Special Article from a Special Commentator

The Science Is Real; the Smear Is Not: A Response to Sonia Sodha's Attack

"The Science Is Real; the Smear Is Not: A Response to Sonia Sodha's Attack on Parental Alienation Research and Dr. Gardner"

How Ideology, Misinformation, and Personal Animus Have Replaced Evidence in the Debate Over Children's Safety

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Introduction

On April 6, 2026, The I Paper (from the U.K.) published an opinion column by Sonia Sodha titled "The American psychologist who destroyed British families with sexist poison." The article characterizes Dr. Richard Gardner as a misogynist crank, parental alienation as an unevidenced theory, and the professionals who study it as unregulated charlatans. It does so without citing a single peer-reviewed study, without engaging with the empirical literature, and without disclosing that the opposition narrative it promotes has been systematically debunked in leading psychology journals.

This article is a response—not merely to Sodha's column, but to the broader pattern of misinformation that endangers children by denying the existence of

a scientifically documented form of psychological abuse. As someone who knew Dr. Gardner personally for nearly four decades, and as a professional who has spent over 41 years working with families destroyed by parental alienation, I am compelled to set the record straight.

Dr. Gardner Was Not a Misogynist: The Evidence of Gender Neutrality

Sodha's article rests on the foundational claim that Gardner was a misogynist who invented parental alienation as a weapon against women. This claim is directly contradicted by Gardner's own published work, in which he explicitly stated that **men are equally capable of engaging in alienating behaviors against their children.** He recognized that fathers could be—and are—alienators. His framework was never gendered; it was behavioral.

The empirical research that followed has overwhelmingly confirmed this gender neutrality. Harman, Leder-Elder, and Biringen (2016, 2019), using nationally representative samples in the United States, found **no statistically significant gender differences** in who is likely to be a targeted parent. What predicts alienation is not gender but custodial control: the parent with greater custodial access is more likely to engage in alienating behaviors, regardless of whether that parent is a mother or a father (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018).

The claim that parental alienation is a "sexist" concept exists only in the rhetoric of its opponents—never in the research itself.

The Evidence the Opposition Refuses to Acknowledge

Sodha describes parental alienation as "unevidenced." This is not an opinion. It is a factual claim. And it is demonstrably false.

Parental alienation is among the most extensively studied constructs in family law and child psychology. Consider the scope of the evidence:

• Over 1,000 publications—including hundreds of peer-reviewed journal articles, as well as scholarly book chapters and books—have been published on parental alienation and related dynamics, according to the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG).

• A systematic review by Harman, Warshak, Lorandos, and Florian (2022), published in **Developmental Psychology**—the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association—identified over 213 empirical studies containing original data on parental alienation, spanning multiple countries, languages, and methodologies.

• More than **40% of all published PA research has appeared since 2016**, demonstrating that this is an accelerating, not declining, field of scientific inquiry (Harman, Bernet, & Harman, 2019).

• Marsden (2025), using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool, assessed 156 peer-reviewed PA studies and found a **mean quality score of 0.84**—well above standard thresholds for methodological rigor.

• The World Health Organization's **ICD-11** includes language referencing parental alienation. The **DSM-5** includes diagnostic codes applicable to alienation dynamics (V61.29, V995.51).

• At the 2014 AFCC conference, **98% of surveyed professionals** agreed that children can be manipulated by one parent to reject the other without legitimate justification (Warshak, 2015).

Sodha cites none of this. Not one study. Not one systematic review. Not one meta-analysis. Her article is entirely devoid of scientific evidence for the claims it makes. This is not journalism. It is advocacy dressed as reporting.

The Opposition's Arguments Have Been Systematically Refuted

Kruk and Harman (2024), writing in The American Journal of Family Therapy, identified and refuted 14 distinct arguments advanced by parental alienation

critics, supported by over 1,000 publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly book chapters, and books. Among the key findings:

"Allegations are never false." Trocmé and Bala (2005) found that while intentionally false allegations constituted approximately 4% of all child maltreatment reports, the rate rose to 12% in custody disputes. Thoennes and Tjaden (1990) found that 33% of sexual abuse allegations in custody contexts were determined to involve no abuse, with an additional 17% yielding indeterminate results. The categorical claim that allegations are "essentially never fabricated" is contradicted by every major study on the subject.

"Only men alienate." No empirical study has ever produced evidence that alienation is a gendered phenomenon. Every nationally representative study finds gender symmetry in alienating behaviors.

"Parental alienation is a pseudo-concept." A 2023 UN Special Rapporteur report used this term without engaging the empirical literature. Kruk and Harman (2024) demonstrated that this characterization relied on science-denial techniques—selective citation, conflation with outdated formulations, and ideological rather than methodological critique.

"Claiming alienation is a tactic used by abusers." Varavei and Harman (2025), analyzing 200 Canadian court cases, found that the narrative of mothers routinely losing custody to abusive fathers who claim alienation constitutes an **illusory correlation**—a pattern that appears salient in anecdotal accounts but is not supported by systematic data.

Science Denial Is Not a Substitute for Evidence

The strategies employed by parental alienation opponents follow well-documented science-denial patterns. Bernet and Xu (2023) catalogued specific instances of misinformation and misrepresentation in the anti-PA literature. Harman and colleagues have identified recurring denial techniques in the opposition's work:

Cherry-picking: Critics cite isolated studies or outdated critiques while ignoring the cumulative weight of over 1,000 publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly book chapters, and books.

Moving the goalposts: When presented with evidence, critics demand ethically impossible study designs (e.g., randomized controlled trials on abused children).

False balance: The opposition presents a manufactured "debate" as though two equally supported scientific positions exist, when the empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports parental alienation's recognition.

Conflation: Critics conflate current parental alienation research with Gardner's earliest 1980s formulations, ignoring three decades of scientific evolution.

Appeal to ideology over evidence: The opposition substitutes ideological claims for empirical analysis, even as research documents gender symmetry in family violence perpetration (Dutton, 2012; Hamel et al., 2007).

Sodha's article employs every one of these techniques. It conflates Gardner's person with the field he helped originate. It ignores three decades of independent research. It presents anecdotal cases as representative of systemic patterns. And it offers not a single piece of scientific evidence for the extraordinary claim that an entire body of peer-reviewed research should be dismissed.

The Real Victims: Children Harmed by Denial

The denial of parental alienation is not an abstract academic debate. It has devastating real-world consequences for children.

Miralles, Godoy, and Hidalgo (2023) reviewed 13 studies and found that adults exposed to parental alienation in childhood reported elevated anxiety and depression, lower self-esteem, higher substance use, insecure attachment, lower quality of life, higher divorce rates, and—most alarmingly—repetition of

alienation behaviors on their own children. Parental alienation is an intergenerational cycle of psychological abuse.

Hine (2025), studying separated parents in the United Kingdom, found that **between 39% and 59%** of the sample had experienced alienating behaviors, with targeted parents reporting significantly greater depression, PTSD symptoms, and suicidal ideation. This is a public health crisis—one that denial campaigns actively work to keep hidden.

Harman, Kruk, and Hines (2018), publishing in the APA's Psychological Bulletin, formally demonstrated that alienating behaviors meet established criteria for **family violence and child abuse**: there is significant human injury, and it results from deliberate human action. The authors drew a powerful parallel: the societal denial of parental alienation today mirrors the historical denial of child abuse a century ago and domestic violence in decades past.

When misinformation campaigns succeed in persuading courts and policymakers that parental alienation does not exist, children who are being psychologically manipulated lose access to the evidence-based interventions that research has shown to be effective (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2017). The children remain trapped. The abuse continues. And the denial movement bears responsibility.

What Sodha's Article Actually Reveals

The rhetoric promoted in Sodha's column—and in the broader campaign against parental alienation—is not driven by science. It is driven by a specific group of individuals who were found by courts, through testimony and evidence, to have psychologically harmed their children using false allegations of abuse and the criminal act of custodial interference. Unable to prevail on the evidence, they have turned to media campaigns, legislative lobbying, and character assassination of the professionals who identified their behavior.

This is the pattern that repeats across jurisdictions and across decades: when a parent is caught engaging in alienating behaviors, the response is not accountability—it is an attack on the concept of alienation itself. The

messenger is destroyed so the message can be ignored. And the children continue to suffer.

Conclusion: The Evidence Exists; the Denial Does Not

The research record on parental alienation is not ambiguous. Over 1,000 publications—including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly book chapters, and books—, published across multiple disciplines, languages, and countries, consistently document its existence, its mechanisms, the harm it inflicts on children and families, and the interventions that can address it. The scientific rigor of this literature has been independently assessed and confirmed.

The opposition has produced no comparable evidence base. Its arguments rely on categorical assertions—allegations are never false, only men alienate—that are contradicted by every major empirical study. Its methods track established patterns of science denial rather than scientific inquiry.

Sonia Sodha's article in The I Paper is not an act of journalism. It is an act of misinformation that, if taken seriously by courts and policymakers, will leave more children trapped in psychologically abusive environments. The children of Britain—and of every nation—deserve better than ideology masquerading as concern.

The evidence for parental alienation exists. The evidence for its denial does not.

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