August 17, 2021

Jennifer Scherer, Ph.D.
Acting Director
National Institute of Justice
810 7th Street NW
Washington, DC 20531

Dear Dr. Scherer,

We, the undersigned organizations, write to you to convey our serious concerns about a research grant funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) that we believe is ideologically driven, deeply flawed, and likely to be harmful to the public interest. We are also very concerned about the ethical behavior of the recipient of the funding that was provided for this research.

In 2014, the NIJ awarded The George Washington University a grant of $501,791 to fund research on parental alienation (Award #2014-MU-CX-0859). The principal investigator for this research was Joan Meier, Professor of Clinical Law at George Washington Law School. Professor Meier has repeatedly stated that parental alienation is a "pseudo-scientific theory" and has alleged it is a theoretical construct which holds that "when mothers allege that a child is not safe with the father, they are doing so illegitimately, to alienate the child from the father." This gendered, ideological bias was apparent in the [description of the original award](#) that was funded by the NIJ as well as in the introduction of the paper that Meier later published in the student-edited GW law paper series:

> Meier, J. S., Dickson, S., O'Sullivan, C., Rosen, L., & Hayes, J. (2019). Child custody
> outcomes in cases involving parental alienation and abuse allegations (GWU Law
> School Public Law Research Paper No. 2019 – 56). SSRN.
> https://ssrn.com/abstracte3448062

In contrast to Meier's position, we note the following. First, parental alienation is not a pseudo-scientific theory. Clinical, legal, and scientific evidence on PA has accumulated for over 35 years. There have been over 1,000 books, book chapters, and peer-reviewed articles published on the topic, and the empirical research on the topic has expanded greatly in the last decade. This research has been recognized and published in the top peer-reviewed journals in the field (e.g., *Psychological Bulletin, Current Directions in Psychological Science, Current Opinion in Psychology)*. We are concerned that the grant reviewers of Meier's NIJ research proposal were not critical of how the scientific work on the topic had been mischaracterized by Meier in her previous writings.

Second, while Professor Meier's description in her NIJ grant award and subsequent publications frames parental alienation in gendered terms, all serious researchers in this area recognize that both mothers and fathers are perpetrators and victims of parental alienation. Finally, to our knowledge, no researcher on parental alienation has ever suggested that *all* allegations that a child is unsafe with the other

parent are efforts at wrongfully alienating the child from that parent (and no serious researcher would imply that *none* are). Indeed, Dr. Richard Gardner, who coined the term "parental alienation syndrome" (PAS) and was one of the first scholars to write about it, never recommended applying the term if there was *bona fide* child abuse by the rejected parent. When scholars mischaracterize the scientific literature of a field and fail to acknowledge competing opinions and research that contradicts their position, this is considered unethical scientific misconduct.

Meier's NIJ grant award and subsequent publications are not the only places where she has mischaracterized the state of scientific research on parental alienation. In a recent expert opinion written by Professor Meier on July 23, 2021, for a family law case in Georgia, she stated that the work of Dr. Gardner "was largely self-published and lacked peer review," and she stated that "PAS itself lacks any empirical support, and considerable evidence contradicts its premises." Both statements are blatantly false (Dr. Gardner published many peer-reviewed articles) and represent a gross misrepresentation of the vast amounts of scientific and scholarly work that has accumulated on the topic of parental alienation for more than three decades. It is our opinion that these statements represent a willful attempt to mislead the court and can potentially cause serious harm to the family involved in this case, and the families in other cases where she has made such statements. We have consulted several members of the Washington, D.C. Bar and have been informed that Professor Meier's written and oral representations to courts should be considered violations of the D.C. Bar Rules of Professional Conduct 3.3 and 8.4. Therefore, the mischaracterization of the scientific body of evidence regarding parental alienation is not limited to the NIJ grant proposal/award given to Meier; she has repeated this misinformation to others, including family courts, policy makers, the media, and in related publications.

We also believe that the work of Professor Meier and her colleagues, which was funded by NIJ, is seriously flawed. Some of these flaws are identified and examined in detail in the peer-reviewed 2021 paper, "[Allegations of Family Violence in Court: How Parental Alienation Affects Judicial Outcomes](#)," by Professor Jennifer Harman and Dr. Demosthenes Lorandos published in the journal *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*. Harman and Lorandos identified "at least 30 conceptual and methodological problems with the design and analyses of the [Meier et al., 2019] study that make the results and the conclusions drawn dubious at best" (p. 2; See Table 1 for a list of the concerns). It is concerning that NIJ would fund a project with so many obvious methodological and conceptual problems. Meier and colleagues appear to not have been able to publish a scientifically-vetted, peer-reviewed rebuttal or commentary to this critique, as they have twice posted personally prepared "rebuttals" on professional list-servs and social media attempting to defend their work. Indeed, in defense of their work, Meier and colleagues have claimed that because NIJ funded their work, this was evidence of "peer-review." Any seasoned scientist knows that a grant award is not the same as scientific peer-review of a final product of the research process.

We are also concerned about another questionable and unethical research practice used by Meier and colleagues: p-hacking. On page 8 of the Meier et al. (2019) law school paper that was funded by NIJ, the authors state,

> *The PI and consultant Dickson developed analyses for the statistical consultant to complete, reviewed the output, and, through numerous iterations, refined, corrected, and amplified on the particular analyses.*

In other words, the authors state explicitly that they analyzed data in many ways, and after reviewing their output, they "refined and corrected" it, and then reanalyzed their data to find something statistically significant. They go on to acknowledge that, after doing this, they ***amplified*** their data for particular analyses. This statement indicates that the authors were not only fishing their data for statistical results that supported their beliefs (the hypotheses being tested were never explicated in the paper), but they clearly stated that they *manipulated* their models in order to make particular effects appear more statistically significant than they were.

This behavior is a serious and unethical research practice that creates bias, a practice known as "p-hacking." P-hacking occurs when researchers collect or select data or statistical analyses until nonsignificant results become significant. This form of data-dredging involves scholars **misusing** data to find patterns that can be presented as statistically significant. By doing this, the scholar increases and understates the risk of finding and reporting false positives. One way to determine whether p-hacking has occurred is when the person conducts multiple statistical tests on the data, and then only reports on the results that are statistically significant. Meier and colleagues admit to engaging in this behavior, and therefore the statistical findings reported in their paper cannot be trusted. We are disturbed that U.S. taxpayer money has supported this unethical practice.

These are not the only concerns about the statistics reported in the 2019 paper published in the GW Law paper series. The statistical models that Meier et al. (2019) claimed to have run have never been available for review. On page 8, the authors state,

> *New codes were created by the statistician in order to perform these analyses. All codes used in the quantitative analyses conducted are described and defined in the separately submitted Codebook, which indicates inclusions, exclusions and newly created variables for the quantitative analyses. See DOCUMENTATION Appendix C.*

This Appendix C was not published in the paper series, which is odd and not standard practice. Materials referenced in a paper should always be provided to readers in the journal or the journal's archives website so that they can evaluate the materials and be critical of what is being reported by the authors. Professor Harman and Dr. Lorandos (2021) report that, when they requested from Meier the appendices and statistical output to evaluate her conclusions, "she refused to provide them … and referred them to a national archive for the material, where much of the material was still not available"

(p.22). One of the appendices referred to in the report (Appendix C with the statistical models/output) is still not publicly available anywhere. In keeping with professional standards, not to mention NIJ funding requirements, data must be openly shared with other researchers working in the area. As a result, there is no way for the public to access and assess work paid for with taxpayer money.

In addition, the authors reported on page 8 the following:

> *Logistic regression was used (primarily with the All Abuse dataset) to control for factors that may affect key outcomes, such as differences between trial court and appellate court opinions; differences among states; and the role of gender in custody switches when various forms of abuse or alienation were claimed.*

The authors did not report any of the statistical models in their paper published in the paper series, which is very concerning. It remains unclear what specific variables were entered into the models to "amplify" (p-hack) their analyses. The last control variable listed in the quote above is particularly troublesome, as the alleged predictors in their models that were subsequently reported included gender. To control for gender, and then test gender effects is a serious statistical error and must be corrected. We note that both Professor Harman and Dr. Lorandos have taught statistical analysis to university students at the undergraduate and graduate level.

At the end of the 2019 paper published in the GW paper series, despite obvious and admitted p-hacking and other sampling and methodological issues, Meier et al. put out a "call to action" to advocates and policy makers to change laws about child abuse, and to include sanctions for professionals who even entertain parental alienation as a problem in the family. This call to action has not gone unheard. Direct segments of her report have been requoted across legislative bills and policies across the country and overseas in order to make expert testimony about parental alienation inadmissible in courts, which have recognized parental alienation for its scientific merits. Changing *any* public policy or law based on the results of one study is unheard of, unethical, and dangerous. And yet Meier et al. appear to have used their NIJ funded study (published in the student-edited series) to press for such changes, ignoring all reputable scientific evidence about parental alienation, and in spite of the serious methodological flaws of the work and biased statistical analyses. It is our opinion that this is a serious misuse of science and public tax dollars, and one that needs to stop.

The myths about parental alienation promulgated by those with an ideologically-based rejection of the scientific research on this malady are harmful to children and parents. Parental alienation is a serious public health problem; it is a serious form of psychological abuse that results in the same types of outcomes that other abused children experience: stress and adjustment disorders (*e.g.*, PTSD, anxiety), psychosocial problems and externalizing behaviors (*e.g.*, substance abuse, suicidality). Alienated parents are unable to get closure and have unresolved grief about the loss of their child(ren). They also suffer from being the target of abusive behaviors of the alienating parent. They have high levels of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms, and many become suicidal. (See Harman, Kruk, &

[Hines, 2018](#), for a thorough review of the research literature.) Given the severity of the effects of parental alienation, this topic deserves serious research from unbiased professionals that results in publication in peer-reviewed venues, not agenda-driven research that is framed from the outset to support preconceived conclusions and that are published only as student-edited, research papers by the researchers' institutions.

Due to the concerns we have raised about the Meier et al. (2019) paper published in the George Washington Law School Public Law Research Paper Series, we emailed the faculty editors of that series, requesting that the paper be retracted. It has been a month since our letter was sent, and we have not received a response. Our concerns were also raised with the Dean of the GW Law School. We are very concerned about what we believe to be Meier's serious misuse of her findings from her NIJ funded research project to promote an ideological agenda. Based on the statements made by the Meier *et al.* team in the paper published in the GW paper series, the statistical results that were reported cannot be trusted. We are also concerned that the data may have been fabricated, which may be why a concern about academic fraud was lodged with the George Washington Office of Ethics, Compliance, and Privacy in April, 2021, and was referred to the Office of Research Integrity where Meier is currently under investigation.

We urge the NIJ to take what steps it can now to mitigate the problems caused by funding flawed research on parental alienation. This would include, at a minimum: investigating the serious methodological flaws in the Meier et al. publication, and if p-hacking and or fraud is found, to demand a return of the taxpayers' money. Furthermore, the NIJ should fund quality research that is undertaken by impartial, highly-qualified researchers, is openly shared with other researchers in the field, and is reported in peer-reviewed, scientific journals.
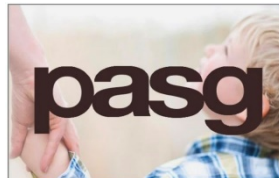
Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Parental Alienation Consortium
PAConsortium2021@gmail.com

[National Parents Organization](#)

[Parental Alienation Study Group](#)

[International Council on Shared Parenting](#)

PASI

Victim to Hero

Asociacion Latinoamericana contra el Sindrome de Alienacion Parental

Center for Parental Responsibility

Families United Action Network

Arkansas Advocates for Parental Equality

Good Egg Safety

WhereRUDad Australia

Family Reunion

VBU

ISNAF

FAN-PAC

Leading Women For Shared Parenting

Children Parents United

National Association of Parental Alienation Specialists

The Toby Center

Preserving Family Ties Media

Mark David Roseman & Associates

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