

# Personality Characteristics of Parents Making False Accusations of Sexual Abuse in Custody Disputes<sup>1</sup>

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*ABSTRACT: Files from contested divorce and custody cases where there were false allegations of sexual abuse were reviewed. In many of the files, there was sufficient information to form an opinion about the individual's personality characteristics. We compared the personalities of 72 falsely accusing parents and 103 falsely accused parents to each other and to a control group of 67 custody only parents (who were involved in custody disputes but without allegations of sexual abuse). All cases had come into our private practice clinic.*

*The falsely accusing parents were much more likely than were the other two groups to have a personality disorder such as histrionic, borderline, passive-aggressive, or paranoid. Only one-fourth were seen as normal. In comparison, most of the individuals in the custody control group and in the falsely accused group were seen as normal. This is discussed in terms of the dynamics involved. A suggested typology of individuals who make false accusation of sexual abuse in divorce and custody disputes is presented.*

Child sexual abuse allegations have increased dramatically in the past 10 to 15 years. Some authorities claim this is caused by an increase in actual abuse of children and that we are in the middle of an epidemic of child abuse. Others suggest that there may not be an increase in abuse but rather an increase in reporting abuse. This is a more hopeful view since it indicates that we are succeeding in our efforts to respond effectively to the reality of child abuse.

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There is considerable confusion about the relationship between incidence and prevalence estimates of child sexual abuse. The most recent incidence estimate reported is in the National Center for Child Abuse and Neglect Second National Incidence Study (1988) suggesting an incidence rate for sexual abuse of children of either 2.2 or 2.5 per 1000, depending upon the definition used. The actual prevalence rate cannot exceed a multiple (years of childhood) of the actual incidence rate so the most likely prevalence rate is around 4%. This is considerably less than many suggested prevalence rates, which range from 3% to 62% in different surveys and average 20% to 30% (Wakefield & Underwager, 1988).

Prevalence estimates are most often based on retrospective memory surveys of adults about their childhood experiences. Retrospective memory involves reconstruction rather than recall and may be inaccurate since we often make up stories about our past in order to make sense of our present (Dawes, 1988). Prevalence surveys do not attempt to relate the prevalence estimate to the incidence rate. One of the more carefully conducted surveys that did not use retrospective reports, however, reported a prevalence rate of 5.3% which is closer to what the incidence rate suggests (Siegel, Sorenson, Golding, Burnam, & Stein, 1987).

False accusations of sexual abuse are also increasing although there is disagreement as to the frequency and nature of false claims. However, many professionals believe that false accusations have become a serious problem in vindictive and angry divorce and custody battles. Consequently, such false accusations have received much publicity and there have been many articles about this in the literature (Ash, 1985; Benedek & Schetky, 1985a & b; Bishop & Johnson, 1987a & b; Blush & Ross, 1987; Brant & Sink, 1984; Bresee, Stearns, Bess, & Packer, 1986; Dwyer, 1986; Ekman, 1989; Ferguson, D., 1988; Gardner, 1986 & 1987a; Goldzband & Renshaw, undated; Gordon, 1985; Green, 1986; Green & Schetky, 1988; Hindmarch, 1990; Jones & Seig, 1988; Levine, 1986; Levy, 1989; MacFarlane, 1986; Murphy, 1987; Ross & Blush, 1990; Schaefer & Guyer, 1988; Schuman,

1986; Sink, 1988b; Spiegel, 1986; Thoennes and Pearson (1988a & b); Underwager & Wakefield, 1989; Wakefield & Underwager, 1988; Wakefield & Underwager, 1989; Yates & Musty, 1988).

It is difficult to determine just how often sexual abuse accusations occur in custody and visitation disputes. Thoennes and her colleagues (Thoennes & Pearson 1988a & b; Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990) attempted to get information on the incidence and validity of sexual abuse allegations in divorce and custody cases. They gathered information through telephone interviews and mail surveys from 290 court administrators, judges, custody mediators, and child protection workers throughout the United States. They then conducted 70 in-depth interviews at five sites, and then finally tracked cases of sexual abuse allegations over a six month period from eleven court systems. This latter procedure yielded a pool of 160 cases of sexual abuse allegations.

They report that the initial survey and interviews at the five sites revealed a general consensus that sexual abuse allegations in custody disputes occur in "a small but growing" number of cases (Thoennes & Pearson, 1988a). They estimate that accusations of sexual abuse are found in approximately 2% of contested custody cases (the range across court sites was 1% to 8%). They state that there are approximately one million divorces annually, and of these, about 55% or 550,000 involve minor children. About 15% of these (82,500) result in court involvement due to custody and/or visitation disputes. Their estimate of 2% sexual abuse accusations in 82,500 custody disputes translates into 1,650 cases of sexual abuse accusations annually within the environment of a divorce/custody dispute.

We suspect that this estimate is too low. In addition to nearly 200 cases of sexual abuse allegations in divorce and/or custody disputes in which we have been formally involved, we have informally consulted on many more. We receive two or three calls or letters every week. When presenting this topic at a poster session at the American Psychological Society in June, 1990, three psychologists stopped to talk to us about similar cases. One reported having recently dealt with such a case, another reported a close friend who had this happen, and a third told us that she herself had been falsely accused by her former husband in a nasty custody battle.

Our own experiences cannot be used to estimate a nationwide frequency. Nevertheless, the large number of cases being seen by us and by others who have communicated with us suggests that the actual frequency may be higher than Thoennes and Pearson's estimate. For example, many matrimonial attorneys report that they are now handling more custody cases with sexual abuse allegations (Fisk, 1989).

There is not agreement as to how many of these cases turn out to be false, although most of the estimates range from one-third to four-fifths. Thoennes and her colleagues report that in 33% of the cases in their survey, no abuse was believed to have occurred. Abuse was believed likely in 50% and in 17% no determination could be reached (Thoennes & Pearson 1988a & b; Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990). However, the decision as to whether the abuse was factual was made by custody evaluators and child protection workers rather than by the justice system.

Most professionals believe that the proportion of false allegations of child sexual abuse is highest in divorce and custody disputes. Out of approximately 500 cases in which we have provided expert consultation in the past six years involving sexual abuse accusations, 40% were divorce and custody cases. Of these divorce and custody cases that have been adjudicated, for three-fourths there was no determination of abuse by the legal system. That is, charges were dropped or never filed or the person was acquitted in criminal court, or there was no finding of abuse in family court.

Dwyer (1986) reports similar statistics. She states that 77% of the divorce-linked allegations of sex abuse cases coming to the Human Sexuality Program at the University of Minnesota have turned out to be "hoax" cases. This was based upon the opinion reached by the agency staff that the allegations were not accurate.

In our experience, accusations of sexual abuse occur in a bitter and acrimonious divorce at all stages of the process. Benedek and Schetky (1985a) report that they were especially common in disputes about child custody that arise after a divorce has been granted and center around issues of visitation.

Most of the time the accusation is not a deliberate fabrication on the part of the accusing parent. Many parents have been influenced by the publicity about sexual abuse to make false accusations based on misperceptions and false assumptions. Wallerstein and Kelly (1975, 1980) note that in a bitter divorce, not only is the child likely to undergo significant stress, but the parents are likely to blame the child's anxiety and distress on the other parent.

However, in some cases a parent can deliberately foster a false accusation as a way to get custody (Wakefield & Underwager, 1989). Thoennes and Pearson (1988b) report that in 15% of the cases they studied, the case worker expressed doubt that the report was offered in good faith.

As the system to respond to accusations of sexual abuse has developed, it rewards the making of an accusation with all manner of reinforcements. The person who is hated is punished. There is social approval for making the accusation. There may be free legal counsel, welfare payments, approbation and sup-

port from mental health professionals, therapists, friends, family, neighbors. There is no response cost for making an accusation. As Green and Schetky (1988) state:

A small number of parents caught up in custody battles or visitation disputes have exploited the epidemic of sexual abuse by using such allegations to promote their own interests at the expense of their child and their former spouse. Allegations have become a surefire way of getting a judge's attention and cutting off visitations. They have the same emotional impact that issues of adultery once had in custody battles a decade or more ago (p. 104).

Gardner (1986) notes that an accusation of sexual abuse is a powerful weapon in a divorce and custody dispute. The vengeful parent may exaggerate a nonexistent or inconsequential sexual contact and build up a case for sexual abuse. The child, in order to ingratiate himself with the accusing parent, may go along with this. On the basis of such observations, he describes a "parental alienation syndrome" in which the child identifies with the vilifying parent and communicates absolute hatred toward the other parent. A false accusation of sexual abuse may develop in this situation (Gardner, 1987a).

Gardner (1986) also observes that in some cases a mother who is obsessed with hatred toward the father may bring the child to the point of having paranoid delusions about the father. A "folie à deux" relationship may evolve in which the child acquires the mother's paranoid delusions (Ferguson, 1988; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1981; Rand, 1989, 1990). Green (1986) states that such women are usually diagnosed as histrionic or paranoid personality disorders, or paranoid schizophrenics.

Blush and Ross (1987) and Ross and Blush (1990) have reported on the personality characteristics of the parties involved arising in the context of unresolved custody and visitation. They gathered social, psychological, and legal data from allegations arising in a family services clinic of a circuit court setting in Michigan. They report that information from several years of such cases provides suggested patterns characterizing accusations that are more likely to be false. Important variables are the escalation and timing of the cases, the personality characteristics of the adults involved, and the behavior of the children. They termed the typical pattern when the allegations turn out to be false the SAID (Sexual Allegations in Divorce) Syndrome (Blush & Ross, 1987).

1. The accusations surface after separation and legal action begins.
2. There is a history of family dysfunction with unresolved divorce conflict and hidden underlying issues.
3. The female (accusing) parent often is a hysterical or borderline personality or is angry, defensive and justifying.

4. The male (the accused) parent is generally passive, nurturing, and lacks "macho" characteristics.
5. The child is typically a female under age eight.
6. The allegations surface via the custodial parent.
7. The mother takes the child to an "expert" who confirms the abuse and identifies the father as the perpetrator.
8. The court reacts to the experts information by terminating or limiting visitation.

Ross and Blush (1990) describe three personality patterns they have observed in falsely accusing parents. The first is the *histrionic personality*. This individual appears anxious, concerned, and nervous and presents herself as victimized by her estranged spouse. She describes herself as manipulated, coerced, and physically or psychologically abused by this spouse and perceives her child as now in danger of victimization from him. Her interpretation of her child's behavior appears to be an extension of her own feelings, with the result that she develops unusual and inappropriate sexual concerns about her child. She may regularly examine her child's genitals, take the child for repeated medical exams, or interrogate the child about possible sexual activity.

The *justified vindicator* is a variation of the histrionic personality. This woman initially offers an intellectually organized, assertive, and justified agenda with many facts, figures, and opinions supporting her evidence. She presents herself as justifiably outraged and concerned by the behavior of her spouse. However, when clarification is sought concerning the details, she becomes hostile, resistant, and passive-aggressive. She will argue and counter even carefully framed questions, is likely to discontinue contact with the evaluator who challenges her statements, and may threaten to sue or make ethical complaints.

The *borderline personality*, by virtue of a basic histrionic propensity and the stress of the divorce, functions in a highly dysfunctional way and may lose contact with reality. This person may be most readily identified by peculiar and bizarre descriptions of events in her history.

We have been engaged in an ongoing study of the personality characteristics of the parties in false accusations of sexual abuse in divorce and custody disputes. To date, files from over 181 cases of accusations of sexual abuse arising in an acrimonious divorce and custody dispute have been reviewed. In many of the files, there is sufficient information from professional evaluations to form an opinion about the individual's personality characteristics.

In conducting a systematic analysis of the psychological information in the files, we predicted that compared to parents in custody disputes without sexual abuse accusations, parents who make false accusations of sexual abuse during a divorce/custody battle will be more likely to demonstrate psychopathology in

the course of an evaluation. We also predicted that the personalities of persons who had been falsely accused would not differ from those in a custody control group.

## Method

### *Subjects*

Files from 181 cases where there have been sexual abuse allegations during a divorce and custody dispute were reviewed. In many of the files, there was sufficient information (from medical and psychological reports, therapy and hospital records, test results, etc.) to form an opinion about the individuals' personality characteristics. In some of the cases, we had performed an evaluation. In others, the data was obtained and the evaluation done by other mental health professionals and was reviewed by us. We limited the information we used to that given by physicians and qualified mental health professionals.

The criteria to select the cases of false allegations were (1) the accused continued to deny the charge, (2) we concluded, from our review of the entire file, that the accusation was likely false, and (3) there had been no finding of abuse by the justice system. The falsely accusing parents were compared to two groups—a group of parents in contested custody cases in which there were no allegations of sexual abuse, and a group of falsely accused parents. All cases had come into our private practice clinic. Some of the sample included both parents in a case, but in others, we only had sufficient information about one.

We found enough information in the 181 files to include 72 falsely accusing parents (68 females and 4 males) and 103 falsely accused parents (4 females and 99 males). There were 67 parents in a custody control group (31 females and 36 males). The mean age of the accusing females was 33.5; the falsely accused females 33.0; and the custody only females 32.8. The mean age of the accusing males was 36.3; the falsely accused males 36.9, and the custody only males 34.6.

### *Procedure*

The available information was carefully reviewed and a diagnosis was assigned to the person on the basis of the information. The amount of information varied from case to case. In some of the files, the persons had been interviewed and given multiple psychological tests by two or three evaluators. In a few, the only information was a letter from a therapist or physician giving observations or opinions about the person but not a formal diagnostic statement. However, most of the files included reports of clinical interviews and

testing. When the diagnosis was given by the evaluator, this was used. In the instances where an actual diagnosis was not given by the evaluator, we selected a diagnosis on the basis of the information in the file. We also compared MMPI profiles in the subjects who had MMPIs in the files.

Both of us reviewed the psychological data and assigned diagnoses when they were lacking. When we disagreed, we discussed the case until we reached consensus. However, there was initial disagreement on only a few of the cases because the information in the file was generally detailed enough to arrive at a diagnosis with a reasonable degree of confidence.

The subjects were then classified according to the diagnoses. We combined persons who were given an adjustment reaction diagnosis and persons who were seen as psychologically healthy or "normal" for whom no psychiatric diagnosis was warranted. We did this for two reasons: First, the adjustment reaction diagnosis was made in terms of the person's reaction to the custody and divorce situation rather in terms of any preexisting problems. Second, an adjustment disorder diagnosis is sometimes used to meet the third party payment requirement for persons who would otherwise not be given a diagnosis.

For each of the three groups, we first compared the diagnoses from our psychological evaluations to those made on the basis of information and conclusions from other professionals. We did this to ensure that our results would not be affected by a tendency for us to assess persons in the three groups differently than would the other professionals. This was important in that the proportions in each group evaluated by us compared to other professionals was different for each group. We evaluated 75% of the custody control group, 20% of the accusing parents, and 70% of the falsely accused parents.

A Chi square indicated no significant differences. Therefore, we then compared the groups

Some information on the actual MMPI profiles was available for 62 of the custody only, 44 of the accusing, and 95 of the accused parents. In most of these, we had the actual profile; in a few we only had specific information about profile validity. We used the available information to compare the groups on the validity scales and the basic clinical scales.

In addition to comparing mean MMPI profiles for our three groups, we compared them to two samples from the MMPI-2 restandardization project: a normal sample of 773 married or cohabiting pairs and a sample of 150 couples in marriage counseling (Hjemboe & Butcher, 1990). Although this data was collected on the MMPI-2, the mean raw scores were converted to the original MMPI K-corrected T-score values with Appendix K of the MMPI-2 Manual.

## Results

Table 1 shows the diagnoses given to the falsely accusing females compared to the custody only females:

**Table 1**  
**Diagnoses of Falsely Accusing Females**  
**and Custody Only Females**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Diagnosis</i>					
	No Diagnosis Warranted		Personality Disorder		Other Diagnoses *	
Accusing N = 68	17	25%	49	72%	2	3%
Custody N = 31	19	61%	10	32%	2	6%

$\chi^2(2, N = 99) = 14.49, p < .001.$

\* alcohol use disorder in all 4 cases; one in the custody group was also dysthymia

Compared to the custody only, the falsely accusing females were significantly more likely to have a personality disorder diagnosis, 72% as compared to 32%. Only two persons in each group were given a diagnosis other than one of the personality disorders—in each case it was an alcohol use disorder (one was also

diagnosed as dysthymia).

The four falsely accusing males were all diagnosed as having personality disorders.

Table 2 shows the diagnoses given to the falsely accused males compared to the custody only males:

**Table 2**  
**Diagnoses of Falsely Accused Males**  
**and Custody Only Males**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Diagnosis</i>					
	No Diagnosis Warranted		Personality Disorder		Other Diagnoses *	
Accusing N = 99	68	69%	27	27%	4	4%
Custody N = 36	25	69%	7	19%	4	11%

$\chi^2(2, N = 135) = 2.88, p < .30 > .20.$

\* Custody other: bipolar disorder (1), alcohol use disorder (1), depression (2)  
Falsely accused other: alcohol use disorder (1), depression (3)

There was no significant difference between the falsely accused males and the custody only males. In both groups most of the persons (69%) were seen as having no psychopathology while a much smaller proportion (27% and 19%) were diagnosed with personality disorders. Only a few persons were given other diagnoses. In the two groups combined, there were five persons who were diagnosed as neurotic depression, two as alcohol use disorder, and one as

bipolar disorder.

The four women in the falsely accused group were all psychologically normal.

The 31 females and 36 males in the custody only group were then compared to each other and there were no significant differences between them ( $\chi^2[2, N = 67] = 3.48, p < .20 > .10$ ).

Therefore, we then combined males and females and compared all three groups in Table 3:

**Table 3**  
**Diagnoses of Falsely Accusing Parents,**  
**Falsely Accused Parents, and Custody Only Parents.**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Diagnosis</i>					
	No Diagnosis Warranted		Personality Disorder		Other Diagnoses *	
Accusing N = 72	17	24%	53	74%	2	3%
Accused N = 103	72	70%	27	26%	4	4%
Custody N = 67	44	66%	17	25%	6	9%

$\chi^2(4, N = 242) = 50.30, p < .001.$

Three-fourths of the falsely accusing parents were given diagnoses of personality disorder while only one-fourth were seen as normal. In comparison, only one-fourth of the individuals in the falsely accused group and the custody control group had personality disorders and most (70% and 66%) were seen as normal.

The most frequent personality disorder diagnosis for all three groups was mixed or unspecified. This is a diagnosis given when a person does not meet the criteria for one specific personality disorder. For the accusing parents, 24 of the 53 with personality disorders were given this diagnosis. Within the unspecified personality disorder category, 11 of the 24 persons had histrionic personality features. The other personality disorders for the accusing parents were histrionic (7), dependent (6), borderline (5), passive-aggressive (5), paranoid (5), and explosive (1).

For the custody only parents, 8 of the 17 with personality disorders were diagnosed as unspecified. The remaining 9 were distributed fairly evenly among other personality disorders.

For the falsely accused parents, 11 of the 27 with personality disorders were diagnosed as unspecified. The others were passive-dependent (7), passive-aggressive (4), anti-social (2), schizoid (1), compulsive (1), and narcissistic (1).

### *MMPIs*

Some information on MMPI scores was available for 44 of the accusing, 95 of the accused, and 62 of the

custody only parents. We had scores on some or all of the scales for 29 of the accusing, 83 of the accused, and 59 of the custody only parents. We compared the raw scores of the custody females to the accusing females and the custody males to the accused males.

Many of the individual MMPIs in all three groups were responded to with mild to severe defensiveness, often to the point of being technically invalid. Using a criteria for invalidity of  $K \geq 70$ ,  $F \geq 70$ , and/or  $F-K \geq -22$ , 30% of 44 MMPIs in the accusing group, 15% of 95 MMPIs in the accused group, and 13% of 62 MMPIs in the custody groups were technically invalid. (These figures also include cases in which a report did not include actual MMPI scores, but stated that the MMPI was either valid or was invalid because of severe defensiveness.)

The raw scores, standard deviations, and *t* values for the comparisons for the accusing versus custody females are shown in Table 4 and for the comparisons for the accused versus custody males in Table 5. The mean profiles for all three groups were within normal limits. The accusing females responded more defensively than did the custody females. Their L and K scales were higher, and their F scale was lower than for the custody only females. This reached statistical significance on F and F-K.

There was no significant difference in defensiveness between the custody only males and the accused males as indicated by the validity scales. On the clinical scales, the accused group was significantly higher on scale 3.

**Table 4**  
**MMPI Mean Raw Scores, Standard Deviations, and *t* Ratios**  
**for Comparisons between Custody and Accusing Females**

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Group</i>					
	Custody Females (N=27)		Accusing Females (N=26)		<i>t</i> Value	<i>p</i> Level
	Raw	SD	Raw	SD		
L	3.93	2.39	5.04	2.49	1.66	.103
F	4.11	3.19	2.15	1.41	2.87	.006*
K	17.33	4.11	19.50	4.50	1.83	.073
F-K	-13.22	6.19	-17.52	5.06	2.79	.007*
	(N=27)		(N=24)			
Hs	3.63	3.10	3.62	3.03	.01	.996
D	19.78	5.72	20.25	5.19	.31	.760
Hy	22.56	4.85	23.71	4.53	.87	.386
Pd	17.04	5.07	15.58	3.76	1.15	.255
Mf	40.82	3.50	39.75	3.87	1.03	.307
Pa	11.07	2.91	11.29	4.06	.22	.825
Pt	10.07	7.30	7.96	7.68	1.01	.318
Sc	9.11	7.80	6.92	6.96	1.06	.289
Ma	14.96	4.97	13.92	3.65	.848	.400
Si	25.22	9.22	23.58	10.17	.604	.549

\* statistically significant

**Table 5**  
**MMPI Mean Raw Scores, Standard Deviations, and *t* Ratios**  
**for Comparisons between Custody and Accused Males**

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Group</i>					
	Custody Males (N=32)		Accused Males (N=79)		<i>t</i> Value	<i>p</i> Level
	Raw	SD	Raw	SD		
L	4.27	2.44	3.87	2.08	.86	.391
F	3.06	1.85	3.51	2.25	.99	.325
K	17.86	4.32	18.66	4.10	.90	.371
F-K	-14.81	5.36	-15.15	5.29	.31	.761
	(N=31)		(N=79)			
Hs	1.94	2.34	3.00	3.14	1.71	.090
D	17.77	3.72	18.13	3.93	.43	.669
Hy	20.32	2.75	22.60	4.01	2.99	.005*
Pd	16.16	3.98	16.96	3.88	.97	.336
Mf	26.19	5.14	26.10	5.11	.09	.932
Pa	11.07	2.44	12.01	3.12	1.49	.139
Pt	7.07	3.97	7.43	4.66	.39	.701
Sc	6.90	4.75	6.13	4.96	.75	.456
Ma	15.48	3.79	15.56	4.25	.08	.934
Si	22.97	9.66	21.32	7.35	.97	.336

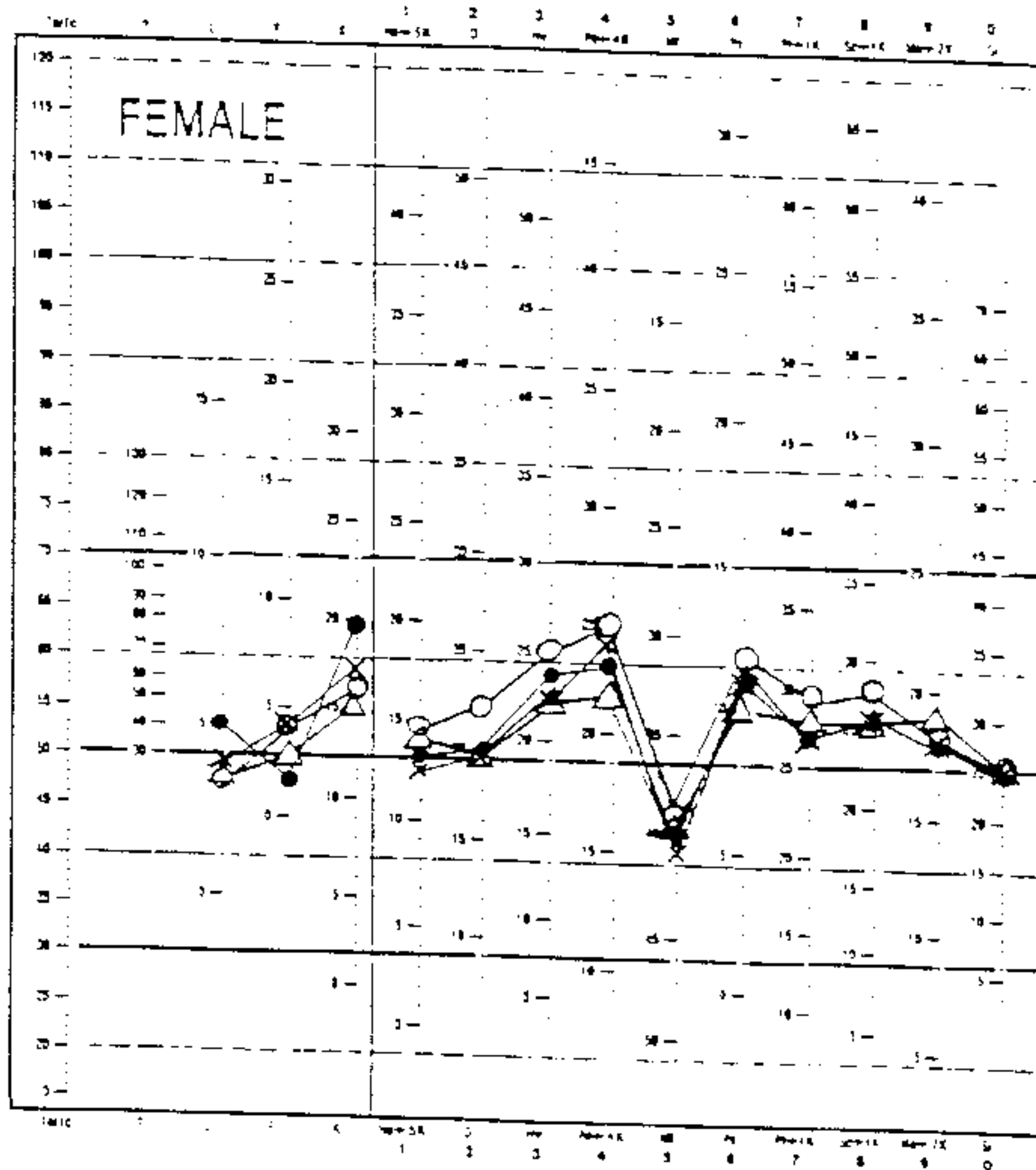
\* statistically significant

The mean K-corrected T scales for our falsely accusing females and custody females are plotted along with the female marriage counseling sample and the normal sample of married or cohabiting females from the MMPI-2 restandardization project (Hjemboe & Butcher, 1990) in Figure 1. The mean K-corrected T scales for our falsely accused males and custody males

are plotted along with the male marriage counseling sample and the normal sample of married or cohabiting males from the MMPI-2 restandardization project are plotted in Figure 2.

Figure 1

**MMPI Profiles for Falsely Accusing Females and Custody Only Females Compared to Female Marital Counselors and a Normal Sample of Females in Marital Pairs from the MMPI-2 Restandardization Project\***

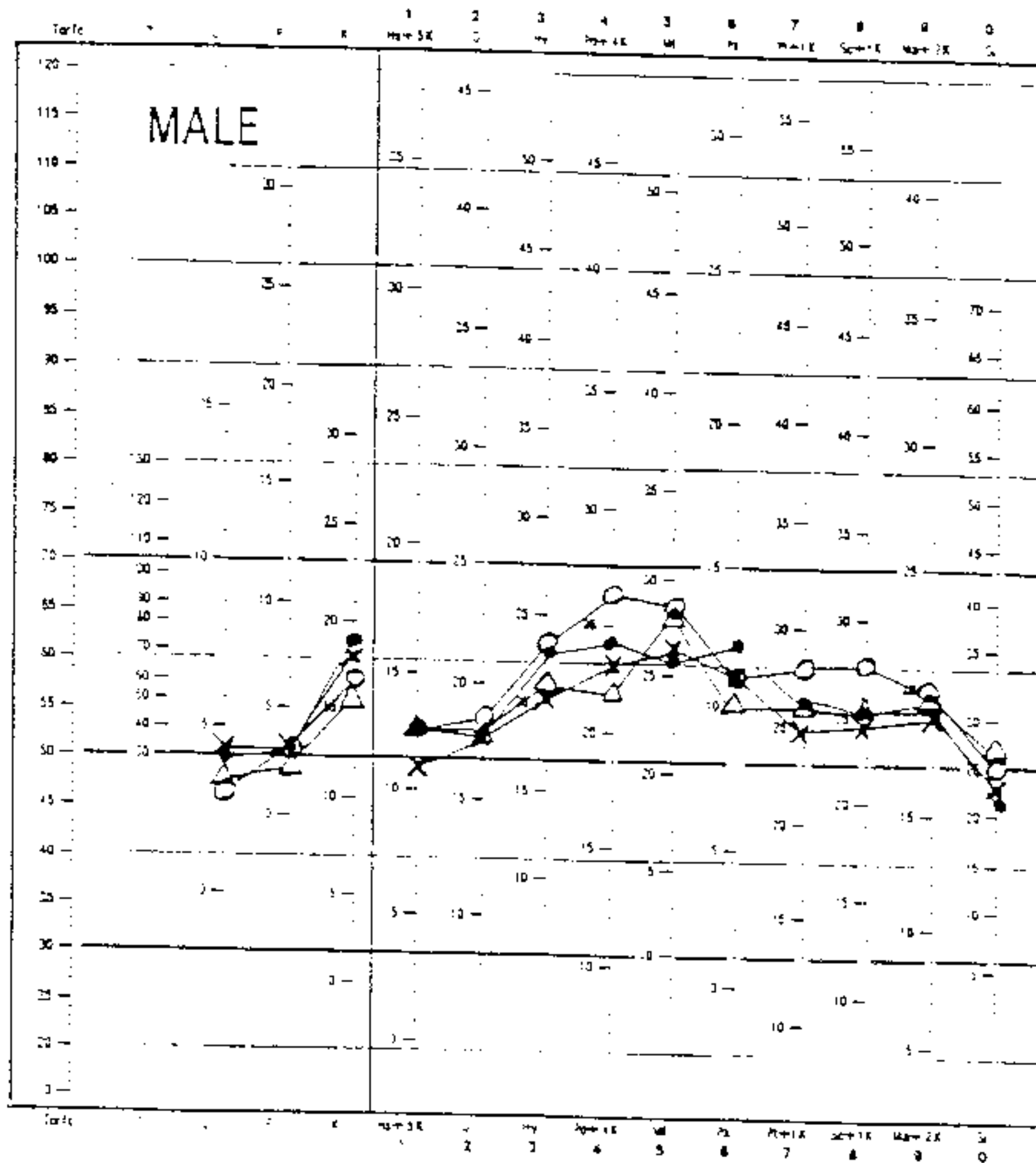


Falsely Accusing Females (N = 24) ●—●—●—●—●  
 Custody Only Females (N = 27) X—X—X—X—X  
 Marital Counselors (N = 150) \* ○—○—○—○—○  
 Normal Marital Pairs (N = 773) \* △—△—△—△—△

\*Hjemboe & Butcher (1990)

Figure 2

**MMPI Profiles for Falsely Accused Males and Custody Only Males Compared to Male Marital Counselors and a Normal Sample of Males in Marital Pairs from the MMPI-2 Restandardization Project\***



Falsely Accusing Males (N = 79)  
 Custody Only Males (N = 31)  
 Marital Counselors (N = 150) \*  
 Normal Marital Pairs (N = 773) \*

●—●—●—●—●  
 X—X—X—X—X  
 ○—○—○—○—○  
 △—△—△—△—△

\*Hjemboe & Butcher (1990)

The shape of the K-corrected mean MMPI profiles of our female samples are similar to those of the samples of the marital counselees and the normal samples from Hjemboe and Butcher (1990) but the marital counselees had higher elevations than did the other three groups. Our samples, however, were more defensive. This is particularly evident in looking at the

profile of the falsely accusing females, whose validity scales show the "check mark" shape characteristic of defensive profiles. This check mark shape is not found in the other groups.

For the males, the marital counselees also had higher elevations than the other three groups. Our custody only and falsely accused samples were more

defensive than the Hjemboe and Butcher samples. However, the "check mark" found in the falsely accusing females is not present for any of the other groups.

## Discussion

Falsely accusing parents were much more likely to have a personality disorder, such as histrionic, borderline, passive-aggressive, paranoid, or unspecified. Only one-fourth were seen as having no psychopathology. In comparison, most of the individuals in the custody control group and the accused group were assessed as normal. Of the personality disorders in the falsely accusing parents, roughly one-third were histrionic personality or unspecified personality disorder with histrionic features.

The mean MMPIs of the three groups did not reflect these differences in diagnoses. The high degree of defensiveness on the MMPIs, particularly in the accusing parents' group, meant that many of the MMPIs could not be used to reach conclusions about psychopathology. A defensive response set is not unusual in persons taking the MMPI as part of a court evaluation or custody evaluation. Graham (1988) reports that a typical K, depending upon education, is a T score of 60 (corresponding to a raw score of 17 or 18). He states that, in fact, if K is low in a custody evaluation, this is a cause for concern. The accusing parents in this study, however, responded more defensively than did the other two groups.

Another reason that the personality disorders of the accusing group were not reflected on their mean MMPIs is that, although personality disorders are relatively common, they are difficult to define and patients who have them present with a wide variety of different behaviors. This is true even within a given personality disorder (i.e., borderline, histrionic, paranoid). This means that there may be different code types found in a given personality disorder. This is especially true of the histrionic personality. Morey and Smith (1988) report that the MMPI has had little success in identifying histrionic personality because the distribution of code types for this disorder is widely scattered.

In addition, mean code types do not necessarily reflect the distribution of code types in a particular sample. The group means often obscure meaningful elevations patterns in that the high and low scales can be canceled out in the averaging. For example, an individual who was high on scales 2 and 7 but low on 4 and 9 would cancel out a second individual who was high on 4 and 9 but low on 2 and 7.

However, the more defensive response pattern

found in the validity scales in our falsely accusing group is important. These people had no more reason to try to look good on the test than did those in our other two groups. They would have had less motivation to "fake good" than would the parents who were falsely accused of sexual abuse, some of whom undoubtedly believed that "a good score" on the MMPI might exonerate them and keep them from prison. Therefore, the defensive MMPIs of the falsely accusing parents may well be reflecting something more than a defensive response set. The personality patterns of many of these people may include poor insight, rigidity, and a tendency to deny shortcomings.

Social desirability is a major source of variance in the MMPI. The extent to which a person is sensitive to and concerned about the impression made on other people reflects important personality characteristics of the individual. Those showing excessive social desirability response sets are "self-centered and overly preoccupied with the social image they create; these individuals tend to be hysteroid, paranoid, or socially insecure. . . . These test-taking attitudes can, then, be better understood as part of a subject's general personality structure" (Dahlstrom, Welsh & Dahlstrom, 1975, p. 138). The finding of a significantly greater defensiveness on the mean F-K index for the group developing false accusations fits into the finding of a much higher proportion of personality disorders in the group of false accusers. The MMPI research on validity scale configurations therefore supports the finding of a high level of pathological personality characteristics in those who are involved in fabricating false accusations of sexual abuse during a divorce/custody conflict.

Could the stress of becoming convinced that one's child was being sexually abused in the face of disbelief by the justice system have caused the accusing parents to develop a personality disorder? This is unlikely for several reasons.

First, in about one-fourth of the cases the psychological information was collected before the abuse allegations were made. There were no differences in the proportion of psychopathology in these cases compared to the ones where the information was obtained afterwards.

Second, in almost all of the cases, at the point at which the information was gathered the allegations were believed and supported. The accused parent's visitation was terminated or greatly restricted and he was often facing criminal charges.

Third, whatever stresses are created by believing one's child is being sexually abused are matched by the stress of *being* falsely accused of child sexual abuse (Schultz, 1989; Underwager, Clauss, & Wakefield,

1990). The information we have from the accused parents is that they often suffered tremendous anxiety and depression as a result of being falsely accused.

Fourth, the personality disorder diagnosis indicates a stable, long-lasting and pervasive personality pattern which is unlikely to develop as a result of a stressful situation. Although personality disorders are exacerbated by stress, they are not created by a stressful incident.

Personality disorders are difficult and frequently misunderstood, but at the same time relatively common (Fleming & Pretzer, 1990). Individuals with personality disorders have personality characteristics which cause distress and impairment in daily functioning. The DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) defines personality disorders as "enduring patterns of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and oneself" which "are exhibited in a wide range of important social and personal contexts" (p. 335). Such persons are likely to misperceive the behavior of others and to react to stressful situations in maladaptive ways. Depending upon the specific personality disorder, they are characterized by instability of mood, impulsivity, inappropriate emotional overreactions, a need for approval and attention, and difficulties handling anger and conflict.

Several of the falsely accusing persons' level of dysfunction was extremely serious, sometimes to the point of losing contact with reality. Some believed they had rare spiritual powers and/or delusions concerning religion. One woman planned on traveling to Rome to marry the Pope; the records of another stated that she had gone to Switzerland to marry Christ. One woman, a psychotherapist, believed that she had exceptional empathic powers that allowed her to sense who among her adult clients had been sexually abused as children. Several were described as being highly unstable and unpredictable, displaying hysterical and bizarre behaviors, and sometimes failing to distinguish between fact and fantasy. The women with histrionic personality diagnoses were described as displaying manipulative, flamboyant, coquettish, or exhibitionistic behavior and being preoccupied with appearance and attractiveness, along with having a tendency to distort events.

Several women were described as having symbiotic relationships with their children and a two were diagnosed as having developed a *folie à deux* relationship with an older child, who also came to share the beliefs about the abuse. In several of the cases, the behaviors Gardner has described as the "parental alienation syndrome" (1987) were evident. In such cases the child accepted and internalized an irrational hatred of the father in the absence of any convincing evidence

for such hatred.

The falsely accusing parents were sometimes so obsessed with anger towards their estranged spouse that this became a major focus in their lives. Such persons were often described by the evaluators as being oppositional, hostile, negative, and resistant in the evaluation and concern is expressed that the anger towards the former spouse supersedes the needs of the child. One woman made frequent calls to her husband's job, alleging that he was a pervert and a thief and should be fired. She also tried to run down her husband's attorney with her car. Another called our office to tell us that her husband was a deadbeat and would not pay his bill with us. She also accused him of being involved in the Scott County sex ring, an accusation that was simply impossible as the man was out of the country at the time. Such women fit Ross and Blush's (1990) "justified vindicator" that was described earlier.

Several of the women remained obsessed with the suspicion that their former spouse was sexually abusing the child, even after the case was dismissed or judged to be false. Some took their young child for multiple physical and psychological examinations and made repeated accusations of abuse to child protection. A few regularly examined the genitals of the child following visits. Some had been questioning the children about possible sexual abuse for years. A few, when the case was not substantiated, moved to another county and started the accusations over, continuing this pattern until a child protection worker was found who substantiated the accusation. One woman arranged for a television station to interview her so she could publicly accuse her husband of sexually abusing their child. This included a videotape of the child. Two disappeared with their children after the court ruled that there was no abuse and ordered visitation with the father be resumed.

What about the four men who made false accusations? Although we cannot generalize from a sample of only four, these men appear to be quite similar to the falsely accusing women. One (unspecified personality disorder) was described by the evaluator as extremely defensive, angry, hostile, hypervigilant, and lacking in accurate perception of others. Another (dependent personality disorder) was described as a docile and passive man who had a chronic behavior pattern of developing dependent relationships. A third (unspecified personality disorder) was seen to have characteristic tendencies to be guarded and defensive and to deny and repress his considerable anger, suspicion, and hostility. The fourth (paranoid personality disorder) had gone through seven attorneys—they all kept dropping him because of his manipulative, angry,

