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The Long-Term Effects of Parental Alienation on Adult Children: A Qualitative Research Study

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A qualitative retrospective study was conducted on 38 adults who experienced parental alienation as a child. Individuals participated in one-hour semi-structured interviews. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, and submitted to a content analysis for primary themes and patterns. Findings pertaining to the long-term effects of parental alienation were analyzed for this article. Results revealed seven major areas of impact: (1) low self-esteem, (2) depression, (3) drug/alcohol abuse, (4) lack of trust, (5) alienation from own children, (6) divorce, and (7) other. These seven themes are discussed at length to provide the first glimpse into the lives of adult children of parental alienation.

Every year one million marriages end in divorce, resulting in more than 100,000 couples battling over the custody and visitation of their children (Turkat, 2000). Children whose parents divorce suffer emotionally and psychologically, especially when the divorce is contentious and the children are exposed to ongoing conflict between their parents (e.g., Amato, 1994; Johnston, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996).

One specific form of post-divorce conflict has been relatively overlooked in the empirical divorce literature: parental alienation, when one parent turns the child against the other parent through powerful emotional manipulation techniques designed to bind the child to them at the exclusion of the other parent (Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 1998; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996; Warshak, 2001). These parents create a “cult of parenthood” and, like cult leaders, they undermine the independent thinking skills of their children and cultivate an unhealthy dependency designed to satisfy the emotional needs of the adult

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rather than the developmental needs of the child (Tobias & Lalich, 1994; Warshak, 2001).

According to Gardner (1998) children can experience three levels of parental alienation: mild, moderate, and severe (although Turkat, 2002 outlines conceptual issues with this scale). In mild cases there is some parental programming against the other parent but visitation is not seriously affected and the child manages to negotiate having a relationship with both parents without too much difficulty. In cases of moderate parental alienation there is considerable programming against the other parent, resulting in struggles around visitation. The child often has difficulty during the transition from one parent to the other but eventually is able to have a reasonably healthy relationship with both. The child in severe alienation is adamant about his or her hatred of the targeted parent. The child usually refuses any contact and may threaten to run away if forced to visit. The alienating parent and the child have an unhealthy alliance based on shared distorted beliefs about the other parent. The relationship between the child and the targeted parent is completely destroyed.

The number of cases of severe parental alienation is unknown, in part because the concept is relatively new and there is no formal mechanism for measuring or tracking it (Turkat, 2002). What is known is that the number of children involved in divorce has increased from 6 in 1000 in 1950 to 17 in 1000 by the 1980s, per year. Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found that one quarter of all divorces in their sample met the criterion of being high-conflict more than one year after the separation while Garrity and Baris (1994) contend that one third of all children of divorce are caught in the middle of animosity between their parents. Opperman (2004) estimated that approximately 20 million children are already victims of mild, moderate, or severe alienating behavior and another 25 million children will likely face some form of alienating behavior between the time of the divorce and attaining adulthood.

Despite the widespread nature of this problem, surprisingly little is known about the children who are alienated from one parent by the other (Cartwright, 1993; Johnston, & Kelly, 2004). Waldron & Joanis (1996) speculate that the likely immediate negative effects of parental alienation include self-hatred, guilt, distortion of reality testing, and general emotional and psychological problems. However, no empirical data exist documenting the long-term effects of parental alienation on the child victims. The current study was designed to address this gap in the knowledge base by asking what kinds of adults do these children grow up to be and what do they perceive the impact of parental alienation to have been on their lives.

METHODS

A qualitative retrospective study was launched in the Fall of 2004. Subjects were recruited from word of mouth and from postings on the Internet. A

message was posted on over 100 Internet message boards inviting people to respond if they believed that as a child they were turned against one parent by the other parent. People who responded to the message and/or heard about the study from someone who saw the message were asked to briefly describe their situation in order to ensure that the alienation was at least in part due to the behaviors and attitudes of the other parent. That is, people who reported that a parent abandoned them and they had no reason to believe that one parent caused the other to leave were excluded from the study. Appointments were made with people who met the criteria. At the beginning of the appointment it was explained that the interview was voluntary, for research purposes, and could be stopped at any time. It was also explained that although I am a psychologist I am not a clinician and would not be able to provide counseling. It was explained that no one else would hear the audio tape of the interview or see the complete transcript of the interview. Following this discussion, informed consent was obtained and the audiotape was turned on. Only one person declined to participate after the study was explained. She did not provide a reason.

Sample

Forty adults participated in the interview process (2 were subsequently removed from data analysis because of faulty tapes). An additional two people agreed to participate by e-mail but then did not follow-up. Thus, data for 38 participants are presented. Participants were between 19 and 67 years of age ($M = 40.5$, $SD = 11.8$); 14 were male and 24 were female. For three fourths ($n = 28$) the parents had divorced during the participant's childhood and in all but seven cases the alienating parent was the mother.

The Interview Schedule

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol which ensured that the same information was obtained from all participants while allowing each person to "tell their story" in full. The first section of the interview obtained basic demographic information including age, gender, place of birth, and so forth. Section two focused on memories of the marriage, the participant's relationship to each parent up until the time of the separation/divorce, how the participant was told about the separation, who moved out of the house and a description of the custody/visitation schedule through the age of 18.¹ The third section of the interview focused on the alienation, beginning with which parent was the alienating parent and which was the targeted parent. Participants were asked to list all the different strategies used by the alienating

¹ This section was eliminated for the participants whose parents never separated/divorced.

parent and to provide examples of each. The participant was asked to describe his/her relationship to the targeted parent and how that changed over time, as well as the participant's relationship to the alienating parent during this period. This section ended with a discussion of how the targeted parent tried to counter the alienation, whether the participant knew about these attempts at the time or only found out about them later, and the perceived motivation of the alienating parent. In the fourth section of the interview, we discussed how and when the participant's thinking eventually changed about the targeted parent. They were asked when they began to think that their feelings and thoughts about the targeted parent were induced by the other parent rather than based in reality. Whether or not the alienating parent was ever confronted, whether the targeted parent was told about the realization was also discussed and what, if anything, could the targeted parent have done to mitigate the alienation. Any reunification with the targeted parent was described in full including who initiated it and what happened. The final section of the interview entailed a discussion of the person's life at the present, including what kind of relationship he or she had with each parent and what they believed the impact of the alienation has been. If they were experiencing alienation from their own children this was also discussed at length. At the very end of the interview a checklist was reviewed in order to ensure consistency of data across participants including questions about domestic violence between the parents as well as parental alcoholism/drug abuse, physical or sexual abuse of the participant, alcohol/drug problems and depression of the participant, and any divorce/alienation as an adult.

Data Analysis

Each one-hour audiotape was transcribed verbatim (about 12 pages of text). These transcripts were then submitted to a content analysis in which each unique unit of thought was separated from the transcript and taped onto an index card. Cards were then coded according to its essential idea (i.e., relationship with targeted parent prior to the alienation, strategies utilized by the alienating parent, impact of the alienation). In all there were 11 major categories including a category on the perceived impact of the alienation. These "impact" cards were further coded into sub-categories that produced the major findings presented in the current paper. Future papers will present the findings pertaining to other aspects of the interview including the strategies used by the alienating parent and the process involved in the adults realizing that they had been manipulated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This article presents the results pertaining to one portion of the interview protocol, those responses that reflected the impact of the alienation on the

study participants. This is presented in the following seven sections: (1) low self-esteem/self-hatred, (2) depression, (3) drugs/alcohol abuse, (4) lack of trust, (5) alienation from own children, (6) divorce and (7) other. Each of these will be discussed in turn.

From the outset three methodological and conceptual issues need to be noted. First, not all participants experienced each of these negative outcomes. Further, many of the study participants experienced themselves as having many positive life experiences and personal attributes in addition to the problems discussed below. There were islands of strength in their lives despite the fact they also experienced real hardship and difficulty. Second, it is also important to note that it is not possible to isolate these outcomes as directly resulting from the alienation as opposed to the more general experience of divorce and the parental pathology that was probably underlying the alienation for at least some of the families. Nonetheless, these outcomes are what the participants themselves believed to have been the effects of the alienation and as such they offer insight into their felt experience. Further, the findings discussed below can serve as the foundation for future research endeavors that aim to isolate the effects of alienation. A final methodological consideration is that these findings can only be generalized to people who identified themselves as having been alienated from a parent. It is quite likely that there are individuals for whom the alienation was so subtle and so successful that they never realized that they had been manipulated. It is not possible to determine whether the long-term life outcomes of that group would resemble the outcomes presented below.

Low Self-Esteem

Consistent with the predictions of Waldron and Joanis (1996) there were high rates of low self-esteem if not outright self-hatred was prevalent in the sample. Twenty-six of the participants directly referenced negative self-feelings. As one woman explained, "My brother always thought he was ugly and I always thought I was and I don't know if it was because thinking they didn't want us as babies you know. I did think I was bad, really nasty. I always had no confidence, nothing. Nobody likes me." Similar statements were made by other participants. The negative self image experienced by the participants seemed to derive from at least three sources.

The first source of low self-esteem was the internalization of the hatred of the targeted parent. This process is consistent with object relations theory in which the bad object is taken as an "introject" into the child's understanding of himself (e.g., Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Plainly stated, because the participants felt that the "bad" parent was part of them (genetically as well as through an early relationship) they felt that they must also be bad. The alienating parent's rejection of the targeted parent was experienced as a rejection of that part of the child that was like the targeted parent. "When

you have somebody like my mother who is constantly sitting there telling you this person who is your dad and is a part of you is such a bad person and he is going to do all these terrible things and it is like if he is so bad and I am a part of him then doesn't that sort of make me like that too?" This phenomenon was particularly powerful for participants who were alienated from their same-sex parents and, as they matured, took on the physical likeness of that rejected parent. Amato (1994) also found difficulty experienced by children who physically resembled one of their parents in a high-conflict divorce. One woman in the current study reported gluing her ears to the side of her head so that they looked less like the "sticking out ears" of her father. In general, the participants said that they could not distinguish between the parent's hatred of the other parent and the parent's hatred for those parts of the child that were like the targeted parent. As children they naturally concluded that the alienating parent hated them as well. Because the alienation campaign against the targeted parent started when the child was relatively young (for many it went as far back as they could remember) the negative self-feelings seemed to be incorporated into the very core of their self-identity and sense of self-worth.

Self-hatred also seemed to result from the alienating parent telling their children that the targeted parent did not love or want them. More than one participant told how an alienating parent claimed to have actually saved the child from an intended abortion (one woman recalled her father describing the procedure in detail and providing graphic illustrations of aborted fetuses). One man recalled his mother telling him that his father wanted to throw him in the river. These vivid and horrifying images planted themselves into the mind of the child as a fundamental truth (especially because the stories were repeated) about the targeted parent's feelings about the child. A particularly diabolical form of this strategy was a mother who returned letters that the father was sending (the father later showed them to her with the postmark intact). The mother then asked her daughter to explain how her father could love her if he couldn't even bother to write. The girl eventually capitulated under the weight of the "evidence" and concluded that her father must not really love her. Many others had memories of the alienating parent claiming, "Daddy doesn't love us anymore," conflating in the child's mind the end of the marriage with the parent's rejection of the child. In these cases, the children grew up assuming that the alienated parent had found them to be unworthy of love and concluded that they were in fact unlovable. In many instances the participant did not know at the time that the targeted parent had been trying to contact them and actually felt tremendous love and affection for them. They believed that the alienating parent was telling them the truth, exemplified in the statement, "Of course I believed my mother. She was god." As Peck (1983) among others have explained, when parental love is lacking, the child will naturally assume himself rather than the parent to be the cause, resulting in an unrealistically negative self-image. It is much too

frightening to think that the parent—upon whom the child is dependent—is at fault. This self-blaming has also been borne out in the empirical research on parenting styles. Studies have confirmed that warm but consistent and strict parenting is related to positive child outcomes including self-esteem while hostile parenting is related to self-esteem problems in children (Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). This is also consistent with the notion of internal working models of the world and self as described in attachment theory and research (Bowlby, 1969, Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990). What begins as the child's interaction with the outside world (being told the parent is rejecting him) becomes incorporated into the child's only known inner reality (the child is not worthy of being loved).

And, finally, the participants expressed self-hatred as an apparent outgrowth of the guilt they experienced from betraying the targeted parent. One man who was made to verbally abuse his father on the telephone worried about what impact that had on his father, "I don't know if he believed we really felt that way or not because we were saying these things to him. I am hoping in my heart that he knew but it must have hurt like hell anyway." He described his own feeling at the time as being like "slicing his wrists." This suicidal imagery perhaps indicates an unconscious wish to die; that is, to both escape the pain of the guilt and to be punished for the pain he caused his father. Another participant was encouraged to denigrate and belittle her father and only later did she realize that he was in fact a person worthy of respect and dignity. She recalled driving through her hometown one day when she was 18 years of age. She saw a sickly man with an obvious physical handicap holding on to a lamppost for support, trying to make his way down the street. Her first thought was how sad it was that this poor man was alone and had no one to assist him. As she approached the man she realized that he was her own father, trying to make his way to the family home to visit his children. At that moment she literally saw him in a new light, as he really was and not as her mother wanted her to see him. She was flooded with feelings of shame and self-loathing. "I was a horrible horrible person to him. I joined in with my mom as far as saying he didn't do anything right. I was like a little copy of her when it came to him." To this day she feels ashamed and guilty about how she treated her own father who had done nothing to deserve such contempt. Another woman went so far as to take her own father to court for custody of the younger siblings when the alienating mother passed away. Even now she does not understand her own motivation, but she finds herself replaying in her mind the conversation she had with her father when she told him of her plan, "I can see his face in my mind's eye and he looked devastated and I feel really bad that I did that to him."

Participants who left younger brothers and sisters behind when they finally escaped an abusive alienating parent also experienced tremendous

guilt. One woman risked her own life to return to the home of a violently abusive father in order to rescue her younger half siblings. She was able to escape with all but one, a young man who subsequently committed suicide. Although participants seemed to recognize that they did the best they could under terrible circumstances and that they had been manipulated and lied to, many nonetheless suffered from feelings of guilt and shame at their own behavior, contributing to low self-esteem and a negative self-image.

Depression

Not surprisingly, the majority (70%) also reported suffering from significant episodes of depression in their adult lives. Participants believed that their depression was rooted in early feelings of being unloved by the targeted parent and from the actual extended separation from that parent, both of which are psychosocial risk factors for depressive episodes (Bowlby, 1980). An older woman whose mother died when she was just two months old provided a particularly poignant example of this. At the time of the mother's death, her father was having difficulty caring for five children while holding down a full-time job that required him to be away from the home on alternating weeks. For this reason, he agreed to let his sister raise the baby. This aunt, whom the participant called mommy, subsequently alienated her from her father. She prevented visitation, denigrated him to her, and let it be known that any preference for the father would be disloyal, hurtful, and not tolerated. She only saw her father a few times a year despite the fact that he lived less than an hour away. Not only did she lose her mother from an early death but she lost her father as well. Because the loss of her father was unnecessary, she was particularly bitter. "You lose your mother and you lose your father and you're alone. I always felt alone." Another man explained his experience with depression, "I feel like I have a hole in my soul. And it is not something you can physically point to and say here it is but you know it is there." Another participant, a Pakistani woman whose mother pushed her father out of her life said that not only did she lose her father because the mother made visitation impossible but she also felt that she had lost her mother because of the conflict that ensued between them when the mother made her choose between her parents. "I think I lost two parents. I think the way she handled it was incredibly naïve. She assumed that we would reject her for our father especially me because I had such a strong bond with him. She was scared of that rejection. I don't know if I am depressed but there are times when I can't function you know I can't get out of bed or I can't do work and I am out for days and it is really difficult."

The impact of the loss of the targeted parent was exacerbated by the fact that as children the participants were denied the opportunity to mourn this loss. In fact, quite the opposite was conveyed to them, that it was a positive event for that parent to be out of their lives, essentially a "good riddance to

bad rubbish” message. The participants were discouraged by the alienating parent from talking about and/or expressing interest in their relationship with the targeted parent. One man reported that his mother introduced her new husband to him in the following way, “Your father was a bad man. You can’t have a bad man for a daddy. You deserve a good man to be your daddy. I have found a good man to be your daddy. This man will be your new daddy.” From that point on the word daddy was used to describe the stepfather and there was no language available to ask about the man who used to be his father. In this way it was made clear to him that there was to be no discussion of that other person; and the little boy was left alone to manage his feelings of loss and rejection. Grief researchers and clinicians have outlined different stages that people dealing with catastrophic change or loss experience and it is generally believed that being able to process the loss and go through the stages is a necessary part of healing (Bowlby, 1980; Kubler-Ross, 1997). Conversely, inability to experience these stages of grieving is believed to be associated with subsequent relational problems and depression (Bowlby, 1980). This certainly seemed to be the case for many of the study participants. The interview itself seemed to bring to the surface intense feelings of sadness for the child they had been and the traumatic loss they unnecessarily experienced at the hands of their own parent. Many wept quietly as they recalled their early histories of separation and loss and felt gratitude that someone acknowledged the import of this experience for them.

Drug and Alcohol Problems

About one third of the participants reported having serious problems with drugs and/or alcohol at some point in their lives. Some recognized that they were drawn to substance abuse as a way to escape the feelings of pain and loss that they felt as young children. The following type of comment was common throughout the interviews, “It was very painful and I started taking a lot of drugs at that time to try to block it out, not feel it.” One young man reported, “My drug abuse had gotten pretty bad and I had to get out of there or I was going to die and I knew it. I was slowly destroying myself.” Many participants reported being in recovery and were now aware that they had been consuming drugs and alcohol as a way to avoid the pain of the loss of the parent, the pain from low self-esteem, and the pain of the conflict that was part of the fabric of the relationship with the alienating parent. That is, in many—but not all—cases, the alienating parent’s campaign to eliminate the targeted parent from the child’s life took its toll on their relationship as well. The constant pressure to agree with the alienating parent that the targeted parent was of no value eventually backfired and many participants reported having a highly conflicted relationship with the alienating parent. In many, but again not all cases, the alienating parents were emotionally

abusive in their attempts to subjugate the child's independent thoughts and feelings to their will. One response to this abuse was to escape into alcohol and drugs. For many the realization that the alienating parent had manipulated them also led to pain, anger, guilt, and resentment. The emergence of these intense negative feelings coincided with attainment of late adolescence/early adulthood, a time when there tends to be increased access to and experimentation with drugs and alcohol.

Lack of Trust

Lack of trust in themselves and others was a recurrent theme in the interviews, with 16 of the participants speaking about their difficulty trusting themselves and/or other people. Some were women who were alienated from their fathers and reported not trusting that a man would be able to love them. They assumed that if their father (their first male love) did not love them enough to stay involved in their lives how could any man find them worthy of love and commitment. This idea was expressed in the following question posed by one young woman, "If my father can't love me who will?" One such woman explained that she continually created conflict in her romantic relationships, testing to see how much the man could take before he eventually rejected her. When he finally did leave, she concluded that of course that would happen, all men will eventually leave her as her father did. As she explained, "It all stems from my parent's separation and I think also because I wasn't allowed to have a fruitful relationship with my father after he left. That really scarred me in my relationships with men. I keep thinking they are going to leave and I have to test them until they do leave. As a result I am divorced and I find it really difficult to trust men."

Psychoanalysts call this pattern of repeating the past, no matter how painful, the repetition compulsion (Freud, 1920), while others call it a self-fulfilling prophesy (Merton, 1968). Regardless of the term, the need to repeat the primal rejection of the parent in all subsequent romantic relationships was apparent in some of the study participants. In this way, the individuals were recreating the only experience they knew (rejection by a love object) and confirming that what was is what should have been. According to object relations theory, as painful as it is to repeat the rejection, it is less painful than the terror of being alone that would result from breaking with the past. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) explain Fairbairn's theory of repetition in this way, "Beneath the pain and self-defeating relations and organizations of experience lie ancient internal attachments and allegiances to early significant others." To find new ways of relating entails losing the past and facing the terror of being alone. Warshak (2001) also noted that parents who promote alienation tend to have conflicted and/or distant relationships with a parent. He too concluded that a compulsion to repeat the past was at play.

Another version of the lack of trust expressed by the participants was a sense of doubting their own perceptions of people because from a young age they were told by one parent that the other parent (whom most had positive memories of) was bad, dangerous, or in some other way worthy of fear or contempt. From this conflict between their own perception and what they were told to believe, they developed a lack of trust in people in general and in their own ability to make decisions and make their way in the world. Further, once they realized that they had been manipulated and that what they been led to believe their whole lives about the targeted parent was not the truth (or at least not the whole truth) they became even more unsure of what to believe and whom to trust. "Everything I believed is not so true." Said one participant and another, a young man suffering from great emotional distress, explained, "I don't trust. You are supposed to trust your parents. They are supposed to give you love, care, and support. If one accuses the other parent it splits you. I was played off from one parent to the other and I learned I couldn't trust and so it has made me so I can't trust people or be confident with people."

Parental Alienation From Own Children

Another form of repetition was seen in a particularly tragic long-term outcome of parental alienation: many of the adults interviewed had become alienated from their own children. Fully half of the 28 participants who were parents at the time of the interview were alienated from a child. There were a few different ways that this occurred but in each scenario the individuals seemed to be repeating their early experience of loss, rejection, and feeling unloved. Not only were they unloved by a parent but they were unloved by their own child as well.

One scenario entailed participants with a narcissistic parent (who alienated them from the targeted parent) marrying a narcissistic person who alienated them from their own children. Several of the male participants remarked that they had married women very similar in personality structure to their mothers (who was the alienator). To them, this is what love from a woman felt like and it was all they knew. When these marriages soured, the men became non-custodial parents who were subjected to the same alienation as their own fathers had been. One man recalled taking a trip out west to be with his dying father (whom he had been estranged from as a child) and returning home to find that his wife had moved away with his son. He didn't see his son again for seven years. These men reported that they had been devoted fathers trying to be involved in their children's lives in a way that their fathers could not be there for them. They were shocked and bitter that nonetheless they ended up in the same place: unwanted intruders being squeezed out of their children's hearts and lives. Because of their experience as alienated children, many were conscious of how important it was that

their children know they cared, despite the alienation. They sent cards and letters on a regular basis even though they were probably not well received. One father was particularly energetic in this regard. He told of creating several photo albums and scrapbooks commemorating the fun times he and his daughter had shared as a reminder to her that they once had had a close and loving relationship. Another father created a website in the event that his son wanted to contact him via the Internet. These men knew what rejection from a father felt like and were devastated that they were implicated in causing that pain in their children's lives.

Two women who were alienated from their fathers subsequently lost their own children to their mothers. In both cases these mothers were domineering and narcissistic women who cultivated her daughters' dependency on her, which extended to her grandchildren as well. As one such woman explained, "My son kept running away to my mother and they were not bringing him back and they were saying I was hitting him and all that so they put in for residence for him and. . . I just didn't see that she was doing the same she did with me and my dad. I thought she had changed but. . ." Her own mother convinced her two children to make abuse allegations and based on that report she lost custody. She understands parental alienation from both sides and looks forward to being able to help her children through the anger and guilt that she believes they will likely feel once they realize that they have been manipulated to hate their mother.

Divorce

Two-thirds of the participants had been divorced at least once (one-fourth were divorced more than once). This rate is higher than the national average and will probably be even higher as time passes because some of the participants who had not yet been married or were currently married may join the ranks of the divorced. This heightened rate of divorce is consistent with the general statistics of children of divorce (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2001) and also speaks to the relational and self-esteem issues already noted as being prevalent in this sample. Many said that their marriages failed because of their lack of trust in their partner, their inability to be intimate, as well as their problems with depression and substance abuse.

As noted above, many reported selecting for a life partner a person remarkably similar to their alienating parent. This typically meant a person who put their own needs first, lacked empathy for others, and desired an excessive degree of control over them. One woman explained how she married a man who was quite similar to her narcissistic mother. "My ex-husband is a terrible person. The world revolves around him like he is a copy of my mother almost and the funny thing is I didn't realize that until later on. Everything is about him even to the point where if I was spending time with my little boy he was getting angry because I wasn't spending that time with him." A

man who also married a woman similar to his mother, a parent who did not understand his need to have a relationship with his father explained, "When my wife and I had disagreements she always yelled at me and I was always capitulating to her because she was the woman and we could not resolve things. I couldn't seem to get my point across or get any understanding of any kind."

Other Impacts

Other effects of the parental alienation that were mentioned by a few of the participants although the themes were not as prominent as those discussed in detail above include: problems with identity and not having a sense of belonging or roots, choosing not to have children to avoid being rejected by them, low achievement, and anger and bitterness over the time lost with the alienated parent.

SUMMARY

In sum, at least six major areas of functioning were affected by the experience of parental alienation. Many of the participants suffered from low self-esteem, lack of trust in themselves and others, depression, drug-alcohol problems, alienation from their own children, and divorce. These findings are not surprising in light of the multiple traumas associated with parental alienation. Not only did the participants experience the loss of a parent but they were also forbidden to mourn that loss or share their thoughts and feelings with their primary caretaker. They were essentially encouraged to deny and/or bury whatever positive regard they had for the targeted parent, cutting off and denying a piece of themselves in the process. The ensuing negative self regard as well as the other outcomes discussed above can be viewed in that light. At the time of the interview, all of the participants were aware that they had been manipulated to turn against the targeted parent. Although that was a painful realization, it was the beginning of reclaiming the parent they lost and the part of themselves that loved and cherished that parent and that part of themselves. One participant claimed that the moment he met his father for the first time in 40 years he could feel the hole in his soul closing.

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