nodes in the network. Publications with higher betweenness centrality scores play a more critical “bridge” role in the network of misinformation. In this study, there was a wide range of betweenness centrality (0–201.14) of the nodes. The articles with the highest betweenness centrality are Mercer (2019), Erickson (2013), Bruch (2001), Johnston and Sullivan (2020), and Meier (2009).

Appendix B (at <https://osf.io/d83rw/>) lists the out-degree centrality score and betweenness centrality score of each publication. Appendix C (at <https://osf.io/d83rw/>) provides a visual representation of the citation network with node size indicating the betweenness centrality score of each publication.

### 3.4 | Lack of relevant citation

The noted citations were found somewhere in the citing articles, chapters, and presentations; they were not usually associated with the sentence or paragraph containing the misinformation. In most of the examples discussed here, the authors provided no citation at all for the stated misinformation. When citations were provided, they did not support the claims made in the false statements.

Several authors cited books and articles by Richard Gardner: *Family Evaluation in Child Custody Evaluations* (1982), *The Parental Alienation Syndrome and the Differentiation between Fabricated and Genuine Child Sexual Abuse* (1987), *True and False Allegations of Child Sexual Abuse* (1992), *The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Guide for Mental Health and Legal Professionals* (1992, 1998), “Differentiating between Parental Alienation Syndrome and Bona Fide Abuse–Neglect” (1999), “Family Therapy of the Moderate Type of Parental Alienation Syndrome” (1999), “Should Courts Order PAS Children to Visit/Reside with the Alienated Parent” (2001), “Parental Alienation Syndrome vs. Parental Alienation: Which Diagnosis Should Evaluators Use in Child Custody Disputes?” (2002), “Commentary on Kelly and Johnston’s ‘The Alienated Child: A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome’” (2004), and “The Three Levels of Parental Alienation Syndrome Alienators: Differential Diagnosis and Management” (2004). Although these authors mentioned books and articles by Gardner, they typically did not provide a specific page or location in the cited texts for the recurrent misinformation. Gardner was consistently misrepresented by these citations, since he never said that PAS/PA should be diagnosed simply based on the behavioral signs in the child, that is, contact refusal.

### 3.5 | Misinformation based on evaluation reports and testimony

Some PA critics acknowledge that the incorrect assertion identified in this research is not found in the published writings of PA scholars, but the critics say that the same premise occurs in custody evaluations prepared by PA scholars

and in their testimony in legal proceedings. For example, Meier (2003) said that this notion occurred “in cases with which I have been associated” (p. 711), rather than in material published by PA scholars. Meier and other PA critics have rarely identified specific PA scholars who make that error in their custody evaluations or testimony; if these individuals are ever identified, they should be contacted and advised to improve their understanding of PA theory.

### 3.6 | Prevalence of misinformation

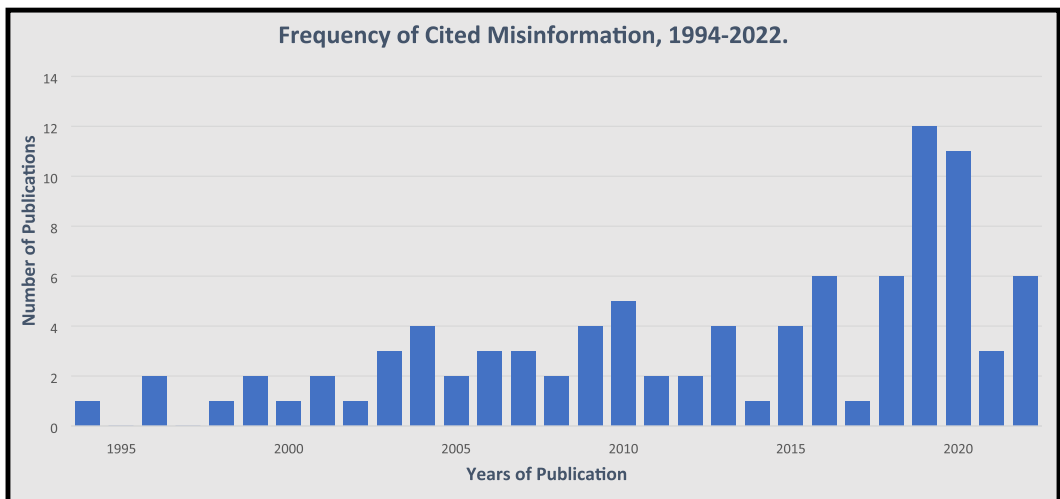
The frequency of published and presented misinformation has increased in recent years (Figure 2). This increase is probably the result of greater discussion of this topic, for example, special issues of the *Journal of Child Custody* (2016, 2019), the *APSAC Advisor* (2020), and the *Family Court Review* (2020) regarding PA and a new book, *Challenging Parental Alienation*, devoted to criticizing PA theory (Mercer & Drew, 2022).

### 3.7 | “Assume” and similar words

A form of the words *assume*, *presume*, or *infer* occurred in 56 of the 94 examples of misinformation cited in this article. For example, “PAS theory simply *presumes* that a child's hostility toward a father is pathological and that mothers who make such allegations are doing so only to undermine the child's relationship with the father” (emphasis in original) (Meier, 2009, p. 236). The use of these words heightens the incorrect notion that PA scholars jump to the diagnosis of PA with minimal and inadequate information.

## 4 | POSSIBLE SOURCES OF MISUNDERSTANDING

The vast compilation of misinformation discussed here did not materialize out of thin air. It is possible that these recurrent false statements were prompted by misunderstanding passages in articles or books written by PA scholars.



**FIGURE 2** Frequency of cited misinformation, 1994–2022. Ninety-four articles, books, presentations, government documents, and legal briefs were identified with the same misinformation regarding parental alienation theory, published between 1994 and 2022. A large increase in the frequency of published misinformation occurred during 2019 and 2020



For example, an article by Dallam and Silberg (2016) illustrates how an important misunderstanding may have come about. They made the following statement, in which they cited a specific passage from Gardner:

Gardner's theory of parental alienation was based on the assumption that if a child rejects their parent (usually the father) after allegations of abuse, the other parent (i.e., the mother) must have brainwashed the child. As Gardner (1992) stated, "Children are not born with genes that program them to reject a father. Such hatred is environmentally induced, and the most likely person to have brought about the alienation is the mother" (p. 75). Thus, problems in the child's relationship with the father were simply blamed on brainwashing by the mother.

(p. 135)

Dallam and Silberg made the error of confusing Gardner's discussion of general principles regarding children's patterns of attachment to their parents with the procedure for evaluating the relationships in a specific family. In the passage they quoted from Gardner (1992, p. 75), he was saying, in effect: *In general*, children do not reject a parent unless some external force has influenced them to do so. *In general*, children who strongly reject a parent have probably been influenced to do so by the favored parent. Both those statements continue to be held by PA scholars. However, those statements do not mean that an evaluator of a specific family can make the "assumption" that every child who rejects a parent was influenced to do so by the favored parent. Instead, Gardner and all PA scholars would say that the favored parent's ABs must be identified and proven, not assumed, to have occurred. It is easy to see how Dallam and Silberg—if they had a preexisting negative bias toward Gardner and PA theory—could have misinterpreted Gardner's statements to suit their own misconceptions.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

This article demonstrates how pervasive misinformation plays out in the space where mental health and legal issues come together. The 94 statements cited in this article—made repeatedly by PA critics—are incorrect. The recurrent misinformation examined here is not trivial. These statements are significant misrepresentations of basic principles of PA theory. Also, the statements discussed in this article are not simply diverse opinions of professionals examining the same data; instead, they are factual errors. That is, the quotations from PA critics clearly misstate and misrepresent the writings of PA scholars. The quotations from PA critics, which were found in journal articles, government documents, books, and PowerPoint presentations, have not been twisted or taken out of context.

Furthermore, none of the writers quoted here provided an adequate source or a relevant reference for the misinformation they expressed; there is no source in the PA literature for the claims of these writers. While all the examples discussed in this article have been described as misinformation, it is possible that some of them constitute disinformation. *Misinformation* refers to false information that is spread, regardless of the author's intent to mislead the reader. On the other hand, *disinformation* refers to material that is deliberately misleading or biased; disinformation is spreading misinformation in a purposeful manner.

This article reports a pattern of recurrent false statements in psychosocial literature, which had not been previously recognized. This research suggests that a systemic flaw has occurred among the authors, peer reviewers, editors, and publishers of mental health and legal literature. There are at least three plausible explanations for this inescapable trail of misinformation: the first pertains to the psychological mindset of the authors and presenters (i.e., confirmation bias); the second pertains to the authors' writing skills (e.g., sloppy research practices, such as persistent use of secondary sources rather than original or primary sources for their information); and the third possible explanation for the epidemic of PA misinformation is the adoption of typical cognitive processes within PA families by evaluators and attorneys and other individuals in their social network.

Confirmation bias is one of many cognitive biases that have been identified and studied. Confirmation bias "describes people's tendency to focus on and look for information that confirms their initial hypothesis while ignoring

contradictory information or alternative explanations” (Neal et al., 2022, p. 102). Further, these notions are subject to the echo chamber effect, which is a widely studied phenomenon in misinformation research referring to an environment in which ideas and values get reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes (Del Vicario et al., 2016). In this case, it is likely that PA critics previously had negative preconceptions regarding this topic (e.g., “PA theory is deeply mistaken.”), which prompts them to misinterpret a central principle of PA theory (e.g., “PA proponents assume all children who reject Parent B were indoctrinated by Parent A.”).

Regarding the second possible explanation for this recurrent misinformation, it is an easy short-cut for authors expounding a particular ideology to base their assertions on the writings of colleagues with a similar perspective. That means that a new article will be published based on secondary or even tertiary sources rather than on primary sources for its information. In the 94 examples of misinformation discussed here, some of them directly cited other PA critics as their source, thus propagating scholarly rumors. None of the authors quoted here correctly cited a PA scholar as their source of information regarding PA theory. This causes misinformation to proliferate quickly in this homogeneous and polarized research community.

The third possible explanation for the epidemic of PA misinformation is, perhaps, more speculative. That is, mental mechanisms within PA families involve strongly held false beliefs, that is, Parent A is convinced—wrongly—that Parent B is deficient in some way, unloving, and perhaps dangerous. Parent A actively conveys that false information to their children and to individuals within their orbit—such as family, friends, therapists, physicians, and attorneys. Some of those individuals identify with and adopt the mindset of Parent A. Mental health and legal writers who support Parent A's position may adopt the same mindset; they readily endorse misinformation about PA and convey that false information to their readers.

The underlying motivations of PA critics/detractors/deniers who have perpetuated this misinformation for almost 30 years are unclear. It appears that they have intended to make PA theory look flawed or even preposterous by repeatedly asserting that PA scholars believe something that sounds inherently absurd, that is, that evaluators assume that every instance of contact refusal is caused by an alienating, favored parent. However, there is no way to know what is happening in the minds of PA critics without engaging in open and transparent discussions with them.

## 5.1 | Public policy implications

Regarding public policy, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) described how information disorder can be corrected and perhaps prevented at various levels of society: technology companies (e.g., work collaboratively and improve public discourse), national governments (e.g., commission research to map out information disorder), media organizations (e.g., debunk sources as well as content), civil society (e.g., educate the public), educational institutions (e.g., create a standardized literacy curriculum), and funding bodies (e.g., support programs that teach critical information skills). There are abundant opportunities to address this critical problem.

The concept *research-to-practice gap* refers to the chasm between scientific knowledge and innovation and the implementation of those advances in the everyday activities of the relevant practitioners (Rudd & Beidas, 2021). For example, it reportedly takes years for a healthcare innovation to make its way into routine clinical practice. The topic of this article is a good example of a research-to-practice gap: although there is a large volume of research and authoritative treatises on PA theory, there is also a vast amount of misunderstanding regarding PA, which has delayed the implementation of important scholarship into the everyday activities of child custody evaluators. This article hopes to illustrate *implementation science*, which refers to the “scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of proven clinical treatments, practices, organizational, and management interventions into routine practice, and hence to improve health” (Eccles et al., 2012, p. 2). The recurrent misinformation reported in this article is a major roadblock for the widespread acceptance of PA theory. The optimistic goal of this article is to identify and correct the misunderstanding that has occurred over many years, which hopefully will make legitimate PA theory more available to practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.

## 5.2 | Overcoming misinformation

It is important to identify and implement methods for overcoming, counteracting, and correcting misinformation and misunderstandings that occur in literature intended for mental health and legal professionals. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel in order to develop strategies to accomplish this task. There are three fields of study—regarding partisanship, denialism, and public health—that are sources of guidance.

*Partisanship* is the practice of strongly supporting a person, principle, or political party without necessarily considering or judging the matter carefully. Van Bavel and Pereira (2018) extensively discussed partisanship theory and its components—including psychological, sociological, and even neurological (“the partisan brain”) aspects. With regard to interventions to reduce partisanship, they recommend having access to actual information in order to create accurate beliefs regarding a topic. They also recommend reducing polarization by searching for common ground. Both of those strategies apply to the predicament described in this article. First, both PA critics and PA scholars should search for primary sources in discussing PA theory rather than relying on secondary and tertiary sources for their information. Second, it would be great for PA critics and PA scholars to collaborate in writing projects, presentations, and research regarding contact refusal, resist/refuse dynamics, and similar topics.

*Denialism* is the rejection of facts and concepts that are generally undisputed components of the scientific consensus on a subject, in favor of ideas that are controversial or fabricated. Common examples are Holocaust denial, AIDS denial, and climate change denial. One of the features of denialism is “the use of misrepresentations and logical fallacies,” such as red herrings and straw men arguments (Diethelm & McKee, 2009). The recurrent misinformation discussed in this article constitutes an army of straw men, in that PA critics have repeatedly made the same false claim regarding PA theory and then repeatedly criticized their fabricated version of the theory. Diethelm and McKee offer cogent advice for dealing with denialism:

It is important to recognize denialism when confronted with it. The normal academic response to an opposing argument is to engage with it, testing the strengths and weaknesses of the differing views, in the expectations that the truth will emerge through a process of debate. However, this requires that both parties obey certain ground rules, such as a willingness to look at the evidence as a whole, to reject deliberate distortions and to accept principles of logic.

(p. 3)

Regarding *public health*, the Surgeon General of the United States published a document, *Confronting Health Misinformation* (Murthy, 2021). In addressing this topic, Murthy said, “We need institutions to recognize that this issue is their moral and civic responsibility, too, and that they are accountable” (p.16). For example, he recommended that educational institutions can increase the use of evidence-based curricula that build resilience to misinformation, educate students on common tactics used by those who spread misinformation, and create quality metrics to assess progress in information literacy. The research reported here follows the guidance of the Surgeon General.

## 5.3 | Limitations

An inherent limitation of this type of research is that it presents only one side—the perspective of PA proponents—of a complex field of study. Ideally, this type of literature review would be a joint effort of proponents and critics. In the future, it will be important for groups of scholars with diverse perspectives to communicate with each other and share proposals and hypotheses. If proponents and critics were to talk with each other, they would likely find that they agree on many aspects of PA theory. For example, both proponents and critics are concerned about domestic violence and all of us want to protect children from maltreatment. The purpose of the research reported here is not to generate debate and disagreement; rather, its purpose is to reach a common understanding of PA theory so that

collaboration and perhaps joint research projects can occur in the future. We realize that most scholars who write about PA—both pro and con—are not promoting misinformation, but are sincerely trying to understand a complex and serious psychosocial phenomenon.

## 5.4 | Future research

The next stage of this long-term research project will involve reaching out to some of the authors, journal editors, and organizations, whose work is cited in this article. In some instances, the cited misinformation is a small feature in an article that is otherwise accurate; in those cases, the publication of a corrected article will be appropriate. In other examples, however, the cited misinformation pervades the entire article or book chapter; in those cases, retraction of the article or book will be called for. Perhaps, a future article will report on these attempts to correct the literature regarding this important topic. In general, publishing companies and editorial staff must improve efforts to identify misinformation that is frequently attributed to PA theory and make efforts to correct or retract publications containing these false statements.

The research reported here pertained to peer-reviewed articles in mental health and legal publications, books that discuss PA theory, a few government documents, and four legal briefs. This literature review did not reach into the world of judicial opinions as reported by trial courts and appellate courts. It would be important to know whether the misinformation reported here has influenced judicial decisions in the United States and elsewhere. That is a likely scenario, since the largest propagators of this misinformation were law professors (Bruch, 2001; Hoult, 2006; Meier, 2009) and a professional organization for family court judges (Bowles et al., 2008; Dalton et al., 2006). If false statements have contaminated precedent setting decisions, that trend should be identified and addressed to prevent the spread of this misinformation from one legal case to another. That is a worrisome prospect, which legal scholars should investigate and correct in order to protect children and families from injury by future judicial decisions based on false information.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This article reports an unusual bibliometric research project, which documents 94 examples of the same misinformation that occurred in mental health and legal literature and professional presentations between 1994 and 2022. Although the cited misinformation pertained to a rather narrow topic—a specific but important aspect of PA theory—the broader implications of this research relate to the integrity and scholarship of authors, peer reviewers, and editors. The misinformation spread from journal articles to presentations at national meetings, government documents, legal briefs, and even official policies of professional organizations. The research data—that is, the 94 quotations of misinformation in published articles and other sources—were subjected to citation analysis, which revealed an unbroken trail of misinformation from 1994 to 2022. The authors recommend that these false statements should be corrected or retracted by their editors and publishers.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors appreciate the helpful suggestions of Ashish S. Joshi, LLM, and Alissa Sherry, Ph.D.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Dr. William Bernet receives royalties from Charles C Thomas, Publisher. He is the president of the Parental Alienation Study Group. Dr. Xu reports no biomedical financial interests or potential conflicts of interest.

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**How to cite this article:** Bernet, W., & Xu, S. (2022). Scholarly rumors: citation analysis of vast misinformation regarding parental alienation theory. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsl.2605>