Writing HIStories – a contribution to the study of parental alienation

Two fathers’ experiences: Rule #1 – Mum is always right. Rule #2 – If Mum is ever wrong, see Rule #1.

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Abstract

Parental alienation is when one parent denigrates the other to turn their children against that parent, often after a separation or divorce. It is well-documented but poorly understood as a form of domestic abuse. This study explores how one Austrian and one Swedish father experience parental alienation in the wake of false allegations of sex abuse, how they perceive their emotional situation after the separation, how their interactions with their children have been affected and what economic impact this has had on their lives.

The study concentrates on white, heterosexual, agnostic men. It is based upon in-depth interviews, and analytically framed within the parental alienation theory. The analysis identified several core themes suggesting the need for better education and training on parental alienation, and strategies to enable effective change to public policies and family law.

Keywords: parental alienation, in-depth interviews, Sweden, Austria, father role, false sexual allegations, family courts, child custody evaluators, gender bias
Sophie Roswall’s research interests span a wide range of fields, from sociology and criminology, transcultural communication, international relations and peace research, to psychology, gender studies and law. Her future projects will first and foremost concentrate on parental alienation and law. Her preferred place to do research is in her oceanside home in the company of her significant other and her three cats, listening to the waves rolling in, and in the strong belief that only if we respect and protect nature, can we live happily.
In memory of Philthy Phil. You left ski tracks of grace behind you, the same way you lived your life. We are connected in the mountains and elsewhere, and we will carry on your legacy. I will keep a watchful eye on Aldi, and at Sammy. Die Besten gehen immer voraus.
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Introduction

Aim and Research Questions

Most people in democracies have faith in the justice system; at least I did. Growing up with a father who served in the police, I always believed that the legal and judicial institutions were there to protect people’s rights.

Some recent court decisions in custody cases in several European countries have made me wonder, however, if my assumption is correct. I do not doubt the impeccable intentions of the courts, but it seems that the issue of parental alienation (PA) deserves closer examination (Harman and Biringen 2016, Balmer et al. 2018, Baker 2014, Hellblom Sjögren 2013, Areskoug 2013).

Parental alienation means that one child refuses contact with the other parent, that this hostility or resistance is not justified and is the result of psychological manipulation by the other parent (Cafcass 2019). There appears to be still some controversy over whether parental alienation actually exists, however, both within academia and society (Harman and Biringen 2016, Benuto et al. 2016, Areskoug 2013). Most research on parental alienation has been done in the mental health and legal disciplines. Psychologists and psychiatrists have above all been trying to answer the question of whether or not parental alienation can be classified as a “syndrome”, while the courts have sought to formulate guidelines for best practice in the absence of PA’s categorization as a mental health diagnosis (see also The Law Society Gazette 2019).

Against this background it is perhaps not surprising that many lawyers and professionals who closely cooperate with the courts, including social workers, do not always seem to understand the concept of parental alienation and its consequences (James 2018, Harman and Biringen 2016, Hellblom Sjögren 2013). This is presumably also the reason why the outcomes of custody cases where mothers and fathers fight over their offspring vary wildly (Harman and Biringen 2016, Hellblom Sjögren 2013:146, Giancarlo and Rottman 2015). Despite this legal uncertainty and doubts over whether PA amounts to a syndrome, there are numerous internet sites and self-help books on the market for parents experiencing parental alienation (Kruk 2013, Baker and Fine 2014, Giglio 2018).
What has not yet been fully explored is parental alienation as a cultural and social problem from the perspective of social psychology (Harman and Biringen 2016). There is also very limited research on fathers’ own perceptions of being rejected by their children (Bosch-Brits et al. 2018, Maturana et al. 2018). As a student of gender studies I hope to contribute and add to the existing research.

My aim is to examine how fathers in two European countries experience parental alienation in the wake of false allegations of sex abuse, how they perceive their emotional situation after the separation, how their interactions with their children have been affected and what economic impact this has had on their lives. The study concentrates on white, heterosexual, non-religious men.

The theme is particularly pertinent given the potentially devastating consequences of parental alienation (Harman et al. 2019) and the high societal costs of psychological problems arising from it both for the children and the alienated parents. Studies have shown that alienated children can develop antisocial behaviours making them more prone to fail in school, develop mental problems, commit suicide or engage in criminal activity (Hellblom Sjögren 2013:47). As mentioned, there are few studies of the impact of PA on the alienated father, yet it can be presumed that the emotional distress is likely to affect the physical and mental health and quality of life.

The Swedish lawyer of one of the fathers interviewed for this thesis advised his client: *If you want to see your children again, don’t mention PA in court, then the other side will only pick an expert denying that PA exists*...

For me, such admonitions or warnings to stop rooting in something, has always been a powerful incentive to do just that.

**Disposition**

I will first present the theoretical framework underlying this study and describe the concepts of target and alienating parents as well as review previous research in the field. Then I will explain the methodology and methods that were used and the rationale behind their choice. Next, I will present the empirical material starting with an introduction of the research participants. In the subsequent analysis, I relate the comments of my interviewees to views
expressed in the theoretical literature. The concluding discussion summarises the results of the analysis within the context of the research question.

**Situated Knowledges**

There is no objective knowledge (Lykke 2011:5). Researchers can never be neutral, however much they would like to believe that they are. Within feminist theory, it was Haraway that first referred to “situated knowledges” as a description of feminist objectivity (1988:581) and “limited location” (ibid.:583) which she sees as the “privilege of partial perspective”. Lykke (2010) similarly emphasises that an involved researcher produces knowledge that always contains personal opinions, and a story, of which she or he is a part (ibid.:5). This involvement and partial perspective also underpin my research. I am a body that sees something (Haraway 1988:582), I am “[…] answerable for what we learn how to see” (ibid.:583).

I am writing from a “white” perspective, as a privileged European who enjoys geographic and social mobility. Both my interviewees are white, non-practising Christian heterosexual males; one is living in Austria, the other in Sweden. This does not mean that I do not acknowledge that other father types exist, who have a different ethnic, cultural or social background, or identify as LGBTQ+. Their views would be interesting to explore, but this would go beyond the scope of this thesis.

**Background – from my limited location**

I grew up in a home with parents who stayed together throughout their life. In the late 1970s, when I went to primary school, most of my classmates shared my background, and it caused almost a scandal when one of the boys’ parents were divorced. In the 1980s divorce became more common, and I had several classmates whose parents had divorced or who were brought up by single mothers. By the 1990s divorce and single parenthood were common in Sweden, yet less so in the Catholic countries where I studied and worked.

My first proper job after university in the late 1990s was in an outdoor clothing company. My desk was next to that of a male work colleague, who was 15 years my senior. He spent a big part of his day ringing to lawyers and authorities. He was prevented from seeing his daughter by a restraining order and forbidden to go near her nursery. He was distraught and would often
tell me about his ordeal, but I cannot recollect many details. Apparently, he had been accused of having sexually molested his daughter. He could not keep up with his workload and was eventually dismissed. I understood his financial situation was being made worse by his private drama and being without a job must have been hard. Then he disappeared.

During the 1990s, sexual abuse and child abuse became a major topic, first in the USA and then also in Europe (Harman and Biringen 2016, Hellblom Sjögren 2013:238, Adams 2006).

In the early 2000s sexual child abuse seemed to take on enormous proportions, with some reports stating that in the USA 1 out of 5 children was affected (The National Center for Victims of Crime 2019). I remember thinking that the numbers quoted seemed very high. Many of the fathers I knew were beginning to wonder if they should stop picking up their children and sitting them on their laps or bathing naked with them, since they were afraid of sexual allegations.

In 2010, I suddenly found myself witness to two stories that unfolded simultaneously at a similar speed and following a similar pattern. One was set in northern Europe, the other in central Europe. Two of my oldest male friends became targets by their ex-partners of having sexually abused their own children.

I was in contact now and then with both; both were cleared of the accusations after a while. It seemed highly improbable that anyone could have two friends that were both experiencing the same problem at the same time. I wanted to find out if there were perhaps some underlying developments in society that might explain this rather strange coincidence of events. I enrolled in a BA in criminology and studied witness psychology and the reliability of child testimonies.

Gender studies provides an opportunity to look even deeper into the issue. When I discovered that parental alienation was also an understudied topic, it was clear that this would be my research project. PA is relevant and important, not only for me at a personal level, but also on a political one.

Theoretical Framework
Central concepts

The study and the analysis are based on parental alienation (PA) theory. PA is used to describe situations in which one parent, often after separation and during child custody conflicts, tries to make the other parent look so bad that not only the authorities believe the accused parent to be evil, but even the child eventually starts to behave as if that parent was bad. The child and the accused parent, also called the target/ed parent, become alienated from each other, as well as from all family and friends on that parent’s side. Parental alienation can also occur within a marriage or relationship. The concept has been widely discussed (Harman et al. 2019, Harman and Biringen 2016, Bow et al. 2009).

Parental alienation is closely related to parental alienation syndrome (PAS), for which the American Psychology Association, APA, (2019) gives the following definition:

A child’s experience of being manipulated by one parent to turn against the other (targeted) parent and resist contact with him or her. This alignment with one parent and rejection of the other most often arises during child custody disputes following divorce or separation proceedings, particularly when the litigation is prolonged or involves significant antagonism between the parties.

All recognised mental disorders are listed in “The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)” (2013) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), which serves as a taxonomic and diagnostic tool for health professionals around the world, both PAS and PA are not included despite efforts by many researchers to define criteria for their classification as mental disorders (Balmer et al. 2018, James 2018:2, Hellblom Sjögren 2013:69, Bernet et al. 2010).

There are many interesting theories to explain why parental alienation happens. Research has indicated that there often is a connection with personality disorders, such as borderline, narcissistic and antisocial disorders, all disorders which on the first look to an outsider may not be obvious at all as characteristics in a parent (Harman and Biringen 2016:52)

Previous Research on Parental Alienation
Although the phenomenon had been described in the literature before (James 2018, Harman et al. 2019), the term “Parental Alienation” was first used in 1985 by the American child psychiatrist Richard Gardner (Gardner 1985, Adams 2006, see also Hellblom Sjögren 2013:59). Gardner noticed a growing trend of PA cases in the US which coincided with new guidelines for divorce and custody courts. Until then, custody had usually been awarded to mothers based on the “tender years doctrine”, which considered mothers to be the more important parent during a child’s younger years. In the mid-1980s, this was replaced by the “best interest of the child” doctrine and “joint custody”. Gardner suggested that there was a causal link between the new judicial guidelines and the increase in the number of PA cases (Gardner 1985). His article caused a major stir. Many women’s organizations accused him of bias against women (Hellblom Sjögren 2013:73-74). His argument that the accusations of abuse were often fabricated rankled with child advocate organizations despite evidence that false accusations of sexual abuse happen quite frequently (see Harman and Biringen 2016:16,152). As a result, parental alienation became a politically sensitive topic with child advocates, feminists and father’s rights groups expressing very different views (ibid.:153). Gardner later conceded that parental alienation was also provoked by fathers. However, the alienating parent is usually the parent who has primary care, which often is the mother (Giancarlo and Rottman 2015).

Since then, many books and articles have been written about parental alienation. In particular, in the last few years PA, and the harm it causes, have been widely acknowledged (James 2018, see also Lowenstein 2006, Baker 2007, Ben-Ami & Baker 2012, Hellblom Sjögren 2013, Areskoug 2013, Harman et al. 2019). What the researchers are at pains to stress is that parental alienation only applies in cases where alienation is not justified, that is, where no physical, psychological or sexual abuse has been committed (Hellblom Sjögren 2013:74, Gardner 2001).

There are, however, still critics that claim that there is insufficient empirical evidence to prove that parental alienation exists (Benuto et al. 2016) or who maintain that PA merely serves as an excuse for an abusive parent to gain access to the child by claiming that the other parent is alienating the child, though in reality s/he is protecting them (Benuto et al. 2016, Hellblom Sjögren 2013:62).
Nany Simmons from NOW (The National Organization for Women, an American feminist organization founded in 1966) for instance put it this way: “It benefits the abuser and discriminates against the victims of abuse, which are overwhelmingly women” (National Parents Organization 2019). For this reason, NOW in 2006 denounced PAS (Kaslow 2013:12). In 2011, women activists in California demanded a law forbidding even the mentioning of parental alienation or parental alienation syndrome (Hellblom Sjögren 2013:74). By contrast, in Brazil a law was enacted in 2010 recognising parental alienation and addressing the impact of sanctions on the alienating parent (ibid.:75-78).

Research on Parents’ Experiences of Parental Alienation

A study conducted by Maturana et al. showed that targeted parents, i.e. parents experiencing psychological distress as a result of being alienated from their children, are suffering despair and frustration, and believe the legal and mental health systems are failing them (Maturana et al. 2018). Poustie et al. (2018) similarly concluded that targeted parents were experiencing poor mental health and even argued that parental alienation should be considered a type of family violence. They found that targeted parents often face financial difficulties due to high legal fees and the costs of supervised child visits and that they were under considerable emotional stress and worried about the psychological well-being of their children (ibid.). The same conclusion was reached by Hellblom Sjögren (2013) in a comprehensive study of 25 cases in Sweden, including references from court and social institution journals.

Verrocchio et al. (2019) in their study of 500 Italian adults found that people who experienced parental alienation as children were more likely to develop depression.

Bosch-Brits, Wessels and Roux (2018) reached a similar conclusion in an interview-based study with six alienated fathers in South Africa. They also found that fathers suffered extreme agony, were constantly concerned about their children’s well-being, bore a great anger with little trust in the legal system concerning custody cases and experienced trauma generally, and specifically during supervised contact visits.

Balmer et al. (2018) found in their study of 225 targeted parents who filled out an online survey that they were severely exposed to parental alienation tactics, and that gender and targeted child age predicted variance in exposure to PA. Templer et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review
of literature published between 1990 and 2015 which propose best practice models for therapeutic or legal interventions in cases of PA. They conclude that both psychological and legal intervention are necessary and suggest that giving the parent being alienated full custody could benefit the child (and the targeted parent), who then would gain access to both parents (ibid.).

There is little literature discussing targeted parents´, and specifically, fathers´ own experience of alienating behaviours (Maturana et al. 2018, Bosch-Brits et al. 2018, Kaslow 2013, Erera and Baum 2009, Baker et al. 2006). Maturana et al. published the results of a systematic international literature review on the experiences of parents who were subjected to parental alienation drawing on academic databases. They found nine articles which were published between 1997 and 2018. Six studies were carried out in the USA, two in Australia and one in Israel (see also Balmer et al. 2017; Finzi-Dottan et al. 2012; Poustie et al. 2018; Vassiliou and Cartwright 2001). None dealt solely with fathers´ experiences.

These studies suggest that the parents´ experience of PA is similar across the globe. What is different are the legal systems and how legal and mental health professionals view parental alienation, which is likely to depend on their experience and training.

**Methodology and Method – and how to Analyse?**

**Methodology and Method**

My aim was to research fathers’ experiences and perceptions of parental alienation in a European context; to find out how they viewed their emotional and economic situation after separation and unjustified child abuse allegations and how their interactions with their children were affected.

Given the limited scope of this thesis (15 ECTS), as well as time constraints, I decided that in-depth interviews were the most suitable method for this study (see also Bosch-Brits et al. 2018).

In-depth interviews were first used by psychologists who wanted to find out more about underlying reasons that are impossible to address in a survey (Loseke 2013:87). They provide qualitative answers and can identify feelings. In-depth interviews are also useful when the aim
is to obtain life-story narratives and when “[...] taking everyday life as a point of departure (Christensen & Qvotrup Jensen, 2017:113).

Material

My material represents the experiences of two people who both belong to my wider circle of friends. Interviewing friends of course requires particular caution. However, as Johannessen and Tufte stress, interviewers always influence the answers given by research participants (Johannessen and Tufte 2013:98).

Tim May states that what an interviewee says represents something beyond the interview situation itself. What the interviewee says can be wrong or contrary give a great picture of what the interviewee has experienced, however it is always limited to the interviewee’s own understanding. May means that a researcher can only reach full interpretation by witnessing the events the interviewee is referring to (2013:189). Thurén says, we cannot understand anything without a preunderstanding (Thurén 2013:60). So having witnessed some of the events the interviewees are referring to, should then be an advantage in the study.

Other advantages are that power relations in an interview with friends are usually more symmetrical. Informative data can be collected more economically than is possible in conventional random samples (Denscombe 2009:37-38).

For practical reasons, the interviews were conducted by telephone. A short list of questions was sent to the interviewees before I rang them. The participants were encouraged to talk freely about their situation, and every effort was made not to steer the flow of consciousness and to keep my comments to a minimum. The research participants were also given the possibility to read through and comment on the sections of the thesis where I presented their cases.

How to analyse the material

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety in a verbatim style, meaning the focus was not to capture only what was said, but also how it was said. All grammatical errors and false starts were included, stutters and fillers (uhms etc.) were removed (IndianScribes 2019). Words that
were stressed in the interview were italicised and pauses were marked with “…” and included as such in the quotes.

The transcribed texts were then scanned for salient features. Recurring words were identified and colour-marked and organized into themes (Johannessen & Tufte 2013:78). The themes were then co-referenced with concepts from parental alienation theory.

The sample size of course does not permit generalizations; however, the HISStories are relevant enough to be told in the light of it being an important topic (Denscombe 2009:37-38).

**Ethics**

Revisiting what were for them traumatic experiences was difficult for the interviewees. As Sven said when I met him to tell about the project and ask if he would be willing to take part in the study: “There are days when I cannot think about this because it makes me so sad and upset and depressed”. Complying with research ethics was therefore of utmost importance (see The Swedish Research Council 2011:50). Before the study, the participants were informed about the aims of the study, the handling of the personal data and also signed forms of consent. For their protection, their identities were anonymized.

**Reflexivity**

I have known the interviewees for 30 years. I have seen them in partner relationships. I saw them when the prepared for the arrival of their children and also as new fathers. There are both advantages and disadvantages to interviewing people you know. One disadvantage is that it is easy to miss information or to read something into a story that is not there because of the shared background. Misinterpretations can of course also occur in interviews with unknown people. We tend to quickly create a picture of a person based on the way they dress, looks, the language they use, etc. We create a background and interpret stimuli founded on existing knowledge and internal schemata (Holt et al. 2015: 189). An advantage, at least in this study, was that it may have been easier for the interviewees to revisit traumatic experiences with a friend who knows them well than in a conversation with a complete stranger.
Just as no interview or interviewer can ever be completely objective, it is impossible to carry out a fully objective analysis. The themes that I identified were selected and highlighted by me. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in German and Swedish and translated into English by me, which adds yet another layer of subjectivity (Johansson 2005).

**Analysis**

Before the interview, the interviewees were encouraged to talk about the separations and what effects it had on their relationship with their children. It was the first time they told me their stories in one coherent whole and not only in small bits. The interviews were transcribed and then scanned for recurring words or themes. Words that were stressed in the interview were italicised and pauses were marked with “…”.

Words that were frequently used: father, ex-wife, legal advice, family courts, child visitations, social welfare institutions, false abuse accusations, child sex abuse, abuse, discrimination, gender roles, parents, money, trauma, sorrow, child evaluators, politics, psychologist and problem.

The interviewees:

- **Sven:**
  Swedish man, university graduate, between 40 and 50 years, met his ex-wife in his early thirties: they had two daughters and divorced after eight years. Sees his children.

- **Felix:**
  Austrian man, university graduate, between 40 and 50, met ex-partner in his early forties: they had one daughter and separated after a few years; does not see his child.

The way the interviewees spoke about the events was very different. Sven appeared more matter-of-factly and defiant. He himself said: “I stood up, I have received accusations for seven or eight years now more or less…but I am not backing”. Felix seemed beaten down and resigned. About his meetings with various institutions he said that:
You always have to stay calm, even though you are being constantly provoked…you face verbally provocations all the time, but still you cannot react with anything but the utmost calm, otherwise it will be negatively interpreted as if you are aggressive.

Felix also said that “you are always being humiliated, always discriminated against”.

Father role

One of the most frequently recurring words in both interviews is father. Both respondents see themselves as responsible and loving fathers who very much wanted to play an active role in their children’s lives and took paternity leave to be able to spend time with them.

What rankles with Felix is that this involvement seemingly counted for nothing:

One can only conclude, as a father you are being systematically excluded, and in my opinion, it is a totally pathological system discriminating against fathers, and it discriminates against the wrong kind of fathers, namely, involved fathers. The kind that wanted to play a role in their children’s lives. Only that kind of fathers, who feel responsible for their children, who want to be there for them, they are being punished. Because only these are willing to take on years of fighting, but they are being punished. A man who does not particularly care about his child, would have been gone long ago.

Felix also thought that he as a father was closer to the child than the mother: “the child had a very close attachment to me, because the mother apparently, if you ask me, is suffering from a personality disorder”.

Sven also stressed that he took several months’ paternity leave to be with the children:

I was on the steering committee and was the first one taking father’s leave, a real one, so to say, not only at the birth but for several months thereafter with the first child, and with the second I stayed at home for 6 months.

In Sven’s line of work it is not usual to take paternity leave, yet he did so for a substantial time.
False sexual abuse allegations

Another frequently recurring word pair in both interviews is abuse allegations. Both interviewees were accused of having sexually abused their children after the separation, and both were cleared on the basis of strong counterevidence. Both stressed that lies in family courts usually go unnoticed; even when a judge realises that a party is not telling the truth, liars do not need to fear punishment since the parties in family courts are not required to give statements under oath.

Sven faced, among others, sexual child abuse accusations, where the mother claimed the child had told her he had touched her private parts in an inappropriate way. Interestingly, however, the mother did not move out even when she was offered safe housing by the authorities. For several months after the accusations she and the two daughters lived in the house with him.

The child…the mother claimed that the child had told her things, there were no witnesses. The mother then calls the psychologist who…well, anyone knows they have mandatory reporting, everyone within the health services, psychologists, teachers, everyone, they have mandatory reporting if someone comes, it is so strict that you basically cannot do any qualitative assessment of it.

Sven thought that his ex-wife knew exactly what she was doing. She never expressly accused Sven of having abused their daughter, but would occasionally drop a word and insinuate that something was not right in meetings with psychologists, teachers, another parent or a female friend. What Sven criticised was there was never a thorough qualitative assessment whether the accusations were justified.

How difficult it was for Sven to prove that his ex-wife had not told the truth is exemplified by the following quote:

She manipulated recordings, I knew that she was recording when she was dropping off the children, she always tried to provoke situations… I was always very careful not to walk into the trap, and then they sent the recordings to court as evidence…with transcriptions, and when I read through the transcriptions…so…it was totally sick things, and then I had to sit down and listen through all recordings, and then it showed that the transcriptions were totally fake. We had to sit for hours in court, in the district court, and
go through recordings where I said that *this* I am not saying, and *this* the child is not saying, and here I actually say *this*. And it turned out that I was right all the time… So they had manipulated it, and the problem in these kinds of cases is that the parts are not under oath. You can come with any accusations, *you can lie as much as you want*, but family court cases and custody cases and so on, then you are not under oath, because it is so emotional. So the only time a person can be caught on this, is if the court realizes that the person is totally…not credible. And I guess that is what happened in our case, after a while the court realized that she was making things up, and I could prove that it was wrong.[…] she does not tell the truth at all, and it is a tactic for her to dupe and manipulate, well to say it outright, to lie.

Felix first faced accusations of stalking and bodily harm, but shortly after he was granted custody rights, sexual abuse charges were brought against him, nine or ten months after they allegedly happened. The mother claimed that Felix had touched the private parts of his daughter in an inappropriate way. In the interview he recounts:

> It started with accusations of *stalking*, which was relatively *sporty*…then it continued with sexual abuse, child pornography…everything without *any* consequences for the mother and it does not cost the mother a cent.

Felix then continued,

> She claimed she had observed, how I once caressed my daughter on her private parts. It should have happened on the eve before she moved out. This was the reason why she the next day left for her parents’ house. The only problem was, on that evening I was verifiably on a longer bike tour with a friend, and I was not home at all. There are pictures on Facebook, where I am standing together with my friend on a glacier. I told the child evaluator this, when I was asked if I had sexually abused my daughter….it is not possible that I can have done this, because at that time I was not at home. And instead of her saying that “well, then the mother must have lied” she starts an investigation, well, it is in her financial interests…pretty sure…she could have stopped the investigations, I confronted her about this afterwards, but everything that a mother does is *downtoned*, and everything a father does is *dramatized*.
Both men were audibly angry at what they described as unfair treatment at the hands of the courts. Both also believe that a gender bias is built into the court system and social welfare institutions, which favours women. Sven said,

It is absolutely terrible, it is the worst that you can be accused of, to have sexually assaulted your child. It is the absolutely worst trauma that I have experienced, to be accused of this. And I think…well, that she knew it. We have lived together, and I am very clear and open with my views. And those things I have said about paedophiles…well…that is something that you only say in your own kitchen…and I have been very clear on how I feel about paedophiles, and what I could do to one of those. And then to be accused of it myself, I don’t believe that is a coincidence. Because I believe, and I have experienced it and it is my strong opinion, that much of this boils down to her state of mind, and the tactics she is following is *shaming*. Shaming is one of the strongest weapons they have, because it can destroy your social life, it can destroy your career, it can destroy absolutely everything. Your economy. And to accuse someone of having sexually molested a child, if this comes out, then you are…well it is terrible for humans. And especially for men.

Felix similarly indicated:

If a father makes similar accusations (of abuse), then it is being interpreted as him trying to make the mother look bad. You must be careful, because if you make too many accusations as a man, then you are viewed as a difficult person, or as a carper who feels wronged all the time, this is the jargon they use for you and which you constantly encounter…

Later he added:

Today you only have to utter accusations of sexual abuse, the famous theme “the abuse of abuse”, and *that was it for the father*. This needs to end, this *abuse of the abuse*, it needs to stop. Then a lot would change to the better for the children.

Meetings with family courts and child custody evaluators

Other frequently occurring words during the interviews were *family courts, social welfare institutions* and *child custody evaluators*, which I gathered together in this section.
Sven immediately sought legal advice and thought in the beginning of their divorce process that all was about money. The ex-wife did not mention the children at all initially. His lawyer advised that in any talks with the social services’ child evaluators he should only “talk feelings” so as not to appear “clinical”, instead of showing his natural inclination for structured and rational talk. He found it humiliating but was told that most evaluators were women and they understand “feelings” better than anything else:

With the social welfare institutions you have to be…you have to talk feelings. So she said (his lawyer) that you have to talk more feelings, because they…because they are mostly women there, and women talk more feelings than men, and they only work, or, they work 95% of their time with abused women. Abused and exposed women, like my ex-wife who claims to have been psychologically abused and other things…. I found it humiliating.

However, his “clinical” approach helped him in court, where evidence and facts were asked for. The lawyers’ view of female evaluators would merit in-depth treatment which is, however, beyond the scope of this study.

Felix also immediately hired a lawyer who told Felix not to take on the fight, having experienced first-hand how the system worked against men:

It was the first information the lawyer gave me…and…I should have listened to him, because what followed in the next three years […] is, well, it is a systematic destruction of an existence.

Felix decided not to follow this advice from his lawyer and continued the fight.

At a certain stage in the process to see his child, Felix tried to persuade a judge it was time for a change in custody, as the mother was preventing him from seeing his daughter. He anticipated that his ex-partner would continue with false accusations, and that it could not go on like this. He had just been cleared of accusations by his ex-partner for having child pornographic content on his computer.
The judge did not view it that way. She said, it only means that they never found anything. This is exactly the prejudice you encounter all the time. The father is always offender, there will at least be something true in the accusations, and that you only have been lucky that the police did not find anything.

Felix did not succeed in convincing the judge of a change in custody, neither could he convince the judge of his innocence.

Like Sven, Felix found that the workforce in the family welfare institutions was comprised almost exclusively of women:

I would guess that 90% of the people involved in custody cases were women. It is very rare to occasionally come across a man.

Felix’s perceptions of the legal system is that it is a “pathological system” where “in the best interest of the child” is a cover up for “scrupulous business interests”:

There is a fundamental problem in it all, there are economic interests. The people investigating these cases, they should be neutral and objective, but they are not, since they have economic interests, and so we have a classical incompatibility.

Later he outlined how it should work:

When you notice there is one parent trying to prevent the child from seeing the other parent, then there should be one warning, no more. If that parent continues, then there should be a change in custody. That’s it. But then the whole system would fall apart. No need for supervised parent-child visitations centres, the child custody evaluators would be without a job, and and and…the whole system would fall apart.

Felix’s encounters with the institutions left him feeling humiliated and discriminated against. He believes that there is a gender bias, that parenting stereotypes decide the outcomes in custody cases, and prejudice and stereotypes make fathers offenders and mothers victims. He feels that he received no support from anyone, and that the system itself promotes parental alienation.
Economic situation

Another frequently recurring word in both interviews was money. Sven has spent “several” hundred thousand Swedish Crowns on lawyers. Having the financial resources, he feels, has helped him gaining access to his children. He has also been extremely open about the whole thing:

I am a consultant, I have my own company, sometimes I have even informed my clients about this ordeal, for example stock exchange listed companies, so that no anonymous tips will get into their IR departments, claiming they are dealing with someone that has been accused of child abuse, without them knowing on beforehand.

Felix has also paid a large sum of money for lawyers, paid supervised visits and other administrative fees:

And then there are supervised child visits, you pay for those. For the mother the state pays, and for the father it costs, in my case, 25 € an hour, makes for four hours visit 100 €. Interestingly enough… there are packages with 10 visits, so as a father you have to pay 1,000 € to see your child for four hours ten times.

All these outlays plus the loss of income on days when he attended court hearings, was interviewed by the police or had meetings with lawyers and custody evaluators, have left Felix financially ruined. His health has deteriorated to the point where he cannot work any longer.

Emotional situation

Trauma and psychologist were two frequently reappearing words during the interviews. Sven’s battle has been tough, yet he is very matter-of-fact about it:

I am solution oriented and want my children to have a nice life…(I don’t want) that people should feel sorry for me. It was…and then I also went to a psychologist, I believe it to be very important, it is something that people might be ashamed of, especially men, but well, I….it was very important to me that I got someone to talk to, because friends can only listen that much (laughing). They cannot take hearing the same things over and over, and one has to rid oneself of the burden.
Earlier he also said that “obviously I am very sad, but one does not have to reiterate it all the time”. His main concern are his children, who he describes as the biggest losers:

They live under constant pressure, and that is the price you have to pay. [...] I...I...it is like I said, I believe it to be important that the children know and understand deep inside that I am there for them, that I am fighting for them, and they will know this once they get older, and then it will only be a disadvantage to their mother.

Felix feels distressed and humiliated. He felt he was treated like a criminal, that he was not believed, that he was a failure. In the beginning he did not realize how severely stressed he was, but later decided to see a psychologist. Even though he was cleared of all accusations, he still feels isolated and powerless. He talks about the “disposal” of fathers in society, and how everything has been taken away from him, including his daughter who is the most valuable asset he has:

You notice that you are feeling worse and worse, and suddenly, you just cannot tell what is happening to you, you have a permanent feeling of utter helplessness, of permanent powerlessness, you feel unconscious, you are at the mercy of these people, who can start crazy actions anytime, it is an extreme feeling of terror, yes it is true psychological terror, that you are subjected to...[...] you are getting no help, I then went to therapists, and in my case the events were so far from what can be considered “normal” that you are afraid that no one believes you, it is like an alternative reality, and I feared the therapist would believe that I suffered from paranoia.

Felix was afraid that people around him would not believe him, that his story would sound incredulous even to his therapist. Sven openly admits that the separation and what followed was a horrible ordeal for him, yet he has tried to come to terms with the situation and accept it. What he still finds difficult, however, and extremely upsetting is that new accusations of sexual abuse may be made at any time:

But that is the reality I live in. That this can show up any time, from anywhere. I have to be, what do you say, pre-empt in English, in the situation and be completely open about this issue with people around me. I have good friends, and girlfriend, understanding, people who know who I am and how I am, so that all this craziness is absolutely nothing that I could have done.
Sven seems to have a large circle of friends and people he can talk to about his situation and his fears of new abuse accusations appearing out of nowhere.

While Sven apparently has found a way of coping with the situation and can now lead a relatively normal life with the support of his friends, Felix seems less fortunate. He finds he has lost the social network that once supported him:

Well, it goes hand in hand with losing the social network around you and becoming isolated.

He also finds that the physical and mental stress he is under has pushed him to the brink:

And it comes from the fact that you are constantly under pressure. The body reacts to the stress, and at some point, it becomes too much, and the limit is reached...when you are continually put under pressure. One person has reached this limit earlier, the other person later. In my case it took years, but I have become severely traumatized. And the same is to fear what concerns the child. But even such a fact is turned against you. Instead of them saying...a person in his best years has all of a sudden become a person on disability pension, something must have happened?

For Felix the ordeal has been so traumatic that he is no longer able to work or live a normal active life.

**Parental alienation**

During the interviews only one of the interviewees used the term *parental alienation*. Sven did not mention the term parental alienation once during the interview. Until last fall, when I decided to research PA for this study, I had not encountered the term either. When I rang Sven about some other things shortly after I had come across the term, I also briefly mentioned to him that I wanted to do some research on fathers who had gone through the same experience as he, and that the literature actually had a name for the phenomenon, namely parental alienation. He said he knew the term and that his lawyer had advised him not to mention PA in court. If he did, “then the other side will only pick an expert professional denying that PA exists”.
Felix immediately said in the interview that he was a victim of “parental alienation”. The mother refused to sign the shared parenting form. Later, she boycotted child visits sending messages five minutes before the agreed time saying, “the child is sick”. He accuses the family court system of playing along with alienating mothers and has given up on his daughter after years of battles he realized he could not win. He knew accusations would follow accusations, since a hoax confronted with the reality of evidence requires new lies to sustain itself.

Sven´s ex-wife refused to share custody from the start. She claimed the children did not want to be with him. Before the family law institutions she claimed she was acting in the “interests of the children” and argued that she was the better parent. She controls the children and puts pressure on them, so they dare not ring Sven or show affections when she is around. Sven´s lawyer advised him early on to get a house in the same area as the children and make sure to spend time with them, so as not to lose them.

It is the body language. My youngest has been so manipulated that she now lives with her mother, she…..she wants to see me, she smiles when she sees me and so on, but there is a huge difference in her body language…and her behaviour changes, when she is with me alone, or when her mother stands next to us. And she has also caught herself doing this, being huggable with me when her mother went to the bathroom (laughing) and she then talked to me in an excited and engaged voice, and then her mother returns and my daughter suddenly goes quiet and takes two steps backwards…because she knows that it is not acceptable. Not acceptable for the mother, so the pressure that the children are under, directly and indirectly, due to the mother wanting to control and decide, to always be their spokesperson, that is terrible to watch.

This kind of behavior in a child is typical of parental alienation according to the literature.

In the first years, Felix called different political institutions. In the Austrian Social Ministry he met one who understood:

The problem is known, it is politically known, since the 70s it has been known, and since that time there is this department (referring to the Men's Policy Department), and I spoke to a lady there, she had worked there for decades and was 2 years before her retirement,
and she completely agreed with me. She said it is all known. But there is no political will to change it, because single mothers stand for a huge voter potential, and if the fathers did not have to pay maintenance, it would be upon the State, and then it would be very expensive...[...] and she said nothing has happened in all these years, except for it getting worse, because now you only have to scream sexual abuse...

If a woman in Austria has sole custody of a child, the father has to pay significantly more child maintenance than in the case of shared custody (Rechtsinformationssystem des Bundes 2019, see §§ 49 und 60 EheG and § 1266 ABGB). This ruling also applies to Felix. Felix no longer sees his daughter.

Conclusion

Many of the themes addressed in the interviews are also mentioned in the literature which was my theoretical starting point. Felix´ and Sven´s perceptions of parental alienation overlap with descriptions in Harman et al. (2019), Hellblom Sjögren (2013), Areskoug (2013), Ben-Ami & Baker (2012) and Baker (2007).

In the interviews, the men stressed their active involvement in the children´s upbringing. Both had been very active fathers who stayed at home for several months with the children when they were infants. Sven had a leading position in a male-dominated sector where it is rare that fathers take several months of parental leave. The way they spoke about their years with their children left no doubt that that their identities as fathers were important to them, and that they wanted to be caring fathers. Sven still sees his daughters regularly, although meetings can be awkward as his daughters dare not show emotions when his ex-wife is around. Felix, by contrast, gave up after three years of struggle. Every time a judge gave him the right to see his daughter, new accusations of abuse followed.

Sexual abuse allegations tend to be made at specific times, either before scheduled court proceedings, or in the context of financial or custody reports (Harman and Biringen 2016:79). Felix for example reported he was first accused of child abuse when he had received a temporary care reversal, which was nine months after the abuse allegedly happened. Such accusations can help the alienating parent to obtain full custody (ibid.:16-17) and to keep the
other parent away until s/he can prove that s/he is innocent, which takes time (ibid.:150). Felix mentioned three times “the abuse with the abuse”.

Sven was also accused of having sexually abused one of his daughters. After the allegations, the mother continued to live in the house with him, together with their two daughters, even though she had been offered safe housing by the authorities, which she declined. In Sweden a law amendment came into force in 2006, which replaced the earlier “equal parenting time by default” ruling by sole custody in cases where the parents have problems cooperating. This makes it easier for an alienating parent to be awarded sole custody (Hellblom Sjögren 2013:223).

In the interviews the men spoke about their extreme frustration with what they considered to be a prejudiced legal system and biased gender roles. Support for this allegation is found in the literature (Hellblom Sjögren 2013, Harman and Biringen 2016, Giancarlo and Rottman 2015). For New Zealand, Canada and England/Wales, James (2018) found in her review of parental alienation decisions that in many cases the alienating parent had made allegations of sexual abuse, yet few charges were substantiated (James 2018:143).

Sven also indicated that he had spent many hours in court trying to prove that the transcriptions of the recordings made during child visits had been manipulated by his ex-wife and her lawyer. Apart from the stress this causes for the wrongfully accused, such attempts at manipulation also have repercussions for the family court systems. Harman and Biringen (2016), for instance, found that in the USA wrong allegations have led to wait times of over a year for a hearing with a judge who can then enforce court ordered parenting time (ibid.:127).

Both men have spent a substantial amount of money on lawyers, supervised visits and other administrative fees. Sven has spent “several” hundred thousand Swedish Crowns in legal fees, and Felix cited similar outlays in Austria. This sum does not include loss of income on days when they attended court hearings, were interviewed by the police or had meetings with lawyers and custody evaluators.

The men also spoke about their despair, mental health problems and emotional distress. They were also extremely concerned about the psychological well-being of their children. Sven for
instance felt his children were the biggest losers, and that they were living under constant pressure, which was terrible for him to watch but there was nothing he can do. Felix spoke about feeling utterly helpless, powerless, of the psychological terror he was experiencing and that he could not get help from anyone. He decided to seek psychotherapy but was afraid that the psychotherapists would not believe him since he himself could not believe that what was happening around him was real, he was daily reliving his worst nightmare.

Similar findings are also reported in Maturana et al. (2018), Poustie et al. (2018), Bosch-Brits (2018) and Hellblom Sjögren (2013). Alienated parents often feel that they are not believed by the courts and social welfare institutions, which causes severe mental distress. As one judge, who is a member of the independent professional body for solicitors in the United Kingdom put it: “[...] seeking to overcome such prejudice is a formidable, and at times, a soul-destroying task.” (June Venters, in The Law Society Gazette 2019).

Sven regularly sees his children, but fears that sexual abuse accusations may be levelled against him again any time. He says that his younger daughter has been manipulated by the mother to the extent that she no longer wants to live with Sven. His older daughter is afraid of showing affection towards him when the mother is around. Sven believes it is important that he does not move away and continues to live near his children, so the mother cannot brainwash the children too much. Long absences do not make the heart grow fonder in cases of parental alienation, at least children do not seem to long for absent parents (Lorandos et al. 2013:515). Felix does not see his daughter any longer. According to him, he used to be very close to her before and always spent much time with her, but he has been kept away from her by the mother. This, he said, happened while the family welfare institutions and the family courts were looking on.

The answers I received suggest that parental alienation is considered a family matter in Sweden and not a societal or cultural problem (Harman and Biringen 2016:193). The Austrian stance is similar.

**Limitations**

This study is of course not exhaustive, and the sample is too small to be able to reach data saturation. The study also only covers western, white and straight men. Research indicates though that parental alienation cuts across all socio-economic groups, races, and nationalities.
(Harman and Biringen:105). As stated before, I have also known the interviewees for a long time, which may have affected the interviews and their responses. Moreover, personal biases and subjective choices are likely to have influenced the selection of the themes and quotes in the analysis. Despite its limitations, however, this study can contribute to our knowledge of parental alienation. It is the first based on in-depth interviews with fathers in Sweden and Austria and illustrates the experiences of two alienated fathers, analyzing their stories. It also answered my research question how fathers’ perceived their situation.

**Discussion**

In my introduction I argued that parental alienation has so far rarely been addressed as a cultural or societal problem. From the interviews, four themes have emerged which I believe support my assumption that the wider societal implications of PA deserve more attention. These themes are: 1) Gender bias in family court systems, 2) incompatibilities in the same system, 3) economic interests, and 4) false sexual allegations.

**Gender Bias in Family Court Systems**

Felix repeatedly said that he felt discriminated against in court and that he was constantly treated as an “offender” because of his gender. Sven also commented on how his lawyer advised him to “talk feelings” which would help him in meetings with personnel from the social welfare institutions. Both said that caseworkers in child custody cases were almost exclusively women. Similar findings are reported in the literature. Harmen and Biringen (2016:168-169), for example, state that men are typically perceived as being less nurturing or empathetic than women, and that their parenting abilities are doubted. The consequence of this is, the authors conclude, that “accusations are made about the father because of stereotypes about men being more aggressive and violent than mothers (ibid.:154), and that many judges’ decisions in custody cases are informed by a strong gender bias in favour of women (ibid.:170).

While the portrayal of women caseworkers as emotional and feeling-focused (Sven’s lawyer, see also Harmen & Biringen 2016:174) is of course highly problematic, the prevalence of women caseworkers in child custody litigation – at least in the countries examined here – as well as men’s perception of being discriminated against need to be addressed. Social psychology research has shown that humans tend to categorize people into in-groups and out-
groups. Out-groups are typically assigned stereotypical characteristics and also seen as more homogenic than the in-group (Aronson et al. 2014:453, see also Ainsworth 1998:70). Although it can be assumed that caseworkers are conscious of the detrimental impact of such “us versus them” dichotomies and that all within the system that take decisions in child custody cases are careful not to fall prey to prejudices and clichés, it appears that they do not always succeed in plausibly demonstrating their neutrality and objectivity. Courts and social welfare institutions would therefore be well advised to offer awareness training to ensure that no in-group bias exists and that all practices are avoided that might be construed as gender-biased.

**Incompatibility**

Felix also criticised what he referred to as “incompatibilities” in the child custody and court system, in other words, that caseworkers enacted multiple roles. A similar critique was voiced by Hellblom Sjögren (2013) who took a closer look at the Swedish Social Services. She concluded that social workers in Sweden had four roles or functions: they examined the case, made decisions, ensured the execution of the decision and afterwards also evaluated their own work. Moreover, social workers had access to case documents which were confidential. A parent, by contrast, was rarely entitled to view documents or to question a decision. All the power of decision was invested in the Social Services. This at least ethically, if not also legally, questionable situation, Hellblom Sjögren further stresses, is made yet more problematic by the fact that social workers do not receive sufficient education and training (ibid.:506-507). Many assessments that she had seen during her 30-year long career as an expert in custody cases, Hellblom Sjögren argues, were arbitrary; assessments also varied wildly within Sweden (ibid.:505). Harman and Biringen similarly found role overlap and overly close relations between different actors within the family law court system (Harman and Biringen 2016:203).

These are obviously very problematic facts for democratic states which are “[…] governed by a body of law (legal codes and processes) adopted by established procedures rather than discretionary or case-by-case decisions”. This “rule of law” is a fundamental value in the European Union (EUR-Lex 2019).

**Economic interests**
Felix is convinced that there are economic interests involved and that powerful stakeholders ensure the continuation of the system. He even surmised that the whole system would fall apart, if men received equal treatment.

Similar views are reported in the literature. Harman and Biringen, for instance, conducted an interview survey and found that many targeted parents believed that there was a conspiracy to promote alienation in order to generate money (Harman and Biringen 2016:128). Even many professionals in the legal and social welfare systems are convinced that money is the main driver (ibid.:127). Given that divorce litigation is a billion-dollar industry in the United States, their conclusion is that lawyers had realised that PA cases were an easy way to make money and that there was therefore little interest in changing the system (ibid.:203).

In their survey of targeted parents in Canada, Giancarlo and Rottman (2015) found that three quarters of the survey participants had met with stalling tactics which were used by their lawyers to prolong PA cases and make more money. An investigative documentary in Sweden also showed that alienation cases were a lucrative source of income for the lawyers (Hellblom Sjögren:118).

It is obviously also very problematic if economic interests are given priority over children’s right to both parents.

False abuse accusations

Both interviewees were falsely accused of having sexually abused a daughter, and both believe that these accusations were levelled at them intentionally by the mothers for the purpose of securing sole custody of the child/children as well as maintenance support. Both found it was difficult to convince people of their innocence, even after they had been acquitted of all charges, and that old stories kept resurfacing. Felix repeatedly argued that men were always treated like offenders, while women were victims. To illustrate how difficult it was to be considered innocent he quoted the example of a police investigation in his home after he had been accused of storing pornographic child content on his computer. Felix was cleared of the charges, but the judge told him that being cleared only meant that the police had not found anything. Both Felix and Sven spoke in the interviews about old stories surfacing long after they had been cleared of all accusations in court.
Sexual abuse, like any abuse, is an abominable crime and the perpetrators need to be punished and prevented from committing further offenses. At the same time, it is important to ensure that no-one is falsely accused of sexual abuse (see Harman and Biringen 2016:200-201). In most European countries, in the case of sexual abuse there is no presumption of innocence and the burden of proof is not on the accuser but on the accused. This legal practice has been criticised by the European Court of Justice. Hellblom Sjögren also reports that in some countries a man that has been acquitted of sexual abuse charges is still considered culpable, which of course is in breach of our understanding of justice and fairness (Hellblom Sjögren 2013:302). Even Harman and Biringen address the fact that an accused parent is presumed guilty until proven innocent (Harman and Biringen 2016:150), and acknowledge that a cleared man is never really cleared (ibid.:188).

One of the most critical issues is how caseworkers and judges can decide whether sexual abuse accusations are true or false. There are of course many books and manuals for psychologists and lawyers to help them assess the truthfulness accuracy and credibility of eyewitness and child testimonies and detect lies and deceit. Strict guidelines exist for interviews of children who may have been victims of sexual abuse, and experts can refer to lists of signs that are conclusive indicators.

The reality seems to be different, however. Hellblom Sjögren criticises the Swedish system for a lack of specialist knowledge; she found that especially child evaluators and social workers do not receive sufficient training and education to make reliable judgements (Hellblom Sjögren 2013, see also Harman and Biringen 2016). Hellblom Sjögren also makes some suggestions for how the current practice might be improved.

For example, she recommends that caseworkers and the police systematically look of lacking details or a lack of continuity in the accounts of sexual abuse. Avoiding details is usually a good indicator that the story may be fabricated. Also, she argues, the police and social workers tend to look for confirmation once an accusation has been made, and do not look for non-confirming information, which easily leads to a tunnel vision (Hellblom Sjögren 2013:318). She also insists that authentic documentation has to be collected, that is, investigative interviews by the police and social workers should always be undertaken and audio-recorded.
This is, according to her, the only way to obtain a more comprehensive and non-subjective picture (ibid.:319). Support for her argument is provided by Lorandos et al. (2013:515) They quote a judge who likewise advises that decision-makers need to look at the entire context of the case, if, for example, visitation has been obstructed in the past, or if there is a pattern of visitation interference. The Law Society in the UK similarly recommends that background papers and the history need to be read more carefully (The Law Society 2019).

All these comments would suggest that greater focus needs to be afforded to the intersection of psychology, criminology and law in the education and training of all who work with custody cases.

**Summing up**

My aim was to examine how fathers in two European countries experienced parental alienation after false allegations of sex abuse, how they perceived their emotional situation after the separation, how their interactions with their children have been affected and what economic impact this has had on their lives. Their statements in the interviews were reproduced and commented on in the Analysis. The methods that were chosen to collect and analyse the data were suitable for finding answers to the research question. The answers of the two interviewees partly repeated perceptions and views reported by other researchers.

The study has of course several limitations. The perceptions and response of the two interviewees were rather similar. A bigger sample including non-white men and women or homosexual or transgender persons, or cases where the alienated children were male, could have shown to what extent reactions to PA are shared across all groups, and where commonalities and disparities with the two cases I studied exist. There are also several other avenues of research that would be interesting to explore. Currently, no reliable data exist on how often false accusations are made (Harman and Biringen 2016:155). This would be a relevant topic for future research. Further interesting topics would be a study of female aggression, which has so far received little attention (ibid.:163), and of men as the alienating parent.

Despite these limitations, this study has given voice to two men. Their stories have become HISStories in the sense that they were told by two men. Telling HISStories is of course not new.
The male view has been predominant throughout human history. However, I would still argue that men who feel that they are discriminated against because of bias in the legal system, deserve to be heard. Two wrongs do not make a right, so it is important that the men are given a fair hearing also in matters relating to child rearing if we want true equality between the sexes.

Throughout the writing of this thesis I have also been keen to find out more about the field (Lykke 2011:163). The more I read, the more literature I found on the topic, the more I became convinced that parental alienation is a social and cultural problem, just as Harman and Biringen argue (2016). My hope is that my study becomes part of the wider efforts to change the system. Today, we can draw on a considerable body of literature that teaches us much about parental alienation and its effects on individuals and society. We know that those taking decisions in PA cases need better education and training and we need to develop strategies to enable effective change to public policies and family law.
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