



Are children susceptible to manipulation? The best interest of children and their testimony



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ABSTRACT

In Richard Gardner's proposed parental alienation syndrome, children reject contact with the noncustodial parent due to manipulation from the custodial parent. We investigated whether children are, in fact, easily manipulated, and how. Half of a sample of children ages 6 to 12 witnessed an incident of verbal aggression, while the other half did not. All were asked to report what happened. Half were then subjected to high pressure, stating that the aggressor would be their future teacher. Subjects were furthermore told that the perpetrator was either a good person or a bad person. After these two manipulations they reported again what they had witnessed. The results indicate that children rarely lie, and that although 40% of those who witnessed nothing created a false memory of an aggressive incident, this outcome was not influenced by the degree of pressure or positive or negative manipulation. We found no significant differences based on gender or age. We conclude that Gardner's ideas about parental alienation syndrome, and in particular the ease of parental manipulation of children, were not empirically verified. We recommend that this concept not be used in the legal system.

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1. Introduction

In this research we refer to a concept that has had a major impact due to the actions of professionals in the justice system but that has had little impact on academia or on the scientific advancement of knowledge. We refer to the so-called parental alienation syndrome, or PAS (Gardner, 1998). The person who named this syndrome was Richard Gardner. Gardner (1985) was a Professor of Clinical Psychiatry in the Department of Child Psychiatry at Columbia University. He began to use the term PAS in an article entitled Recent trends in divorce and custody litigation. This psychiatrist died in 2003, and he is the main theoretical reference for the approach. His followers, like him, have failed to scientifically establish the existence of this syndrome, and none has achieved a significant reputation in this field.

The truth is that PAS, from a scientific point of view, is virtually unknown (Padilla, 2013). We conducted a search of the "Web of Knowledge" electronic database and found results quite similar to those found by Escudero et al. (2010). In our case we found 54 articles, when normally a search for any topic using this method results in at least two or three thousand articles, if not more. We examined the 54 citations and found that 37 clearly defend the PAS, 3 criticized and opposed it, and 14 did not offer an opinion on the matter. All this is a clear sign of the limited—we would say nonexistent—scientific importance of the subject.

Gardner (1991, p. 15) defines this syndrome as: "A childhood disorder that arises almost exclusively in the context of disputes over child custody. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign without justification. This results from the combination of programming (brainwashing) due to parental indoctrination and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent. When physical or sexual abuse is present, animosity may be justified, and so the explanation of the child's hostility as parental alienation syndrome is inapplicable." That is, Gardner believes that the syndrome occurs because the custodial parent (usually the mother) manipulates her children to perceive the noncustodial parent (usually the father) negatively and even makes those children invent nonexistent assaults and even sexual abuse by the noncustodial parent in order to get the justice system to prevent contact with that parent. This is an appealing idea, because it would allow children to achieve equal treatment and contact with both parents. And given the existence of a sexually imbalanced society that grants more privileges to mothers as caregivers of children, it defends fathers, who portray themselves as victims who furthermore struggle to prevent an unjust situation that keeps them from having contact with their children.

Unfortunately, this undeniable aspect hides others in its wake. Perhaps one of the most serious ones is that this argument can be exploited by certain justice systems to avoid investigating potentially serious offenses against child victims: abuse, and specifically sexual abuse. Thus, in the face of professional reports (primarily from psychologists) that the child is being manipulated by one parent (almost always the mother), something that is reported without there being any objective, scientific evidence that points to it, the justice system does not

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investigate whether the other parent (usually the father) was abusive toward their children, arguing that it was a matter of the mother's manipulation as a means to remove her children from their father. And since the syndrome is scientifically unprovable, there is not—and never will be—an objective test to justify it or thwart it, since it the very ideology of judges, prosecutors, and psychologists in the justice system is for those who justify or thwart it.

In the face of attacks questioning its scientific foundations, the syndrome has changed its name without changing its meaning. And so now it is masked under labels like “Malicious Parent Syndrome,” “Distancing Process,” “Friendly Parent,” etc. This last name, “Friendly Parent” (FP), was also proposed by Gardner and can be considered the pioneering concept from which PAS was created twenty years earlier. It refers to the parent who does not denounce or complain and therefore who does not hinder the relationship of the child with the other parent. The way to prove that a parent is friendly is, curiously, by showing that the other is not (Clemente, 2014).

The main controversy at the scientific level—although not all scientists accept this argument—lies in the omission of PAS as part of the most widely used classification system in psychiatry, the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders” (DSM), the fifth edition of which (DSM-V) has recently been published.

All this would not constitute a major problem if it were not for the fact that this controversy affects the judicial system, since in many countries the existence of PAS is included as an argument for granting or denying custody to one of the parents. Thus, although the PAS is a heavily disputed concept and has been surrounded by controversy since inception, its very existence as a syndrome being brought into question (nor does it meet the requirements to be what is understood as a mental health syndrome), there is something that is beyond question: that there are children who have been separated from one of their parents after having been argued in court that these children were subjected to manipulation by one of their parents.

Gardner used the term PAS to define the symptoms of children's rejection and denigration toward one parent after separation or divorce. At the same time, two American psychologists, Blush and Ross (1987), used the term SAID—“Sexual Allegations in Divorce”—to describe false accusations of abuse during the family crisis (see also Blush & Ross, 1987; Ross & Blush, 1990).

When Gardner defined PAS he used the concepts “brainwashing” and “programming” (Gardner, 1998), such that they have come to be used synonymously, further undermining the scientific existence of PAS. According to Gardner, PAS includes programming by the alienating parent, with contributions from the child, while “brainwashing” only refers to changes to consciousness introduced in the child, ignoring their source. These differences are apparent in their treatment, because while individual victims of a sectarian group may separate from the group because they have autonomy to do so, the child victims of PAS are difficult to treat since continue to reside with the alienating parent.

The term “campaign of denigration” (Gardner, 1998, 1999), assumes that the child is lying. And this is one of the main problems with this purported syndrome—its point of departure is the idea that children do not tell the truth because they are manipulated. Thus, if a child states that she does not want to see her father, this is explained as fruit of the mother's manipulation, and the mother would be accused of being a manipulative mother. However, the hypothesis that the child is being physically or even sexually abused by her father is not contemplated and therefore not investigated. That is, the child's testimony that her father abused her is invalid, because the child is not believed.

Based precisely on this theory's premise that children are unable to tell the truth and that their mothers want to protect their children from potential abuse, Clemente (2013) explains that this orientation is based on psychoanalysis, what is now viewed as an unscientific explanation for human behavior created by another psychiatrist (Freud), based on the belief that reality is determined by the criterion of the psychoanalyst and not by an external criterion of truthfulness.

Therefore, the key element in determining whether the syndrome exists is the child's statement; but unfortunately, regardless of what the child says, the evaluator can determine that the child is manifesting the syndrome, and hence the child is lying because she is being manipulated. But do children lie? In other words, can children be easily manipulated? That is what we wish to determine in this work. Let us reflect briefly on the concept of truth and lies.

We often think that there is a sharp and clear distinction between what is real and what is imaginary, between what is “truth” (the real) and “lie” (the imaginary, the unreal). From a classical point of view a lie is a deliberate act intending to say something that one knows to be untrue. But in psychology it also takes on another meaning, that of the relativity of truth. Indeed, conceptually it is more closely related to the notion of false memory, an issue that interests us greatly, and which Gardner (2004). It is addressed in studies initiated by Loftus (see, e.g., Loftus & Sherman, 1996), as well as Diges (1997). Loftus states that 25% of the population is susceptible to creating false memories based on external influences. She and her team conducted an experiment. One group of individuals was led to believe that when they were children they spent a happy day at Disney World, where Bugs Bunny had hugged them. They remembered the contact with the skin of the character, and even how much fun they had stroking his huge ears. More than one-third of the children who participated in the study recalled the moment as if they had really experienced it, which is impossible not only because it was false but also because Bugs Bunny is not a Disney character. The term false memory was originally created within psychology following research by Loftus, Miller, and Burns (1978).

It is clear that, perhaps, lying does not exist. Some authors tell us that lying does not exist: that it is not possible to lie because any attempt at communication is, as such, a lie, and expresses the prism of that which is communicated. That language is metaphorical and instrumental and only becomes problematic if an adequationist theory of the truth is supported, well defined, for example, by Bueno (1992). A constructionist conception stands in opposition to adequationism. The truth must bear the pragmatic value of this. Now, as Pérez-Álvarez (1996, 883) says “The undoubtedly pragmatic nature of the truth must not be understood as any sort of utility, but as an objective construction, which in its extreme is free of subjectivist biases.”

In itself lying is possibly inherent to society. La Rochefoucauld (maxim 87) said that “men would not live long in society were they not the dupes of each other,” and Kashy and DePaulo (1996) argue that lying is a fact of social life rather than a strange or extraordinary event.

To develop the issue of lying in today's society in some depth would be an enormous task and is beyond the scope of this paper; here we are only interested in focusing on the statements of children in police or judicial situations.

An initial tact must address what, following Gergen (1992), we will refer to as the step “from the self to the personal relationship.” Basically, the argument can be summarized as follows: the self, as an agent of moral conduct, has become obsolete. In a plural, mobile, and changing society, individuals must behave very differently depending on the interactional contexts in which they find themselves. The idea of a “central agency” or, where appropriate, a substantial entity, called the “self,” disappears. The postmodern individual is a plural individual. The “self” does not exist. There are, though, relational aspects, networks in which the person is inserted (even if this insertion is not strictly speaking of the “person” but rather of certain aspects of it). The next step is to declare, as does Gergen (1992, p. 217) that “good moral reasons” necessarily derive from the build-up of established sentences that culture accumulates. When individuals declare what is right and what is wrong in a given situation, they act as local agents of the broader relationships in which they participate, and it is these relationships that speak through their mouths.

As Escudero et al. (2010, p. 7) comment, “The origin of the supposed PAS emerged from the assumption [that] when a parent is accused or

reported by other parent (and by a son/daughter according to their verbal ability and developmental level) of abuse or mistreatment (without abuse) against the son/daughter, the supposed PAS is proposed to also have the ability—scientifically proven—to discriminate whether there is any falsehood in these reports, and their real motivation, and to propose a change in custody under strict control measures between the child and the diagnosed parent.”

To be able to proceed to properly diagnose the syndrome, Gardner devised the Sex Abuse Legitimacy Scale (SAL). There is absolutely no information about the psychometric properties of this scale, so it cannot be considered scientifically reliable or valid. However, by way of example, in Spain, Vilalta (2011) concludes that the results confirm the presence of the PAS criteria in families that are in a process of dissolution with interruptions or conflicts in visitation. Vilalta claims that his results are similar to the study of Cartie et al. (2005) and that of Gordon, Stoffey, and Bottinelli (2008), which also possess abundant methodological flaws. Vilalta discusses issues not related to the data obtained and acknowledges that these are a matter of his own intuition. Thus, for example, he states, “Somehow the campaign of denigration against the parent with visitation can be intuited through the results set forth ... The correlations are also consistent with the prediction that alienating parents recruit several professionals to endorse them and repeatedly take matters to court. The above demonstrates the importance of forensic psychologists being able to reliably and quickly detect the occurrence of PAS. Other health professionals should also be familiar with and alert to this problem, in order to not become yet another cog in the stalling tactic to prevent visitation” (Andritzky, 2006). Therefore, Vilalta, like Gardner, delves into the perspective based on intuitions and sets the data to one side. What is more, at no time were the psychometric properties of the scale for determining the supposed syndrome analyzed (nor could they be, due to the minimal sample size).

It is also curious that Vilalta “revives” the possibility of using the Gardner scale when, given that it did not meet even the most minimum requirement to be considered a reliable measurement instrument, the critiques were so emphatic that Gardner himself abandoned its application, and in his books subsequent to 1995 does not even mention it. Gardner’s own awareness of the scale’s lack of utility led him to suggest the use of other instruments that were not really designed or intended to detect the syndrome. Thus, as Escudero et al. (2010, p. 34–35): comment, “To avoid error, Gardner proposes the use of posttraumatic stress disorder criteria in conjunction with PAS symptoms. According to the author, the DSM IV description of this disorder would approximate the reaction of an abused child. Similarly, in a 2004 article Gardner proposed relying on the criteria described under False Memory Syndrome (FMS) to help distinguish (in supported PAS) true and false testimony.”

Therefore, there is no diagnostic tool for detecting the syndrome that Gardner invented. Of course, starting from a psychoanalytic base and given the impossibility of deriving plausible and testable hypotheses from the theory, the creation of an instrument is an impossible task.

This article will focus on the key element that can enable people to protect children and act in their defense: the determination of whether their statements are true or if they are being manipulated. The accuracy of this statement can be tested through the methods of discourse analysis, both verbal and nonverbal, but it involves techniques that are difficult to apply. An experimental design can also be used to determine whether children report problematic facts, and if they lie, whether those lies can be explained based on two types of pressure they receive: fear of future consequences from being subjected to that person, or having been influenced to have a good or bad image of someone.

We hypothesize that children tend to tell the truth, and that few children invent reality, unless they are in a situation where they are asked about a memory they do not have; in this case, applied to an act of aggression, they were asked whether they had observed something that did not exist. It is hypothesized that if an event has not been witnessed, in that case it would be easy to implant that image in their memory. In addition, we hypothesized a lie will be created if children

are subjected to pressure: that is, if they are manipulated. Specifically, if children are manipulated by being given negative information about a person who is the alleged aggressor, they will be more likely to report that the aggressor has done a negative action. In contrast, if children are told they will be hierarchically subject to that person within an asymmetrical power relationship (they will depend on the person), they will be more likely to not disclose that the other person was aggressive, if that is what has been observed. Of course, we hypothesize that both types of manipulation will be those that involve a greater level of change of information for the children, so for those who witnessed an act of aggression will hide it more often (lie more often) if they are told that the act was perpetrated by a good person and that they will be hierarchical dependents of them; consequently, we hypothesize that children will be more inclined to tell the truth if they receive no type of pressure. We also hypothesize that there will be differences between boys and girls, and that by age groups there will be no differences among those who tell the truth. However, the younger the age of the subject, the more common will be the successful implantation of false memories.

2. Material and method

This study included 300 children across six grades (1st to 6th grade), almost all of them between the ages of 6 and 12. When analyzing the data, 4 of the 300 were eliminated due to data collection flaws. The sample was divided almost in half between girls and boys. All were students at an educational institution in the city of La Coruña (Spain). These children were not experiencing any adversarial proceedings between their parents, but it is believed that their situation is similar to that of children who are experiencing that situation, given the impossibility of obtaining large samples of subjects who are actually immersed in this problem. The sample was non-probabilistic and incidental.

The study has two different phases. During the first phase the children were manipulated to witness an act of verbal aggression. In half of the classes, an accomplice of the researcher verbally assaulted and humiliated the other accomplice; both were supposedly teachers who were going to do a theater activity with the children. In the other half of the classes (one class for each grade) there was no aggression between the accomplices. Therefore, we find ourselves with the manipulation of one independent variable (presence or absence of verbal aggression) and one dependent variable, consisting of collecting information from the children about whether something problematic occurred (they have the option of telling the truth or lying). This is a two-group design with only post-measures, and a single dependent variable.

The second phase involved manipulating two independent variables: the pressure that children received about the potential repercussions of reporting what they saw: they were either informed that the person who provoked the aggression would be their tutor (high pressure) or were not told anything in that regard (low pressure). The second manipulated independent variable was the image of the aggressor: some subjects were told he was a good person (positive image) while others were told he was a bad person (negative image). That is, one-quarter of all subjects received each of the different information combinations. They were then asked to think about it and told that it did not matter what they had said before. They then reported again whether they had seen any problematic scene, and the researchers noted whether they lied or told the truth (the same dependent variable as before). In this second phase, therefore, we have an $A \times B, 2 \times 2$ factorial design of non-repeated measures.

Therefore, between the two phases, three independent variables were manipulated: whether or not an act of aggression was witnessed, whether or not they received pressure that could make them change their minds, and whether or not they received information that implied a positive or negative image of the person that allegedly committed the assault.

Finally, this same design was applied to the third phase of the study by dividing the participants according to the sex and age variables (in this case creating 6 age groups from 6 to 11 years), in order to determine if the variables sex and age modulated whether children reported correctly the experience they had just lived, and to assess the degree of pressure and the image of the adult.

3. Calculation

A response sheet was created to collect information from the subjects on the two occasions. This response sheet also served as script to see whether the subject belonged to a group that actually witnessed the verbal aggression in phase 1 and what combination of information was offered in phase 2.

The administrator of a school in the city of A Coruña (Spain) was asked for permission to conduct the study, explaining what the study involved. After the administration agreed, the experiment was explained to tutors and teachers in every primary classroom (children aged 6 to 11 years). In turn, each teacher agreed to explain the study to students' parents and ask for their consent, and request their discretion. No parents declined to participate.

The experiment required three sessions, conducted on three different days. During the first day, the researchers' assistants went by pairs to two classes in each primary grade (there was therefore an A group and a B group for each grade), from 1st to 6th grade (a total of 12 classes). In the B groups for each grade, the two assistants, who were accomplices, acted out a scene in which verbal aggression occurred between them. The children thus witnessed the existence of a conflict between the supposed teachers, one of whom humiliated and insulted the other in front of other children. However, the A group did not witness any aggression. The rationale for teaching the class was to conduct a theatrical performance combined with games and activities.

The next day two different assistants returned to each class to interview the children individually and ask if they had seen anything problematic. The assistants recorded whether the information offered implied lying or telling the truth. Therefore, during the second day the assistants only asked children in the A and B groups for all grades whether they had seen anything unusual during the previous class day. The children in the A groups were asked if they had seen something strange the previous day and if they had noticed any conflict between the two people who taught the class, in order to detect whether—having not seen anything but faced with pressure from the question—they invented anything. In contrast, students in the B groups were asked what they had seen, to find out whether they concealed the fact of having witnessed a conflict or, conversely, told the truth.

On the third and final day, the individual interviews were repeated. The same question was asked again, but this time the information provided to each child was manipulated as follows:

- Some of them (one-quarter) were told that one of the people who conducted the activity (the one who took the role of aggressor for half of the groups) was going to be their tutor soon (high pressure) and that he was also a good person (positive image).
- Another quarter of the participants were not given any information about whether this person would have something to do with them academically in the future (low pressure) but were told that he was a good person (positive image).
- Another quarter were told that the person would be their tutor (high pressure) and that he was not a good person (negative image).
- And finally, the last quarter were not told anything about whether that person would be involved with them academically (low pressure) and were told that he was a bad person (negative image).

After the students were given information according to the manipulation of the above variables (pressure and image) they were asked

again to tell what they had witnessed, noting whether they lied or told the truth. Therefore, information about what the subjects had supposedly witnessed was recorded on two occasions.

At the end of the experiment, each class's teacher was asked to tell the children that it had all been a game, and that the verbal aggression was artificially created in order to see how they reacted. The teachers were instructed to immediately contact the research team if any of the children were thought to have been traumatized or felt depressed, in which case they would receive immediate psychological assistance from the school Psychological Unit. Fortunately, no child exhibited psychological problems nor required psychological assistance.

4. Results

4.1. Phase 1

In phase 1, half of the children observed an act of verbal aggression, while the other half did not observe any sort of aggression. A contingency table (Table 1) was constructed, which shows the following:

Children who witnessed an act of verbal aggression almost always told the truth. Thus, of the 154 who witnessed such a scene, all but 8 (a total of almost 95%) reported what they had seen: that is, they told the truth.

However, in the case where there was no aggression, just over 40% of children report that something strange had happened, and they said they actually realized that an incident had happened which in reality had not happened. Although almost 60% of children reported correctly, the mere fact that it involved implanting the occurrence of a problematic event in their memory led them to believe it in their mind.

In general, regardless of the manipulation carried out, three-quarters of the children told the truth.

Are the observed differences statistically significant? Pearson's chi-squared test demonstrates that this is the case, since a value of 55.758 was obtained, which for 1 degree of freedom implies a significance of $p \leq .001$. The contingency coefficient (C) is also bilaterally significant ($C = .398, p \leq .001$).

4.2. Phase 2

We will set out the data for the second phase according to which subjects actually observed the aggression in phase 1.

4.2.1. After observing aggression in phase 1

When the subjects were subjected to high pressure, there was hardly any difference between those who told the truth and those who lied. Moreover, this claim can be maintained depending on whether the subjects were given the further information that the person who made the attack was a good or a bad person.

While almost all of these subjects had told the truth, in cases where they lied, those who were most likely to do so were those who received high pressure in this second phase and who were also told that the perpetrator was a good person. The next most likely group to lie was those who received low pressure and was told that the perpetrator was a bad person.

In any case, the children usually told the truth (146 vs. 8, that is, 94.8% of the children who witnessed the aggression stated that they

Table 1
Reporting according to witnessing an act of verbal aggression.

		Truth	Lie	Total	
Type of aggression	Aggression	Frequency (N)	146	8	154
		Percentage	94.8%	5.2%	100.0%
	No aggression	Frequency (N)	83	59	142
		Percentage	58.5%	41.5%	100.0%
Total		Frequency (N)	229	67	296
		Percentage	77.4%	22.6%	100.0%

had seen it), whether they were pressured with the “threat” of the aggressor becoming their teacher or were told that he was a good or a bad person. Table 2 presents these data.

When these results were tested statistically, it was found that, effectively, there were no significant differences within each group: those who told the truth and those who lied. Thus, when the chi-squared test was calculated for 1 degree of freedom for the group that told the truth, a value of 1.000 was obtained ($p = .524$), and for those who lied the value obtained was .486 ($p = .243$).

4.2.2. No aggression observed in phase 1

Recall that half of the subjects did not witness any kind of aggression. Therefore, in the case of those who invented the occurrence of a problematic incident (40% of the total within this subsample) the information that they were provided (pressure level and image) was situated in their mind in reference to a person who in reality had not acted problematically. And so, for this group, the rows in Table 3 referring to the totals show that the percentage of truthfulness or lying does not differ according to whether the children were subjected to high or low pressure. And when we examine possible differences according to whether they received information that the aggressor was a good or a bad person, we find that the percentages are likewise virtually unchanged, although there is a slight tendency for subjects receiving information that the perpetrator was a bad person and subjected to high pressure to be more likely to tell the truth, i.e., to claim they did not see any aggression. Those subjected to low pressure and have received information that the perpetrator was a bad person were more likely to lie. In any case, before performing tests of significance, we note that the manipulation of two independent variables did not entail a change in the children’s statements.

In any event, the fact that those who most often told the truth did so despite being informed that the perpetrator was a bad person and subjected to high pressure from potential consequences shows that children tend to tell the truth.

It must also be noted that 58.45% of the children (83 versus 59) told the truth: that is, they did not report the existence of aggression. In other words, almost 40% of children invented such an incident, confirming what was already determined in phase 1 of this experiment. Table 2 presents all these data.

With respect to statistical significance, the chi-squared test for the group of truth-telling subjects, for 1 degree of freedom, produced a value of .247, which implied a p of .650 (not significant). Similarly, within the group of subjects who lied, the chi-squared value was .827, implying a p of .439 (also not significant). This therefore verified what was already discussed in the preceding paragraphs: the two introduced manipulations did not change the verbal statements of the subjects.

4.2.3. Sex and age

No differences were found when the results were analyzed by sex. Thus, 96.4% of boys and 93% of girls who witnessed an act of aggression

Table 2
Effects of the degree of pressure and the image for subjects who witnessed an act of aggression.

				Good person	Bad person	Total
Truth	Pressure	High	Frequency (N)	39	43	82
			Percentage	47.6%	52.4%	100.0%
	Low	Frequency (N)	31	33	64	
		Percentage	48.4%	51.6%	100.0%	
	Total	Frequency (N)	70	76	146	
		Percentage	47.9%	52.1%	100.0%	
Lie	Pressure	High	Frequency (N)	3	1	4
			Percentage	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
	Low	Frequency (N)	1	3	4	
		Percentage	25.0%	75.0%	100.0%	
	Total	Frequency (N)	4	4	8	
		Percentage	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%	

Table 3
Effects of the degree of pressure and image for subjects who did not witness an act of aggression.

				Good person	Bad person	Total
Truth	Pressure	High	Frequency (N)	23	31	54
			Percentage	42.6%	57.4%	100.0%
	Low	Frequency (N)	14	15	29	
		Percentage	48.3%	51.7%	100.0%	
	Total	Frequency (N)	37	46	83	
		Percentage	44.6%	55.4%	100.0%	
Lie	Pressure	High	Frequency (N)	16	13	29
			Percentage	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%
	Low	Frequency (N)	13	17	30	
		Percentage	43.3%	56.7%	100.0%	
	Total	Frequency (N)	29	30	59	
		Percentage	49.2%	50.8%	100.0%	

told the truth (again, virtually all of them), while of those who did not witness the aggression, 58.2% of boys and 58.7% of girls said that there was indeed no incident: i.e., told the truth. The chi-square and contingency coefficient C tests offered no significant results. Neither the type of pressure nor the type information (positive or negative) received about the actor produced different results.

The results are more dispersed with respect to the age variable. While those subjects who did witness an act of aggression reported truthfully in almost all cases (even 8- and 9-year-olds all told the truth), among those who did not witness an assault the 7-year-olds were most truthful (91.7%), while only 24% of the 10-year-olds and 45% of the 6-year-olds told the truth. Despite this disparity, there is no tendency to be more or less truthful according to age. As with the sex variable, no significant differences were found within each age depending on the type of information (positive or negative) provided about the actor, or the pressure level (high or low) exerted. The contrast statistics verified that there were effectively no significant differences.

Given that no results showed significant differences, we do not present tables or graphs in this regard.

5. Discussion

The ideas derived from the PAS theory are based on a psychoanalytical theoretical orientation that has penetrated deeply into our society, especially in the field of culture. In the film there are many movements and directors using psychoanalytical concepts (David Lynch, Kurosawa, Buñuel, Woody Allen, etc.). We need only to think of Alfred Hitchcock’s “Psycho,” in which Norman Bates states that a man’s best friend is his mother, in a clear allusion to the Oedipus complex. There is furthermore no doubt about the influence of filmmaking on both collective and individual psychology. In music we can cite the case of Mozart as an example, to whom we owe outstanding productions written in an almost delirious state. Recall the obsession he had with the anonymous person who commissioned the “Requiem.” One of his operas, The Magic Flute, is full of dream symbolism, and even current analysts see in it a relationship with Freemasonry. In short, in all the arts it is very normal to express the innermost life of every individual, allowing all these repressed instincts to rise to the surface. One need only look, for example, at a painting by Dali or any surrealist painter, as this artistic movement grounded its work in Freud’s theory (Clemente, 2014).

But along with this, society cannot and should not accept ideas originating in an unscientific theory. Thus, several feminist movements criticize Freud for explaining woman as a man without a phallus, and for the concept of “penis envy.” Other movements also criticize Freud’s theory for considering homosexuality to be a perversion; the great cultural impact of Freud’s theories of psychosexual development and possibly a lack of rigor and objectivity in their interpretation popularized the idea of homosexuality as a disease, which in the first half of the twentieth century resulted in an increase in the confinement of homosexuals in

mental health facilities. Indeed, psychoanalytic treatment was used for several decades to try to “cure” homosexuality.

But what is more: if, as Escudero et al. (2010, p. 22) claim, no such proof exists concerning the methodology, and the creator of the supposed PAS can in no way guarantee the falsity or truthfulness of allegations; if there may be multiple valid explanations for the child’s rejection toward the parent which supposed PAS cannot rule out; if the possibility of false positives (incorrectly deciding that a child has experienced supposed PAS when this is not the case) is so high that in this case the measure of changing custody may actually pose an intolerable risk and harm to the child; and if being able to demonstrate that the fundamentals of supposed PAS have been built by distorting the terminology used and establishing a logic that can justify any outcome a priori, then would it be fitting for a protective system such as the courts to allow it to continue to be used?

Surely, if only to keep to the rule of Ockham’s razor, we should first accept any explanation that is simpler than that established by Gardner.

A recent article (Clemente, 2013) stated that PAS is an attack against science, against the Rule of Law, and against children and their parents. Indeed, an unscientific theory should not be used within the system for the administration of justice, because in this case the first person to suffer harm will be the child.

This article has taken as its starting point the idea of being able to verify whether children tend to invent reality, and if this is so, whether two specific explanatory variables may be key to explaining when lying occurs: the existence of pressure because the informant will be subjected to an asymmetric power relationship with respect to the perpetrator of an aggressive act, and being informed that the aggressive person is a good or a bad person, which is what we label image.

The results clearly show that children who witness aggression (in this case verbal) tell the truth, since only 5% remained silent about what they had witnessed. That is, children who observed aggression reported it without any problem. However, when children did not witness any act of aggression, 40% of the subjects did in fact report that there a problematic event had occurred; that is, faced with the interviewer’s demand that they report whether a problematic event had occurred, they wound up perceiving that such an event had in fact taken place. These results are consistent with our hypothesis in this regard, indicating that children who observed the aggression reported it without problem, and a large proportion of those who did not observe such an event had it implanted in their memory.

Moreover, it is interesting to note how exerting high or low pressure on the child or providing them with a positive or negative image of the aggressor had hardly any influence when it came to telling the truth or lying. These results from the second phase of the research contradict our hypothesis, since we expected that the subjects would use the information to defend themselves against asymmetrical power situations and would be influenced by the prior information offered to them.

Therefore, the ideas suggested by Gardner are not supported by our data. It is very rare for children to lie about what they have seen, and when it does happen it consists of fabricating things that were not seen. But we must take into consideration that if a memory is implanted by suggesting, through a question, that a problematic event has occurred (false memory), this shows hardly any variation regardless of the degree of pressure and whether positive or negative information about the perpetrator of a negative incident is provided. In fact, to a statistically insignificant extent, the opposite is true: the greater the level of pressure, the more likely it is that the subject will tell the truth (i.e., it is difficult to manipulate children), and when someone tries to impose a negative image of that person is it not easy to change children’s opinion but again quite the opposite. If we apply these ideas to what happens in court cases, we would find that if a mother tries to instill a bad image of the father in a child and creates pressure due to the fact that there is an asymmetric power relationship living under their roof, the child would not change their opinion on this account; that is, falsification is independent of these two variables, chosen because they are the ones that are

most closely derived from the ideas expressed by Gardner (1985, 1991, 1998).

Thus Gardner (2004) is not present or exacerbated as a function of the two types of manipulations considered. It is indeed true that children (like adults) create false memories in light of interviewers’ suggestions, as shown in their day by Loftus et al. (1978) and Loftus and Sherman (1996). But such false memory implantation is not exacerbated and does not depend on an external manipulator, which Gardner usually identified with the custodial parent. In any event, we believe that the most prominent and important finding of this study is the verification that in almost all cases children tell the truth when they observe aggression (95% of the time), and so it is not fair to say that they lie.

It is worth noting that no pressure group was observed in the sample of children. This was at odds with what would be expected according to Asch’s early work on pressure groups in 1951 (for an in-depth review, see Asch, 1956) i.e., that at least two-thirds of the children would succumb to the pressure of an adult. However, Bond and Smith’s (1996) meta-analysis has shown that this may not always be the case. One of the variables that may influence an adult’s failure to persuade a child may be the presence of moral conflicts or dilemmas. These types of situations have been examined by several authors such as Kundu and Cummings (2013), who have shown that group pressure was mediated by the degree to which it complied with moral norms.

It may seem odd that the finding of no significant different in the data as a function of age. It is rare to find in the work literature to study the age variable, either because the research on this topic is performed simulations with college students (as is the case of work Pompedda, Zappala, and Santtila 2015), or because the ages are homogeneous. However, papers like Fu, Heyman, Chen, Liu, & Lee, 2015, who uses children very similar to those in our sample (6–11 years) age, have not found differences in the results, so our data does not disagree with the findings of other authors.

6. Conclusion

This article is constrained by a number of limitations, perhaps the most important of which is having worked with children who are not being subjected to a legal conflict. This was necessitated in order to get a large enough sample to be able to obtain statistically significant results, but certainly other works shall delve deeper into this perspective using a sample of children experiencing such conflict. Moreover, we must consider that due to the age of children (legally, the weight of children’s testimony is more decisive at older ages, and therefore we were not interested in including them in the sample), it is difficult and even in some cases impossible to use a wide range of psychological tests, so we have limited ourselves to collecting their responses on a questionnaire, but not to detecting other personality variables that could play a mediating role in whether they report what happened. Finally, one must consider that an aggressive scene was created, but for ethical reasons it was merely verbal; many of the children involved in legal proceedings have witnessed scenes of significant violence, both physical and verbal, but in an experiment it is impossible to create such a scene. Without doubt, future research may try to avoid these limitations.

We believe that this research verifies that one of the starting points of Gardner’s theory—the fact that children are manipulated by the custodial parent—was not confirmed experimentally, and therefore that author’s arguments should not be used when considering the testimony of a minor. The most appropriate stance, as our data demonstrate, is to assume that children tell the truth.

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