

The Parental Acceptance and Rejection Questionnaire – Child; validated on a general population in Sweden.

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Abstract

Parental alienation (PA) is a worldwide parent-child relational problem. It is observed and researched mostly in connection with custody disputes when the child may oppose or refuse contact with a previously loved parent. As PA may have harmful effects on the children, it is essential to be able to document it by valid methods. The Parental Acceptance and Rejection Questionnaire for children (PARQ – child) has been validated to distinguish pre-identified severely alienated from non-alienated children, however, the discriminative validity in the general Swedish population is unknown.

Objective. The purpose of this study was to examine the feasibility, variability, and discriminative ability of a

Swedish translation of a short form of this instrument on a young general population.

Methods. The PARQ - child (short form) was administered to 83 children in the age range of nine to 14.

Results. The questions were well understood and completed by a vast majority, although some of the youngest needed help. The reliability of the questionnaire was good. There was a statistical difference between PARQ fathers that was larger (more rejecting) than for mothers. PARQ mother and PARQ father correlated significantly, however. The variability was adequate, and most values (85%) were in the normal range. Two outliers were identified with great PARQ-gaps, although they did not meet preset values for PA.

The conclusion is that PARQ-child (short form) is a reliable instrument that can be applied in Sweden, but more studies are needed in both the general and in clinical populations to confidently distinguish between parental alienation and other reasons for contact refusal. The questionnaire should be complemented with clinical interviews and examinations.

Key words: Parental acceptance, rejection, questionnaire, relational problem, parental alienation, Sweden.

Practitioner Points

PARQ-child translated and normalized in a Swedish population of 83 children, nine to 14 years old.

None of the children had PARQ-Gap score that would classify them as splitted.

The results showed good psychometric properties.

The PARQ can be used as an instrument to distinguish between parental alienation and estrangement in Swedish practical application, e.g., social services and the judicial system.

Introduction

According to the new version of the Swedish Parental Code (FB 6 2b§, 2021), it is essential to listen to the children's opinions. From the age of 12, the child's voice, in the established praxis, is considered to be of great importance for overall assessments of custody, residence and visitation. However, according to neurological research findings, the child's brain is not fully developed until around the age of 25 (Tottenham, 2020). This limits whether the child understands the consequences of their preferences in disputed family cases. We also know that in many cases the child can be affected by a parent's will and incorporate the parent's will without being able to attribute it as an influence from their parent. This is often seen in cases with severe PA (Harman et al., 2018).

It is normal and beneficial for the child to be close to both parents (Rohner and Khaleque, 2005). However, children may have other reasons than PA for rejecting one or both parents after divorce like anger, remorse, and (self)-blame. Such reactions are natural, and in most cases temporary. A parent with inadequate contact with a child before parental break-up may also strive to build confidence with the child. Finally, and very importantly, contact refusal can also be because the child has been treated badly by that parent. This is called a justified refusal, or estrangement.

A negative impact on the child, through coercive control of the child, characteristic for the severe cases of parental alienation, suggests that it is not meaningful to make decisions in accordance with the child's wishes and opinions. The bad-mouthing and coercive control can be stopped by a court decision that contradicts the expectations of the child and the favored parent (Warshak, 2010).

Custody disputes are often decided without validated methods for distinguishing between reasons for contact refusal. Expert witnesses and social workers are often under the influence of parties that act manipulative with the consequence that the child's best interests are endangered (Nordhelle, 2020). Therefore, It is of utmost importance that we can distinguish between justified refusal and refusal caused by coercive control of the child.

The Five Factor Model

The five-factor model has been used to discriminate between alienated, and not alienated children, for a few years (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022). The factors relate to both the parents and the child. All factors need to be thoroughly examined to distinguish if it is a justified rejection or not.

1. Does the child, in words and behaviour reject contact with one of the parents?
2. Has there previously been a loving contact between the child and the parent the child now rejects?
3. Can any factual and reliable basis be found for the child's rejection?
4. Does the favoured parent of the child exhibit behaviours that research-based findings have shown to be characteristic of alienating parents?
5. Does the child display behaviours that have been shown to be characteristic for children alienated by a parent?

If this examination concludes that the child is alienated, further assessments are required to identify if it is a mild, moderately, or severely alienated child.

Estrangement or Parental Alienation?

One way to distinguish whether a child's rejection of contact with one parent is a justified rejection (estrangement) or if it is caused by a negative and harmful parental influence (parental alienation), is to examine whether the child has a one-sided, or an ambivalent, perception of the rejected parent.

Physically abused children have been found to want to maintain relationships with abusive caregivers (Baker et al., 2019). This can be interpreted as proof that children with justified reasons to reject a parent keep what is normal for children, an ambivalent view of their parent, that is a perception that the parent has both bad and good qualities.

If, on the other hand, the child's rejection of a parent lacks a factual basis, then instead the child tends to have an unreservedly negative view of the rejected parent, and an unconditionally positive view of the favoured parent. It is a phenomenon that is typically associated with a black and white evaluation of the parents. Outwardly, this is so-called splitting -

when the child associates one parent with everything that is good and the other parent with everything that is bad. Whether the child has an ambivalent or a black-and-white view of the rejected parent is thus essential in assessments of unjustified (parental alienation), or a justified basis (estrangement) for the child's rejection (Bernet et al., 2018). Splitting is a core manifestation of moderate or severe parental alienation.

The PARQ - child questionnaire

Assessments of whether a child has justified or unjustified grounds for rejecting contact with one parent can be a difficult task, even for people with long experience in investigating custody disputes. A battery of instruments called PARQ (Parental Acceptance Rejection Questionnaires) have been developed by Ronald Rohner and his colleagues for over four decades (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002).

Of particular importance in the context of custody disputes is that the PARQ-child questionnaire has been demonstrated (Bernet et al., 2018) to distinguish between severely alienated children and children who had a factual basis for rejecting a parent (estrangement). The discriminatory validity of the instrument was very good in the population investigated by Bernet et al (2018) where one group was already identified as severely alienated. Clinical epidemiology warns, however, that the validity can be overestimated when tested in such contexts (Sackett et al., 1985).

International validation of the PARQ-instruments

The PARQ instruments, based on Inter-Personal Acceptance Rejection (IPAR) Theory (Rohner & Khaleque, 2005) have been used in numerous scientific and international studies (Rohner & Ali, 2020). It is a standardized quantitative measure, not based on personal values or judgements.

Bernet et al. (2020) used a population of severely alienated children (N=45), who had been classified as such by professional assessors. These children's responses were compared with those from a population of children who were known to have been abused or had other legitimate reasons for rejecting the parent, (N=71). All the children in this study were asked to answer the long version of PARQ children (60 questions instead of 24 statements as in the short form).

The difference between the children's values for mother and father, the so-called PARQ-Gap, was calculated. The children were classified as alienated if the difference exceeded 90. This PARQ-Gap measure complied with the professional judgments in 99% of the cases. These data indicate that the PARQ can reliably differentiate parental alienation from estrangement with two pre-selected populations. In order for the PARQ to be used as an instrument to distinguish between parental alienation and estrangement in practical application, e.g., within social services and the judicial system in Sweden, a Swedish standardization was needed.

Hypotheses

The prevalence of PA in a general population in Sweden is unknown. The PARQ gap using the short form of the PARQ-child is also unknown. We would expect that only a minority, if any, would satisfy the criteria for PA in a selection of children drawn from the normal, general population. We expected that some children would experience parental warmth and rejection differently with their mothers and fathers, although not be classified as having an exaggerated black and white view as seen with splitting. We also expected that the PARQ for mothers would reveal more warmth and less rejection as compared with the fathers.

The objective of this study was to examine the feasibility, variability, reliability, and discriminative ability of a Swedish translation of the PARQ-child short form on a young general population.

Method

Participants

83 children: 56 girls and 27 boys, participated in the study. The children were between nine and 14 years old, with a mean age of 11.0 years and a standard deviation of 1.3, they were in grades three to eight. The survey was conducted during the spring term of 2019 in schools located in Malmö and was approved by the teachers and the principal of the school. The parents gave written informed consent for their children to participate in the study. The children gave written informed consent to participate in the study.

Material and instruments

The short form of the PARQ-child was used. It consists of 24 statements about how the child perceives his mother's and his father's behaviour in a warmth-rejection dimension. The children were asked to use a four-point scale while evaluating the statements. The same statements were used for mothers and fathers, or those care takers that are present during the child's upbringing. The 24 statements in PARQ-child (short form) have been translated by Lena Hellblom Sjögren from English to Swedish and checked by an authorized translator (see Appendix A). The four response options (almost always true, sometimes true, rarely true, almost never true) describe the child's experience of warmth/affirmation (e.g. "Says nice things"), respectively rejection (e.g. "Seems to dislike me") from both parents. All statements were given once regarding the mother and once regarding the father, so that the total number of statements for each child corresponds to $2 \times 24 = 48$.

Descriptive words

The children were also asked to describe their mother and father with descriptive words. The instruction was: "Write five descriptive words that describe your relationship with your father or the one who is in your father's place", and the same for mother: "Write five descriptive words that describe your relationship with your mother or who is in your mother's place. If you think your relationship is good, write more positive words that describe what is good, and if you think your relationship is bad, write more negative words."

Demography

The children were asked about demographic data; age, cohort (class level), gender, ethnicity (Were you born in Sweden?), how long have you lived in Sweden? (years), language ("What is the main language spoken at home?"), religion ("Which religion do you identify with?").

Procedure

The data collection was carried out in the classrooms. The children were allowed to independently complete the short version of the PARQ-child, descriptive words and demographic data. The data collection was carried out by a psychology student with experience as a teacher.

Statistics

Statistics were conducted with non-parametric Wilcoxon Sign Ranks test (dependent sample) or Mann-Whitney (independent sample) test and Spearman correlations as the PARQ-measure was skewed. The reliability was tested with Cronbach's alpha.

Ethics

The study was reviewed and waived by the Swedish Ethical Board, and the study was performed in accordance with Swedish ethical regulations.

Results

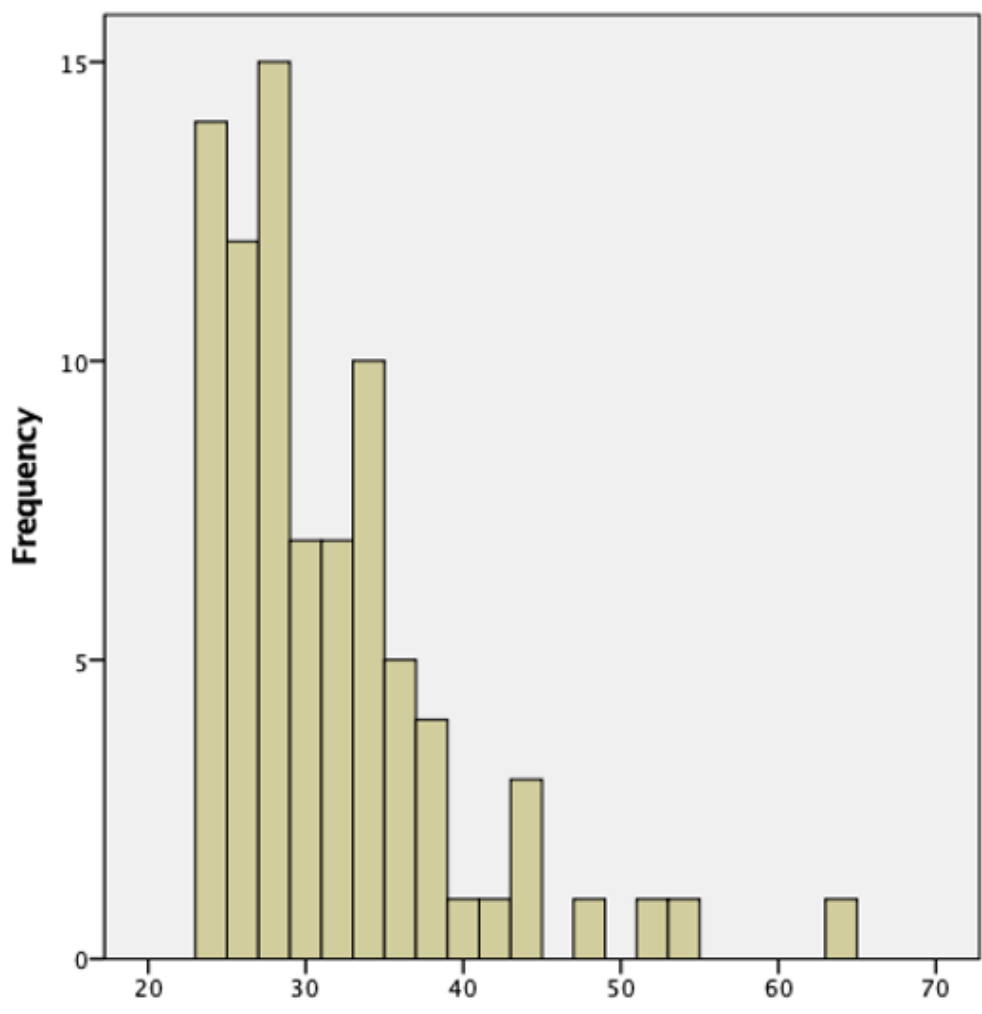
PARQ for mother was 28.7 (min 24, max 57, skewness 2.53) and PARQ for father was 30.9 (min 24, max 63, skewness 1.86) (see Table 1 and histograms in Figure 1a and b). There was a statistical difference between PARQ fathers that was larger (more rejection) than for mothers (paired Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, $z = 4.1$, $p < .0001$ two-sided). The Cronbach's alpha for father was 0.90 and for mother 0.87.

Table 1. PARQ values for father and mother

PARQ	Mean	Median	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Father	30.9	29.0	7.4	24	63
Mother	28.7	27.0	6.8	24	57

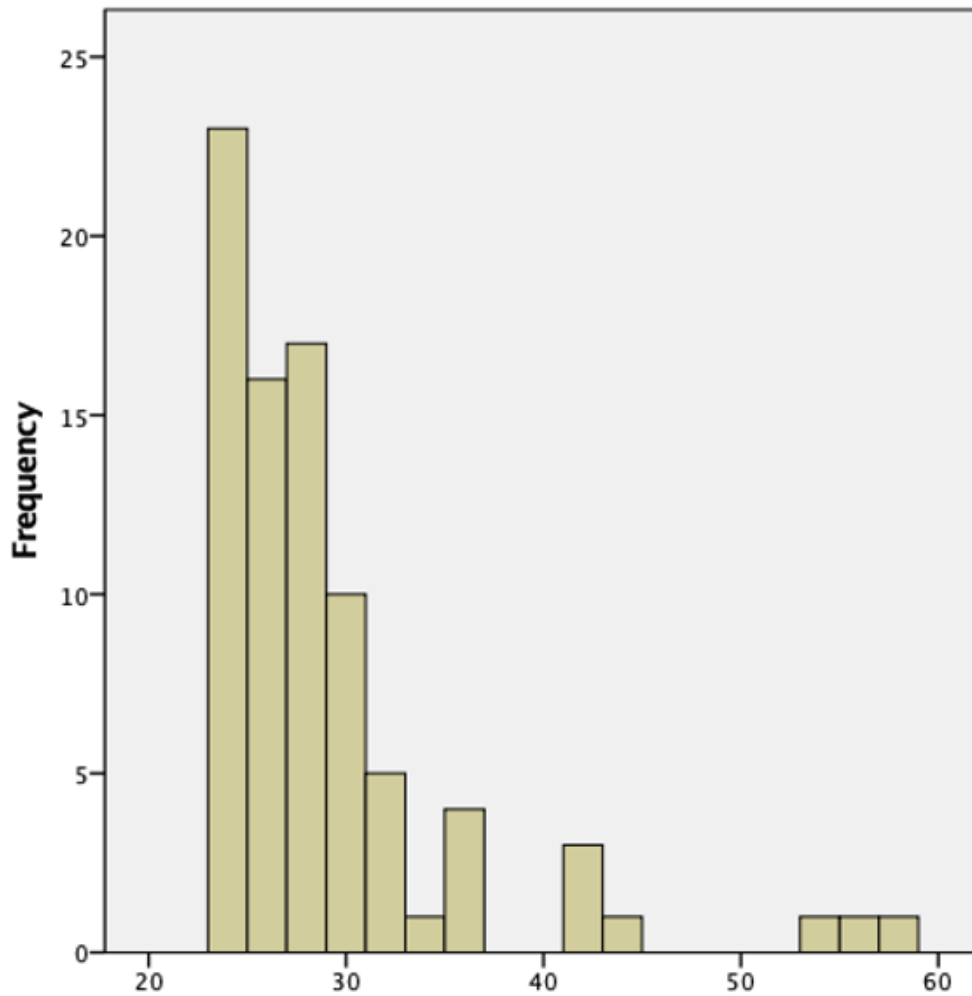
Note. The table shows the mean, median, standard deviation, min, and max values of the PARQ measure divided into fathers and mothers.

Figure 1a. Histogram for PARQ father



Note. The table shows the histogram of PARQ father.

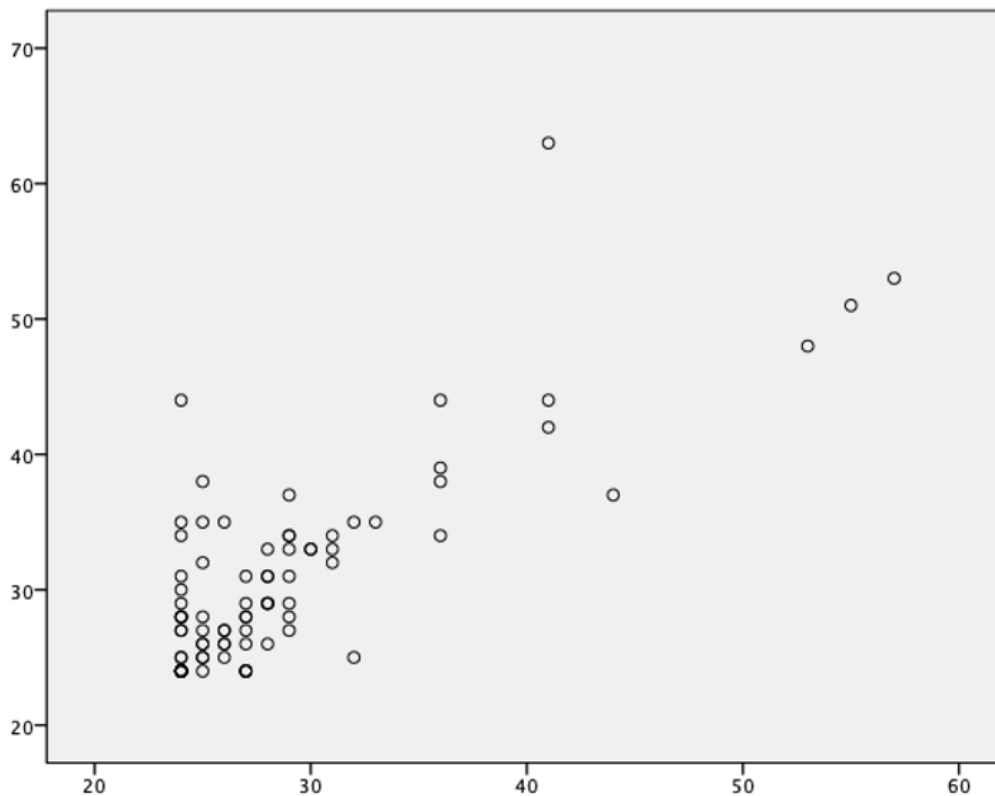
Figure 1b. Histogram for PARQ mother



Note. The table shows the histogram of PARQ mother.

11 PARQ results (six for father and five for mother) were above 40. PARQ mother and PARQ father correlated significantly (Spearman $r = .61$, $p < .0001$), so that high values for mothers also have high values for fathers, see Figure 2.

Figure 2. Scatter plot for PARQ mother (x-axis) and PARQ father (y-axis).

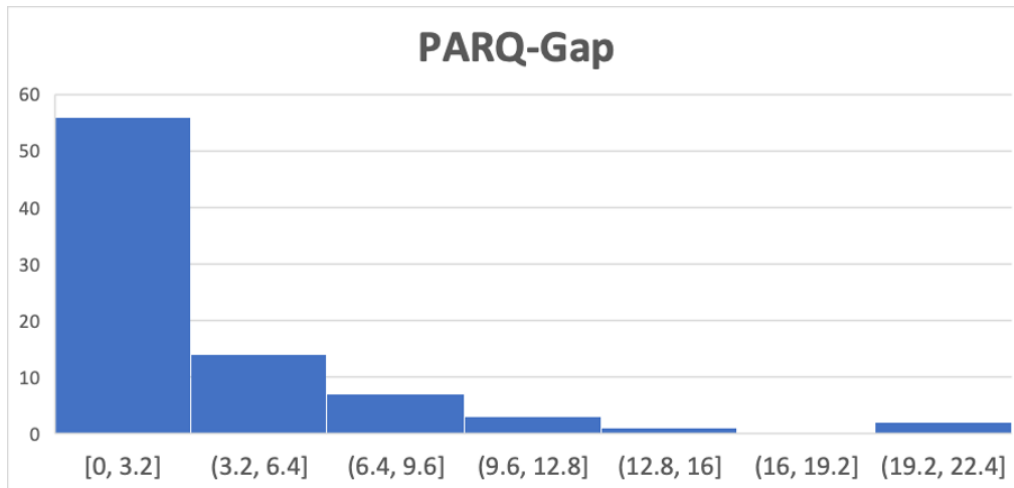


Note. The table shows a scatter plot for PARQ mother (x-axis) and PARQ father (y-axis).

PARQ-Gap

Splitting can be categorized as occurring if the difference between the mother's and father's PARQ is above a certain value. A PARQ-Gap greater than 25, is Bernet's criterion that should be used for classification of splitting, i.e., as severe alienation (William Bernet, personal communication, 2023). None of the Swedish children were classified with splitting according to this criterion. The highest PARQ-Gap value was 22. 63 percent of the children had a PARQ-Gap between zero and three, and 98% a value lower than 13. A histogram of the PARQ-Gap can be found in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Histogram for the PARQ-Gap



Note. The x-axis shows seven bins for the PARQ-Gap measure for mothers and fathers.

According to Bernet the favoured parent should have a PARQ within the "idealized" parenting range of 24-27. The alienated, also called the targeted parent, should be between 52-96 (moderately and severely rejected). A more conservative criterion is 60-96. A score of 60 or more shows that the child qualitatively perceives much more rejecting behaviour than warmth and acceptance.

Two of the respondents were outliers, where the mother had lower PARQ scores than the father. For these two children the generated words they had been asked to use for describing mum and dad, respectively, were warmer for the mother than the father. But only one of these two outliers rated one of the parents in the "idealized" range. The words used by that respondent for mother were "funny, stressed, joyful, safe, calm, angry". The words used for father were "angry, safe, stress, anxiety".

The other outlier respondent had scores indicating that both parents were experienced as rather rejecting. These words were used for mother: "lovable, likable, helpful, trustworthy, difficult", and the words used for "father: troublesome, punish, never say "I love you", help, quarrelsome".

Demography

No demographic data were associated with the PARQ measure. Age had no relation, i.e., did not (Spearman) correlate with PARQ mother or PARQ father. Gender, i.e., whether the child identifies as boy or girl, had no relationship (measured by the Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon two-tailed test) with PARQ mother or PARQ father. Ethnicity is not associated with PARQ mother or PARQ father, as measured by the Mann-Whitney Wilcoxon two-tailed test.

Discussion

This study has demonstrated that the Swedish PARQ-child (short form) was understood by students in the age range from nine -14 among the general population. The reliability of the instrument was good. The study also revealed that the variability indicated that children of this age group identified how they perceived their mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviours along a continuum. The correlations between mothers' and fathers' parenting quality manifested that their reports were predictable from each other in many cases. The PARQ-gap indicated that none of the children could be described as severely alienated from one of the parents when we compared with a preset cut off based on American youth identified with severe PA as compared with non-alienated youth. The construct validity of the questionnaire was demonstrated by the words that the children used of their parents. The hypothesized difference in warmth and rejection between mothers and fathers was also documented, providing validity evidence.

In the Swedish validation we used the short form of PARQ-child. As the long form, the short version has demonstrated good validity also in populations outside the US (Artemis & Touloumakos, 2016). Most of the 83 Swedish pupils easily understood the 24 statements. For some of them, however, the test administrator needed to provide additional support for the child to complete certain items. The feasibility of the questionnaire seems therefore safeguarded.

The PARQ-instrument fulfills several conditions for discriminatory assessments. PARQ-Child has been scientifically validated in the past and is now also validated to distinguish alienated children (unjustified rejection) from children who, on factual and reasonable grounds, reject

a parent (justified rejection/estrangement). The discrimination ability was very good (Bernet et al., 2020). However, the validity was tested on two populations that were identified prior to testing and encompassed the full version of PARQ-child. Validity of diagnostic tools is commonly exaggerated when we test in pre-selected populations (Sackett et al., 1985).

According to William Bernet (personal communication, 2023) the PARQ gap must be 25 points or higher for the child to be classified as severely alienated. Lower PARQ gaps are expected with mild to moderate parental alienation. We have not established clear recommendations for PARQ gaps in mild to moderate alienation, and we cannot ascertain that the suggested cut-off of 25 is valid in a Nordic setting.

One of the respondents in the Swedish study with a gap of 22 had ratings of one parent in the “idealized” range, but the rejection score of the other parent was below expected values for a severely alienated child. As in all scientific contexts, several studies by different researchers need to be made with equivalent results. Therefore, studies in the general population, and especially in clinical populations should be initiated.

Our conclusion is that PARQ-child (short form) is a reliable instrument that can be applied in Sweden and Nordic countries, but we need more studies in both the general and in clinical populations to distinguish with confidence between parental alienation and other reasons for contact refusal. The questionnaire should be complemented with clinical interviews and examinations.

License for PARQ

It is possible for individual therapists, other practitioners or for researchers to use the Swedish version of the PARQ-child. However, Rohner Research Publications requires a small one-time fee for use. A permission to use is obtained by completing a form available here: rohnerresearchpublications.com/order-form/, see also www.rohnerresearchpublications.com.

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