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**Edward Kruk Ph.D.**

Co-Parenting After Divorce

## Professional Misunderstanding of Parental Alienation

Mistaking alienation for estrangement

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In a previous posting on the topic of parental alienation, I noted that alienating parents' disavowal of responsibility for their children's rejection of the other parent continues to find support among advocates who claim that the concept of unjustified parental alienation is harmful to children. They maintain that the concept of parental alienation is little more than a legal strategy used by abusive parents to deflect blame for their children's fear (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/fear>) and hatred of them, and argue that children who reject parents always have valid reasons, and that all "hated parents" are themselves responsible for their fate. As Richard Warshak and others have demonstrated, however, this is an erroneous argument which reinforces the "bystander effect" (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bystander-effect>) prevalent among legal and mental health (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/health>) professionals in regard to victims of alienation, discussed in my last posting. This indifference toward the profound suffering of alienated children and parents has devastating consequences.

Linda Gottlieb digs a little deeper into the phenomenon of professionals' tendency to mistake alienation for estrangement. The main reason for this tendency, she writes, is that cases of parental alienation are counterintuitive, and even experienced practitioners quite naturally misinterpret the family dynamics in these situations. This misunderstanding leads to a number of cognitive

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/cognition>) errors that in turn lead to errors in professional [decision-making](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/decision-making) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/decision-making>). Consequently, many professionals blame the targeted parent for having contributed to his or her rejection, and the alienating parent is largely absolved. We tend to give the benefit of any doubt to the parent who is the child's legal custodial parent. This is particularly true in cases where a mother is the alienating parent; Jennifer Harman and colleagues (2016) have identified a [gender](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gender) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gender>) bias in the perception of alienation: parental alienating behaviors are not viewed as negatively when mothers exhibit them than fathers. Thus, until professionals attain an in-depth [understanding](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/empathy>) of the actual dynamics of parental alienation, cases of severe alienation will continue to be discounted, and parents' heart-rending pleas for help ignored.

How is it, Gottlieb asks, that experienced mental health professionals are so mistaken in these cases that they are no better at assessing parental alienation than a layperson? First and foremost, professionals who are assigned to conduct child custody evaluations or to represent a child in court lack training and expertise in the field of alienation. Parental alienation is a highly specialized arena of professional practice, a subspecialty within the field of family [therapy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/therapy) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/therapy>) requiring special knowledge and skills. Most mental health and legal professionals working with children and families undergoing separation and [divorce](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/divorce) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/divorce>) have received little or no specialized training in these areas.

Thus the majority of both mental health and legal professionals believe that if a child has rejected a parent, the parent must have done something to warrant it. They have difficulty believing that a child would align with an abusive, alienating parent. They also confuse pathological enmeshment with healthy bonding. To the naïve observer, the closeness and clinging characteristic of enmeshed parent-child relationships seems normal, even healthy. But it is far from healthy. As a result of this dysfunctional relationship, alienated children lose their individuality, suppress their natural feelings of [love](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships>) and need for the target parent, and are manipulated to do the bidding of the alienating parent. That is extremely dangerous and damaging to the child.

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According to Gottlieb, having fallen prey to cognitive errors, mental health and legal professionals who lack expertise in alienation succumb to other [biases](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bias>) that lead them to conclude that the alienating parent is competent and the targeted parent is not — in effect, they get it backwards. For example, the targeted parent will exhibit symptoms of anxiety, [depression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/depression)

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/depression>) and fear, leading many professionals to diagnose a [personality disorder](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality-disorders) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality-disorders>). What they fail to understand is that these symptoms are situational and maintained by the alienation, an example of fundamental attribution error. Likewise, it is common for professionals to conclude that a targeted parent's [anger](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger>) is the result of a character flaw instead of the result of [trauma](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/trauma) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/trauma>) caused by the alienation. Having been maltreated by the other parent and the child, their pleas ignored by professionals in the mental health and legal systems who have been co-opted by the alienating parent, falsely accused of abusing one's child, and often drained of financial resources or pushed into bankruptcy, even the most emotionally stable parents would become anxious and angry in the face of such attacks.

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Another common error, Gottlieb points out, is professionals' failure to adequately consider the baseline situation. If the primary problem is alienation, then, by definition, the targeted parent's behavior was generally acceptable and there was no evidence of abuse or neglect. His or her functioning was

adequate, and the relationship with the child was good or normal. Yet some professionals ignore these critical elements of the family's history, placing too much emphasis on their personal observations and too little emphasis on the pre-separation parent-child relationships.

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Given the immense responsibility of professionals who intervene in children's lives, it behooves us to employ the highest standard of professional conduct and ethics (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/ethics-and-morality>). That means selecting only professionals who have adequate expertise and skill to handle such cases. We need more education (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/education>) and expertise in regard to the assessment of parental alienation. Even more importantly, it is vital to establish shared parenting (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting>) as the foundation of family law when parents are in conflict over who will have primary custody of children after divorce. When it comes to parental alienation, "by their actions you will know them." To the degree that parents are enmeshed with and parentify the child, bad mouth the other parent to the child, or discourage a relationship, they are engaged in alienating behaviors. It is only through actions and not words that we can make a proper assessment.

Harman, J. J., Biringen, Z., Ratajack, E. M., Outland, P. L., & Kraus, A. (2016). Parents Behaving Badly: Gender Biases in the Perception of Parental Alienating Behaviors. *Journal of Family Psychology*.

Gottlieb, L.J. (2012). *The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Family Therapy and Collaborative System Approach to Amelioration*, Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publishers.

Warshak, R. (2015). *Ten Parental Alienation Fallacies that Compromise Decisions in Court and in Therapy*. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*.



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