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Perceived Parent-Child Alienation: Empirical Assessment of Parent-Child Relationships Within Divorced and Intact Families

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ABSTRACT. Parental alienation refers to a parent's attempts to distance a child from the child's other parent. We examined (1) the effects of "feeling alienation" upon college students' recollections of their childhood relationships, (2) the effects of "feeling alienation" on perceptions of adult parent-child relationships, and (3) the likelihood of alienation in intact and divorced families. A sample of undergraduates (N = 227) completed the Relationship Distancing Questionnaire and numerous other relationship questionnaires. Results suggested feeling alienation is inversely related to the quality of parent-child relationships during childhood and young adulthood and can be found in intact as well as divorced families. Findings also indicate parental conflict is a better predictor of whether alienation occurs than parents' marital status is. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

When one parent systematically badmouths the other parent, children may be in jeopardy of experiencing a distanced, strained relationship with both parents. Gardner (1985, 1987, 1992, 1999a,b) first suggested that such alienation may harm children and coined the term Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), referring to a child's response to the parent's actions. Gardner indicated that PAS arises in families in which divorced parents maintain fierce custody disputes or make false allegations of child sexual or physical abuse. In other literature, a similar term, "parental alienation," is used (e.g., Darnall, 1998), to describe a parent's words and actions that distance the other parent from his or her child. Thus, PAS focuses on the *child's behavioral responses* to a parent's actions, whereas parental alienation focuses on *parental behavior* (e.g., words, actions) toward the child and other parent. Kelly and Johnston (2001) added the term "alienated child" to address a *child's negative feelings* toward a rejected parent. Our study aimed to describe the behavioral and affective influences one's memory of alienation has on parent-child relationships, both during childhood and when children become young adults, and to describe the contexts in which alienation occurs.

Unlike the clinical scenarios described within the literature (e.g., Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Gardner, 1987, 1999a; Rand, 1997), we are interested in an individual's perceptions and feelings that one parent (aligned parent) consciously or unconsciously strained the parent-child relationship with the other parent (rejected parent). Thus, we examined the perceived relationship quality a child experiences as a result of alienation, which we termed "feeling parent-child alienation." In our view, this quality refers to the continuum of feelings a child has related to parental attempts to distance a child from the other parent, by words or deeds. It also includes any of the child's own attempts to participate in the alienation process.

Influence of "Feeling Parent-Child Alienation" on Memory of Childhood Relationships

The literature indicates that while alienation is occurring, children exemplify poor adjustment, "obsessive hatred" of the alienated parent,

and grief and loss akin to the death of a parent (Cartwright, 1993; Faller, 1998; Gardner, 1992; Kelly, 2000). Children who feel alienated from one parent also show extreme anger and/or fear toward the alienated parent (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). While children experience these effects, parents are experiencing others; the alienating adult experiences the immediate thrill of sweet revenge, while the alienated parent struggles with the loss of a previous relationship with the child (Cartwright, 1993). To expand on this earlier work, we examined whether high levels of “feeling parent-child alienation” induced by one parent are connected to perceptions of less positive childhood relationships with the parent who was rejected. Thus, the first aim of this study was to explore the quality of parent-child relationships based on one’s perception of parent-child alienation.

Effects of “Feeling Parent-Child Alienation” on the Parent-Adult Child Relationship

Although little has been documented with respect to its future effects, it is thought that parent-child alienation must have some long-term effect on a child, especially with respect to the parent-child relationship (Gardner, 1999a; Cartwright, 1993; Siegel & Langford, 1998). Children who have lost contact with one parent after a divorce have more interpersonal relationship difficulties and lower self-esteem (Billar, 1993; Hetherington, 1972). Thus, the passage of time may not always heal the wounds (Cartwright, 1993); on the contrary, time may worsen the effects of alienation. As time passes, the alienating parent has more opportunity to conduct the alienation and the child can become accustomed to the denigration of the alienated parent. The current study fills the void of retrospective inquiries, to which Dunne and Hedrick (1994) alluded, examining the relational influence of alienation on adults who felt parent-child alienation as children.

In the present study, we examined the connection between “feeling parent-child alienation” during the growing-up years and an individual’s report of negative adulthood relationships with the alienated parent. We also investigated the connection between “feeling parent-child alienation” and negative adulthood relationship toward the parent thought to be engaging in the distancing tactics, considered to have a “backfiring effect.” With increased cognitive capacities, someone who felt parent-child alienation as a child may recognize a parent’s alienation attempts as a means to destroy his or her relationship with the other parent. If this backfiring effect occurs, it is possible for the young

adult to deliberately distance himself or herself from the alienating parent, allowing the relationship to deteriorate. Based on this information, another aim of this study was to identify the impact feeling parent-child alienation during childhood has on parent-adult child relationships.

Effect of Conflict on Parent-Child Alienation in Divorced and Intact Families

The present study also examined the relation between “feeling parent-child alienation” and the report of conflict within the family of origin. Research indicates that it is not divorce, per se, that is the culprit for children’s post-divorce adjustment problems. Hetherington (1999) noted that if parents’ conflict continues after a divorce, it is better for children to remain in an “acrimonious, two-parent family.” However, if divorce results in the elimination or significant decrease of parental conflict, it is more advantageous to children. Thus, interparental conflict is regarded as more hurtful to children’s adjustment than parents’ divorce (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Emery, 1982; Forehand & McCombs, 1989; Hetherington, 1999).

Further, Cartwright (1993) contended alienation can arise from disagreements over child support, medical insurance coverage, visitations, and so forth. Therefore, like Hetherington’s (1999) post-divorce adjustment findings, alienation, too, may stem from conflict and not divorce. In this sense, parent-child alienation may appear in various other settings, such as continuously intact families where there may be a high-degree of parental conflict. Whether parents remain married or divorced, for those families embroiled in conflict, the quality of parent-child relationships is at stake. We sought to extend this work, as a third aim in our study, by understanding if the larger construct of “feeling parent-child alienation” would occur most often in families with high conflict, regardless of parents’ marital status.

Theoretical Foundations of Parental Alienation and the Current Study

From a theoretical standpoint, the family systems literature suggests that marital conflict can lead to a type of parent-child coalition, thus affecting children’s adjustment (Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990). According to Fauber et al., an overly close parent-child relationship is often accompanied by “parents’ psychological control mechanisms such as guilt induction” in order to keep a child in an “emotional

alliance” with the parent (p. 1112). Interestingly, this theoretical assertion parallels what authors describe regarding the onset of parental alienation. Further, Kelly and Johnston (2001) describe alienation from a systemic perspective and describe the various influences inciting a child to experience alienation. Another perspective offered by Fauber et al. (1990) is that the child’s behavioral problems distract the parents from their marital conflict. Cox, Paley, and Harter (2001), also using systems theory, support the “spill-over hypothesis” in which emotions in one relationship can spill over and affect other, related relationships. It is clear that the effects of parental conflict are not confined to the marital relationship; the impact of conflict spreads through a family, affecting the youngest members in profound ways.

While some of the central tenets of parent-child alienation appear true (e.g., the damage to the child’s relationship with the alienated parent), other facets, particularly regarding the undertones of PAS, are misguided. In fact, PAS literature is filled with assumptions, which are based on clinical observations rather than sound empirical information. The assumptions inherent in the PAS literature appear to be based on mother blaming and the medical model. For instance, Gardner (1992), in particular, rationalized why mothers, more often than fathers, incite PAS. He contended that mothers alienate children from their fathers because the courts shifted the child custody criteria from the “tender-years presumption” to the “best-interests-of-the-child presumption,” allegedly putting mothers at a disadvantage by not giving custody as often, due to the shift to a child focus. Given the assumption that mothers are the primary instigators of PAS (e.g., Cartwright, 1993; Siegel & Langford, 1998; Rand, 1997; Warshak, 2000), and the pathologizing language that describes them (e.g., Gardner, 1999a,b; Rand, 1997; Siegel & Langford, 1998), mothers are not only blamed for parent-child alienation, but are also marginalized by the prospect of mental illness.

The present study purposely deviated from mother blaming and the medical model and drew upon other theoretical approaches. A feminist approach was used to counter the gender assumptions intertwined in the existing literature. Neither mothers nor fathers were labeled as the culprits in parent-child alienation. Instead, questions were asked to ascertain the extent to which one felt alienated from one’s mother and one’s father.

In the present study, attachment theory was used as the overarching framework in which to examine the relational effects of feeling parent-child alienation. Attachment theory focuses on the affective bonds created between caregiver and child, which serve as a basis for the child’s future relationships (Colin, 1996). The quality of attachment created

during infancy leads to the construction of internal, mental models about how people interact and relationships function. These mental models, known as “working models,” are the basis for one’s underlying organization regarding how relationships function. Consequently, one’s underlying organization about how relationships function drives one’s development and affects one’s intimate and social relationships throughout life (Colin, 1996). Specifically, if one’s attachment to primary caregivers is secure, one’s future relationships have the best chance of success. In her overview of attachment research, Colin (1996) summarized the impact of early attachment, declaring it has “profound and long-lasting effects on the individual’s personality, social relationships, thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (p. 5).

The present research built upon the existing knowledge of attachment theory by including the idea that not only parental sensitivity, but also an outsider’s influence, can affect early parent-child relationships. That is, attachment theory does not explicitly predict that one parent can influence the child’s relationship to the other parent by words and deeds. However, it seems that someone’s relationship with another person can be affected when a third person communicates his or her own representations of the second person, especially when it involves an impressionable child who does not yet have the cognitive skills to form an independent opinion. Therefore, because parent-child alienation deals with primary caregivers and their role in forming an attachment with their child, attachment theory is a legitimate way to conceptualize parent-child alienation.

The three hypotheses of the present investigation, were: (1) young adults indicating high levels of “feeling parent-child alienation” report less positive childhood relationships with that parent as compared with those indicating low levels of this quality; (2) young adults who experienced high levels of “feeling parent-child alienation” while growing up, report more negative relationships with both parents during adulthood as compared with those who report the lowest levels of parent-child alienation; and (3) higher levels of “feeling parent-child alienation” occurs most often in families with high conflict, regardless of parents’ marital status.

METHODS

Participants

Participants ($N = 227$) were recruited from several applied human science courses at a large public university in the western United States.

All students, regardless of their parents' marital status, were invited to participate. Of the 382 questionnaires distributed, 227 usable surveys were returned, a return rate of nearly 60%.

For specific details of the sample, refer to Moné and Biringen (2005). The sample consisted of predominantly females, majors in a social science field, and Caucasians. For analytic purposes, due to the small number of respondents from ethnic backgrounds other than Caucasian, the ethnicity variable was grouped into two groups: Caucasian and non-Caucasian. Over half of the respondents had parents who were married to one another (labeled intact families for analyses) and slightly more than 25% had parents who were divorced. Respondents whose parents were separated, divorced, or remarried were combined into one group for analytical purposes. Participants indicating at least one parent had died were not included in the analyses.

Procedure

For detailed information about the procedures employed, see Moné and Biringen (2005). With instructor permission, the principal researcher invited students to voluntarily participate in a study, either for extra credit or to be entered into a drawing to receive a free pizza. Students were not penalized for choosing not to participate; other extra credit options were given if they did not participate. Questionnaires were distributed and collected a week later.

Measures

Relationship Distancing Questionnaire (RDQ). The RDQ was created by the authors due to the lack of an empirical assessment regarding parent-child alienation. The RDQ measures the extent to which a respondent felt alienated toward one or both parents by having respondents recall their own memories about feeling alienation and their parents' actions and words that contributed to the alienation process. The RDQ has 30 questions, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale, from 1 (Very often false) to 6 (Very often true). Participants rate the truth of each statement for "feeling parent-child alienation" toward one's mother and, separately, toward one's father while growing up.

Because alienation comprises separate, yet overlapping characteristics, factor scores as well as total alienation scores were separately computed on each of the Mother and Father sections. For this reason, the separate factor scores and the total alienation scores were used for

analyses. The RDQ contains several factors on each of the Mother and Father sections. Together, the seven factors that comprise the Mother section yielded an alpha level of 0.76 (Moné & Biringen, 2005). The six factors comprising the Father section, taken together, reached an alpha level of 0.79 (Moné & Biringen). Excellent test-retest reliability was achieved: the mother total alienation score reached 0.94 and the father total alienation score was 0.88 (Moné & Biringen). Convergent validity with other measures showed the RDQ to be a valid assessment of feelings of parent-child alienation. For a thorough description of the RDQ, a review of its creation and validation is given by Moné and Biringen (2005).

Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC). The CPIC (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) was included in order to assess parents' level of conflict. It contains 48 questions about parent behavior, which participants answer on a 3-point format: true, sort of true, or false. As designed, the scale assesses dimensions of Conflict Properties, Perceived Threat, and Self-Blame. Only the Conflict Properties scale was used in this research. The Conflict Properties scale contains items relating to respondents' perceptions of the frequency, intensity, and resolution of their parents' arguments. Although the scale was originally developed for young children, it has been validated for use with college students. In using the CPIC with a sample of college students, Bickham and Fiese (1997) reported a coefficient alphas reaching to 0.95 for Conflict Properties. Over a two-week timeframe, test-retest reliability for the Conflict Properties scale also reached 0.95. Furthermore, Bickham and Fiese obtained nearly an identical factor structure to the original and concluded that the CPIC is a reliable and valid measure that can be used by college students.

To retain consistency, permission was granted to slightly alter the directions. The change directed participants to respond with respect to the conflicts between their mother and father, rather than a parent's current spouse or partner.

Mother-Father Peer Scale (MFP Scale). The MFP Scale (Epstein, 1983), a self-report questionnaire with 56 Likert-type questions, assesses childhood memories of parental encouragement of independence/overprotection, parental acceptance/rejection, and one's parent idealization. The three scales were intercorrelated 0.36 to 0.53 and scores on the three scales were created separately for mothers and fathers. The MFP Scale was included in order to assess respondents' recollections of their relationships with their parents. For the purposes of hypothesis testing, analyses were conducted using the acceptance/rejection scale and ideal-

ization scales because they best represented quality of parent-child relationships for the purposes of this study. The MFP Scale was appropriate to use with the population of the present study because it was normed on a population of male and female college students, wherein the test-retest reliability was found to range from 0.88 to 0.93. Further, reports indicate it has reasonable external validity (Biringen, 1990). The MFP Scale has been found to correlate highly with the Baron's Ego Strength Inventory, Ego Strength Scale, Eysenck's Neuroticism/Extraversion, Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Survey, Primary Emotions and Traits Inventory, and the Self-Esteem Inventory (Biringen, 1990).

To remain consistent throughout the questionnaires, permission was granted to slightly alter the directions. For the MFP Scale, the words "or mother [father] substitute" were removed, so that respondents answered the statements using recollections of their mothers and fathers, rather than other parental figures.

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA). The IPPA (Armsden, 1986; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) is a self-report instrument measuring the affective and cognitive dimensions of adolescents' current relationships with their parents and peers. The IPPA was included in order to assess the quality of respondents' current relationship with their parents. The 25 items for each of the mother, father, and peer sections on the revised version are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (Almost never or Never true) to 5 (Almost always or Always true). The IPPA contains three scales as well as a total attachment score; for the hypothesis testing only the total attachment score and alienation scale were used and only Mother and Father sections were scored. The alienation scale assesses the extent of anger and alienation between the respondent and the mother or father. The measure has been normed on participants ranging in age from 16 to 20. For a group aged 18-20 years, the inventory yields high test-retest reliability scores of 0.93 for parent attachment. Internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) scores for the revised version are 0.87 for Mother attachment and 0.89 for father attachment. With respect to validity, the IPPA has moderate to high associations with other measures of family relationship scales. According to Armsden and Greenberg (1987), scores from the measure have been closely related to the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and many of the Family Environmental Scale scales. Scores on the IPPA are also related to life-satisfaction and state of emotion. Furthermore, higher scores on parental attachment scales indicate lower levels of loneliness and lower amounts of conflict between parents. The scale also discriminates between delinquent and nondelinquent adolescents (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).

Like the other questionnaires, permission was granted to slightly alter the directions of the IPPA. Words relating to a caregiver or step-parent were omitted so that participants answered the questionnaire regarding their relationships only with their mothers and fathers.

RESULTS

As the validation of the RDQ (Moné & Biringen, 2005) yielded stronger empirical factors than those suggested in the PAS literature, to test the hypotheses, analyses were conducted using RDQ total scores and empirically driven factor scores.

To test whether any of the background variables were significantly related to any of the measures used within this study, all background variables were correlated with the scores from each measure. When significant correlations occurred, the background variables were used as covariates and were entered as a block in the first step of a hierarchical multiple regression (HMR) in order to eliminate confounding effects. There were five background variables, including participant age, ethnicity, level of father's education, number of years since parents' divorce, and age at parents' divorce, that were significantly correlated to the measures used in this study; together, they were entered as the first block of covariates within each HMR analysis (see Tables 1-7).

After the block of background variables was entered into the HMR, a second step, using the variable family type, was entered. As a third step, a block of the RDQ total score and selected factors were entered. For instance, for the Mother section, the first five factors were included (see Tables 1, 3, and 5) and for the Father section, the first four factors were included (see Tables 2, 4, and 6). A different number of Mother and Father factors were included because the factors did not match up well and we wanted to include as many similar factors as possible. All factors were not included in order to reduce the number of variables in the analysis.

Hypothesis 1: Respondents indicating high levels of "feeling parent-child alienation" toward one parent report less positive childhood relationships with that parent as compared with those indicating low levels of this quality

"Feeling parent-child alienation" toward mother and recollections of the mother-child relationship during childhood. Table 1 displays the

blocks of variables entered and the results of the HMR for the mother-related scores. A significant 8% of the variance (ΔR^2) in MFP mother acceptance versus rejection is accounted for by the background variables ($\Delta F(5, 186) = 3.08, p < 0.05$). One background variable, years since parents' divorce, was a significant contributor. Interestingly, the more years that had passed since parents' divorce, the less one recalled the mother as accepting.

The RDQ variables, entered as the third block, explained 55% of the total variance (ΔR^2) in MFP acceptance versus rejection ($\Delta F(6, 179) = 45.31, p < 0.001$). Three mother RDQ factors, *Negativity Without Guilt*, *Complaints and Avoidance*, and *Rejection* were significant contributors. That is, higher scores for these three factors were associated with recollections of MFP mother rejection.

Similar to the results for the MFP acceptance versus rejection score, a significant 7% of the variance (ΔR^2) in MFP mother idealization is accounted for by the background variables ($\Delta F(5, 181) = 2.82, p < 0.05$).

TABLE 1. HMR for Mother Scores and Past Mother-Child Relationship

	MFP Acceptance versus Rejection		MFP Parent Idealization	
	β	t	β	t
Block 1				
Participant age	-0.09	-1.09	-0.13	-1.67
Ethnicity	0.01	0.19	0.02	0.30
Father's education	-0.10	-1.37	-0.09	-1.28
Years since parents' divorce	-0.18	-2.20*	-0.05	-0.58
Age at parents' divorce	-0.09	-1.20	-0.19	-2.43*
Block 2				
Family type	-0.32	-1.25	-0.33	-1.26
Block 3				
RDQ mother total	0.09	0.94	0.16	1.53
Negativity without guilt	-0.23	-2.10*	-0.18	-1.45
Complaints and avoidance	-0.31	-2.45*	-0.45	-3.17**
Rejection	-0.33	-2.72**	-0.19	-1.40
Other's influence	-0.07	-1.30	-0.15	-2.69**
Father's badmouthing of mother	-0.02	-0.30	0.03	0.47

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Only the background variable age at parents' divorce was a significant contributor. In other words, the older one was when parents divorced, the less he or she recalled idealizing the mother.

Together, the RDQ variables explained 48% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the MFP mother idealization score ($\Delta F(6, 174) = 31.17, p < 0.001$). Two of the mother RDQ factors, *Complaints and Avoidance* and *Other's Influence*, were significant predictors. Higher scores for these factors were associated with recollections of lower mother idealization during childhood.

Taken together, the above results indicate higher feelings of parent-child alienation toward one's mother are associated with poorer parent-child relationship quality during one's childhood.

"Feeling parent-child alienation" toward father and recollections of the father-child relationship during childhood. In relation to the MFP father acceptance versus rejection score, a significant 19% of the variance (ΔR^2) in MFP father acceptance versus rejection was accounted for by the background variables ($\Delta F(5, 183) = 8.37, p < 0.001$). As shown in Table 2, three background variables, ethnicity, years since parents' divorce, and age at parents' divorce were significant contributors. With respect to ethnicity, non-Caucasian participants were more likely to recall their father as rejecting. With respect to years since parents' divorce, the more years that passed since the divorce, the more fathers were perceived as rejecting. Similarly, the older one was when parents divorced, the more likely one's father was viewed as rejecting.

Together, the RDQ father variables explained 41% of the total variance (ΔR^2) in MFP father acceptance versus rejection ($\Delta F(5, 177) = 36.50, p < 0.001$). Two of the father RDQ factors, *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt* and *Rejection*, were significant contributors. That is, higher scores for these two factors were related to recollections of MFP father rejection.

Turning to the MFP father idealization score, a significant 17% of the variance (ΔR^2) in MFP father idealization is accounted for by the background variables ($\Delta F(5, 180) = 7.53, p < 0.001$). Like before, the three background variables of ethnicity, years since parents' divorce, and age since parents' divorce were significant contributors to father idealization. That is, non-Caucasian participants were more likely to recall idealizing their father during childhood. In relation to number of years since parents' divorce, those whose parents divorced longer ago perceived their father with less idealization. Similarly, those who were older at the time of their parents' divorce also recalled less father idealization during childhood. These results are more intricate than those relating to mother

TABLE 2. HMR for Father Scores and Past Father-Child Relationship

	MFP Acceptance versus Rejection		MFP Parent Idealization	
	β	t	β	t
Block 1				
Participant age	0.05	0.66	0.01	0.09
Ethnicity	-0.17	-2.57*	-0.16	-2.38*
Father's education	0.11	1.68	0.04	0.58
Years since parents' divorce	-0.22	-2.67**	-0.27	-3.11**
Age at parents' divorce	-0.24	-3.29**	-0.19	-2.64**
Block 2				
Family type	-0.23	-1.06	-0.33	-1.47
Block 3				
RDQ father total	0.07	0.55	0.36	2.66**
Avoidance and negativity without guilt	-0.39	-2.68**	-0.79	-5.05***
Rejection	-0.50	-3.76***	-0.18	-1.28
Other's influence	-0.01	-0.23	-0.15	-2.39*
Mother's badmouthing of father	0.15	1.92	0.09	1.16

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

idealization; however, although the variable years since parents' divorce was not a significant predictor for mother idealization, the t -value indicates years since parents' divorce and mother idealization were inversely related, just as was found for father idealization. It is unclear why ethnicity was significant and inversely related to father idealization but not significant and positively related to mother idealization.

The RDQ father variables predicted 36% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the MFP father idealization score ($\Delta F(5, 174) = 27.50, p < 0.001$). Three of the entered father variables were significant predictors; these were the RDQ father total score, *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt*, and *Other's Influence*. Interestingly, the higher the total father alienation score, the more fathers were idealized. On the other hand, the more one felt *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt*, the less he or she recalled idealizing the father in childhood. Further, the higher the score on *Other's Influence*, the less the father was idealized.

In general, the aforementioned results signify higher feelings of parent-child alienation toward one's father were related to perceptions of

poorer father-child relationship quality during one's childhood. Moreover, the high percentage of variance predicted by the RDQ scores suggest that the RDQ total and factor scores do a good job at predicting parent-child relationship during one's childhood. Taken in conjunction with the results for the mother scores, findings support the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Young adults who experienced high levels of "feeling parent-child alienation" while growing up, report more negative relationships with both parents during adulthood as compared with those who report the lowest levels of parent-child alienation

"Feeling parent-child alienation" toward mother and views of the mother-child relationship during adulthood. The same background variables and RDQ scores were entered into an HMR to determine the contributors to current parent-child relationship quality. Table 3 presents findings of the HMR for mother scores on the IPPA.

On the IPPA mother attachment score, the only significant set of predictors were the RDQ scores. Together, the RDQ scores explained 55% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the IPPA mother attachment score ($\Delta F(6, 172) = 39.51, p < 0.001$). The first three mother factors, *Negativity Without Guilt*, *Complaints and Avoidance*, and *Rejection*, contribute significantly. For all three factors, higher scores indicate lower scores for the IPPA mother attachment. That is, the higher one scored on the factors *Negativity Without Guilt*, *Complaints and Avoidance*, and *Rejection*, the lower he or she is rated on the current attachment to the mother.

For the IPPA mother alienation score, the only significant set of predictors were the RDQ scores. The RDQ mother scores accounted for 46% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the IPPA mother alienation score ($\Delta F(6, 177) = 26.98, p < 0.001$). Only the *Complaints and Avoidance* factor was a significant predictor. Higher scores for *Complaints and Avoidance* of mother were positively associated with the IPPA mother alienation score.

Collectively, the above findings suggest that the more one "feels parent-child alienation" toward one's mother, the poorer are the perceptions of parent-child relationship quality during adulthood.

"Feeling parent-child alienation" toward father and views of the father-child relationship during adulthood. Table 4 shows results of the HMR for father scores on the IPPA. For the IPPA father attachment score, 23% of the variance (ΔR^2) father attachment score was explained by the background variables ($\Delta F(5, 179) = 10.83, p < 0.001$). All of the variables except for participant age were significant contributors. For

TABLE 3. HMR for Mother Scores and Current Mother-Child Relationship

	IPPA Attachment		IPPA Alienation	
	β	t	β	t
Block 1				
Participant age	-0.11	-1.33	0.11	1.39
Ethnicity	0.00	0.05	-0.05	-0.66
Father's education	-0.03	-0.39	0.02	0.29
Years since parents' divorce	-0.08	-0.94	0.04	0.43
Age at parents' divorce	-0.13	-1.66	0.12	1.57
Block 2				
Family type	-0.20	-0.75	-0.01	-0.06
Block 3				
RDQ mother total	0.08	0.82	0.04	0.36
Negativity without guilt	-0.32	-2.57*	0.10	0.77
Complaints and avoidance	-0.26	-1.95*	0.34	2.25*
Rejection	-0.29	-2.23*	0.25	1.75
Other's influence	-0.06	-1.17	0.08	1.32
Father's badmouthing of mother	0.01	0.19	0.03	0.35

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

level of father's education, higher father education was related to higher scores on the IPPA father attachment scale. For the other background variables, ethnicity, years since parent's divorce and age at parents' divorce, higher values were associated with lower values on the IPPA father attachment score. That is, non-Caucasian participants scored lower on father attachment, as did participants whose parents divorced longer ago and participants who were older at the time of their parents' divorce.

As a whole, the RDQ father scores explain 39% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the IPPA father attachment score ($\Delta F(5, 173) = 36.50, p < 0.001$). All but the third factor contributed significantly. For the factors *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt* and *Rejection*, higher scores were associated with lower scores for father attachment on the IPPA. Interestingly, for the other significantly contributing factor, *Mother's Badmouthing of Father*, higher scores were related to higher IPPA father attachment scores. This finding may imply that as a child's cognitive capacities grow, the more he or she may be aware of the deliberate badmouthing.

TABLE 4. HMR for Father Scores and Current Father-Child Relationship

	IPPA Attachment		IPPA Alienation	
	β	t	β	t
Block 1				
Participant age	0.00	-0.06	-0.05	-0.70
Ethnicity	-0.23	-3.39**	0.19	2.77**
Father's education	0.14	2.17*	-0.14	-2.09*
Years since parents' divorce	-0.29	-3.75***	0.30	3.83***
Age at parents' divorce	-0.15	-2.12*	0.14	1.97*
Block 2				
Family type	0.02	0.07	0.17	0.70
Block 3				
RDQ Father total	0.12	0.99	0.00	0.00
Avoidance and negativity without guilt	-0.58	-4.02***	0.40	2.55*
Rejection	-0.33	-2.37*	0.35	2.39*
Other's Influence	-0.06	-1.15	0.04	0.59
Mother's Badmouthing of Father	0.15	2.04*	-0.11	-1.36

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

In turn, this young adult may put more effort into regaining a positive relationship with the father.

For the IPPA father alienation score, the background variables explained 20% of the variance (ΔR^2) ($\Delta F(5, 182) = 9.07, p < 0.001$). Excluding participant's age, all the background variables were significant contributors. Father's education level was negatively related to the IPPA father alienation score, indicating the higher a father's education, the less one felt alienated toward him. However, the other background variables were positively correlated with father alienation scores.

The RDQ father variables accounted for 36% of the variance (ΔR^2) of the IPPA father alienation score ($\Delta F(5, 176) = 28.43, p < 0.001$). Two factors were significant contributors; higher scores for *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt* and *Rejection* were associated with higher scores for IPPA father alienation.

On the whole, the results above imply that higher "feeling parent-child alienation" toward one's father is related to perceptions of poorer parent-child relationship quality during adulthood. The finding that

Mother's Badmouthing of Father is related to higher father attachment scores may shed light on the cognitive impressions young adults make about their parents' behavior. This may suggest that if alienation toward one's father can be connected to a mother's badmouthing, then the father-child relationship may improve as the child becomes a young adult.

"*Feeling parent-child alienation*" toward mother and views of the father-child relationship during adulthood. Table 5 displays the findings of the HMR for parent-child alienation felt towards a mother and father-child relationship as portrayed using the IPPA scale scores. Essentially, this HMR analysis measured the "backfire effect" on the father-child relationship as a result of his attempts to induce parent-child alienation for the mother.

Turning to the IPPA father attachment score, a significant 23% of the variance (ΔR^2) was explained by the background variables ($\Delta F(5, 181) = 10.98, p < 0.001$). All of the background variables except for participant age were significant predictors. For the variable level of father's education, higher levels of father education were associated with higher ratings for IPPA father attachment, indicating a current positive father-child relationship. For the other background variables, higher values were connected with lower IPPA father attachment scores.

The RDQ scores explain 10% of the variance (ΔR^2) for IPPA father attachment ($\Delta F(6, 174) = 4.43, p < 0.001$). Two mother factors, *Negativity Without Guilt* and *Father's Badmouthing of Mother*, contributed significantly. For both of these factors, higher scores indicate lower scores on the IPPA father attachment scale.

For the IPPA father alienation score, the background variables contributed 20% of the variance (ΔR^2) ($\Delta F(5, 184) = 9.27, p < 0.001$). All of the background variables except for participant age significantly contributed. For the variable level of father's education, higher education level was related to lower IPPA father alienation scores. For the other variables, higher values were associated with higher levels of father alienation.

The RDQ mother scores accounted for 10% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the IPPA father alienation score ($\Delta F(6, 177) = 4.18, p = 0.001$). The same two factors that were significant predictors in the other analyses in this section were significant predictors here as well. Higher scores for *Negativity Without Guilt* and *Father's Badmouthing of Mother* were associated with a higher IPPA father alienation score.

The above findings generally suggest that a father whose child remembers "feeling parent-child alienation" toward a mother can suffer poorer quality father-child relationships as his child becomes a young

TABLE 5. HMR for Mother Scores and Current Father-Child Relationship

	IPPA Attachment		IPPA Alienation	
	β	t	β	t
Block 1				
Participant age	0.00	-0.06	-0.05	-0.69
Ethnicity	-0.23	-3.44**	0.19	2.80**
Father's education	0.14	2.12*	-0.14	-2.04*
Years since parents' divorce	-0.29	-3.80***	0.30	3.85***
Age at parents' divorce	-0.15	-2.17*	0.15	2.11*
Block 2				
Family type	0.02	0.08	0.18	0.74
Block 3				
RDQ mother total	0.15	1.10	-0.08	-0.59
Negativity without guilt	-0.44	-2.92**	0.30	2.01*
Complaints and avoidance	0.28	1.61	-0.23	-1.34
Rejection	-0.06	-0.35	0.10	0.57
Other's influence	-0.08	-1.12	0.08	1.08
Father's badmouthing of mother	-0.31	-3.34**	0.29	3.12**

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

adult. This lends support for part of the second hypothesis, indicating that fathers who make negative remarks and whose children feel alienated from their mothers experience a "backfire effect"; thus, more than just the alienated parent-child relationship suffers as a result of parent-child alienation.

"Feeling parent-child alienation" toward father and views of the mother-child relationship during adulthood. Table 6 displays the results of the HMR for mother-child relationship scores on the IPPA scale scores with respect to RDQ father scores. Like the previous subsection, the HMR analyses described here were completed in order to identify if parent-child alienation creates a backfire effect on parent-child relationships.

Again, for the IPPA mother attachment score, the RDQ father scores were the only significant contributors. The RDQ father scores explain 29% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the IPPA mother attachment score ($\Delta F(5,173) = 15.46, p < 0.001$). All but the third factor contributed significantly. For the factors *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt* and *Mother's Badmouthing of Father*, higher scores were associated with

TABLE 6. HMR for Father Scores and Current Mother-Child Relationship

	IPPA Attachment		IPPA Alienation	
	β	t	β	t
Block 1				
Participant age	-0.08	-0.92	0.07	0.80
Ethnicity	0.00	-0.02	-0.04	-0.54
Father's education	-0.02	-0.33	0.01	0.17
Years since parents' divorce	-0.08	-0.83	0.03	0.32
Age at parents' divorce	-0.12	-1.58	0.09	1.18
Block 2				
Family type	-0.29	-1.22	0.14	0.60
Block 3				
RDQ father total	0.45	2.68**	-0.32	-1.82
Avoidance and negativity without guilt	-1.26	-6.30***	1.07	5.32***
Rejection	0.97	5.44***	-0.84	-4.63***
Other's influence	-0.11	-1.47	0.15	1.88
Mother's badmouthing of father	-0.66	-6.64***	0.60	5.94***

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

lower scores for mother attachment on the IPPA. Interestingly, for the RDQ father total and for the father factor of *Rejection*, higher scores were related to higher IPPA mother attachment scores.

For the IPPA mother alienation score, the only significant predictors were the RDQ father scores. The RDQ father variables explained 28% of the variance (ΔR^2) of the IPPA mother alienation score ($\Delta F(5, 177) = 14.17, p < 0.001$). Three factors were significant contributors. Higher scores for *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt* and *Mother's Badmouthing of Father* were associated with higher scores for IPPA mother alienation. However, the father factor of *Rejection* was negatively associated with mother alienation, suggesting the more rejection one felt toward one's father due to the mother's parental alienation attempts, the more he or she became alienated from the mother as a young adult. This gives credence to the backfire effect.

On the whole, some of the results above, particularly those involving the factor *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt*, imply that "feeling parent-child alienation" toward one's father as a child is related to poorer mother-child relationship quality during adulthood. These find-

ings support the idea of a backfire effect. However, the RDQ total scores and *Rejection* factor scores that correlated with a positive current mother-child relationship were unexpected. In light of the other results in this subsection, this finding is confusing. It may just be that parent-child alienation aspects of *Avoidance and Negativity Without Guilt* and *Mother's Badmouthing of Father* lead to some level of a backfiring effect, but that the RDQ father total and *Rejection* of one's father during childhood do not negatively affect the current mother-child relationship. Thus, these findings lend some support for the idea of a backfire effect and lend further support to the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3: Higher levels of "feeling parent-child alienation" occurs most often in families with high conflict, regardless of parents' marital status

As with the analyses completed for the other two hypotheses, variables were entered as blocks into the HMR; however, the variables entered differed somewhat from the first two hypotheses. The five background variables of participant age, ethnicity, level of father's education, number of years since parents' divorce, and age at parents' divorce, that were used before were again entered as the first block in the HMR. Two dummy variables (TF1, TF2) were created to explain the effect of family type among intact, divorced, and remarried families. TF1 compared intact family type with divorced and remarried family types. TF2 compared divorced family type with intact and remarried family types. These dummy variables were entered as a second block. The variable CPIC Conflict Properties was entered alone as the third block. The Conflict Properties scale of the CPIC was used because it tapped into parents' frequency, intensity, and resolution of conflict, whereas the other scales measured respondents' attributions about parents' conflict. As a fourth block, the two dummy variables relating to family type were crossed with the Conflict Properties variable. Separately, RDQ mother and father total scores were entered as the dependent variable. Only RDQ total scores were calculated because effect of family type and conflict on one's overall sense of feeling parent-child alienation was of interest.

Table 7 reports findings of the HMR for family type and CPIC Conflict Properties score with respect to the RDQ total scores. With respect to the influence of family type and parental conflict on "feeling parent-child alienation" toward mothers, the background variables accounted for a significant 12% of the total variance (ΔR^2) in the RDQ mother total score ($\Delta F(5, 179) = 5.08, p < 0.001$). Only two background variables,

TABLE 7. HMR for RDQ Total Scores Due to Family Type and Conflict

	RDQ Mother Total		RDQ Father Total	
	β	t	β	t
Block 1				
Participant age	0.05	0.64	-0.01	-0.11
Ethnicity	-0.02	-0.28	0.17	2.60*
Father's education	0.05	0.69	-0.02	-0.27
Years since parents' divorce	0.17	2.00*	0.35	4.55***
Age at parents' divorce	0.24	3.20**	0.27	4.00***
Block 2				
TF1	-0.29	-0.76	0.10	0.30
TF2	-0.04	-0.47	-0.10	-1.28
Block 3				
CPIC Conflict Properties	0.42	5.72***	0.46	7.15***
Block 4				
TF1* Conflict Properties	-0.24	-1.61	-0.15	-1.15
TF2 * Conflict Properties	-0.35	-1.67	-0.18	-0.95

TF1 = intact compared to divorced and remarried family type.

TF2 = divorced compared to intact and remarried family type.

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level.

years since parents' divorce and age at parents' divorce, significantly contributed to the prediction. The more time that had passed since the parents' divorce, the higher was the RDQ mother total score. Also, higher age at parents' divorce is associated with higher RDQ mother total scores.

Family type made no significant contribution to the prediction of RDQ mother total score.

In contrast, CPIC Conflict Properties score explained a significant 13% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the RDQ mother total score ($\Delta F(1, 176) = 32.73, p < 0.001$). Higher scores on the CPIC Conflict Properties scale were related to RDQ mother total scores such that higher conflict scores were correlated with higher RDQ mother total scores. That is, even after family type was entered, conflict continued to significantly predict parent-child alienation.

The interaction of family type and parental conflict did not contribute to the total prediction of RDQ mother total score. Thus, it is conflict

rather than divorce per se, which predicts “feeling parent-child alienation” towards mothers.

Turning to the influence of family type and parental conflict on parent-child alienation felt toward fathers, the same pattern appeared. Background variables predicted 28% of the total variance (ΔR^2) in the RDQ Father total score ($\Delta F(5, 177) = 13.93, p < 0.001$). Background variables of ethnicity, years since parents’ divorce, and age at parents’ divorce were all significant contributors. Non-Caucasian respondents reported higher RDQ father total scores. In relation to years since parents’ divorce, the more time that passed, the higher the RDQ father total score. Similarly, the older one was at the time of divorce, the higher the RDQ father score.

Family type did not significantly predict RDQ father total score.

However, CPIC Conflict Properties score predicted 16% of the variance (ΔR^2) in the RDQ father total score ($\Delta F(1, 174) = 51.23, p < 0.001$). This means that higher CPIC Conflict Properties scores were associated with higher RDQ father total scores.

Finally, the interaction of family type and parental conflict did not significantly contribute to the prediction of RDQ father total score.

These findings imply that after controlling for background variables and even family type, conflict continues to predict “feeling parent-child alienation.” Because conflict and not family type predicted some of the variance in total parent-child alienation scores, it is likely that parent-child alienation occurs in intact as well as divorced families. Moreover, the fact that conflict was a predictor of parent-child alienation, rather than family type, supports previous research that continuous parental conflict is more important than whether parents remain married or not. Thus, these results lend credence to the third hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

The results of this inquiry imply several things. First, the findings indicate lower quality of parent-child relationships during childhood is associated with higher “feelings of parent-child alienation.” In particular, results show that the more parent-child alienation in one’s childhood one recalled, the more he or she also recalled a poor relationship with that (alienating) parent. Interestingly, “feeling parent-child alienation” toward a parent is significantly related to recollections of that parent being reciprocally rejecting. Although this study is not longitudinal and one needs to refrain from cause-effect reasoning, it may be that

the more one feels alienated from a parent, the more he or she views the parent as rejecting and distancing.

Moreover, acknowledging Siegel and Langford's (1998) and Cartwright's (1993) concern as to the impact of parent-child alienation on one's future relationships, the current research indicates a linkage between "feeling parent-child alienation," as assessed in this study, and reports about the state of the current parent-adult child relationship. Thus, one's perception of "feeling parent-child alienation" in the family of origin is associated with feeling the relationship with one's parents as an adult is compromised. Although we would refrain from cause-effect linkages in this cross-sectional study, it may be that as young adults remember their childhoods as being fraught with alienation attempts, they devalue their extant relationships with their parents. Thus, there is qualified support for Cartwright's suggestion that time does not heal all wounds.

With respect to the backfiring effect, one's sense of "feeling parent-child alienation" towards the mother is associated with a poorer quality of feelings about the father-child relationship in the long run. This supports the idea that when an individual feels one's father is inducing alienation from one's mother, there may be a backfiring effect such that the father is also viewed in a negative light. In contrast, slightly mixed findings occur in connection with "feeling parent-child alienation" induced by the mother. Despite this gender difference, it is ironic that "feeling parent-child alienation" in the family of origin may eventually hurt the parent-child relationship that was never meant to be affected.

Another implication of the present results is that "feeling parent-child alienation" exists in both divorced and intact families, and that conflict is a better predictor of this quality than marital status, in line with prior work (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Hetherington, 1999). This finding highlights the corrosive influence of not only conflict in the family, but also badmouthing of the other parent by both married and divorced parents. Based on this finding therapists and social service personnel should work to untangle family triangulation and to educate the parents about the negative impacts badmouthing can have on present and future parent-child relationships.

Some caution is necessary regarding the interpretation of these findings. For instance, some aspects of parent-child alienation are difficult to assess due to this study's focus on adult child's retrospective reports and the use of only self-report measures; it may be better to utilize multiple informants to get various viewpoints. Thus, although this research

does indicate the participants' own perceptions and feelings about alienated parents and the relationships with them, it is not able to indicate which families actually engaged in parent-child alienation or child alienation. Short of longitudinal observations, one cannot make claims about what actually transpired in the family of origin. Therefore, we have framed these findings in terms of feelings of parent-child alienation rather than linked directly to parental alienation, PAS, or to child abuse. Furthermore, our finding that feeling alienated can occur in intact as well as in divorced families has merit; however more studies should be carried out to understand whether intact families can weather more severe feelings of parent-child alienation than divorced families, in line with findings that high conflict in families who do not separate is less harmful to children than if high conflict was present before and remained after a divorce (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Hetherington, 1999).

Additional caution is needed when interpreting the findings because the accessible sample was not completely representative of the desired generalized population, as the participants were college students, mainly females, and not an ethnically diverse sample. First, because only approximately 30-40% of the young adult population attends college, undergraduates may be a breed apart from the portion of the population that does not attend educational instruction beyond high school. This difference between college students and non-college students may have affected the findings. Second, the results may be slightly skewed due to the lack of males available in Human Development and Family Studies courses. Third, results may not adequately represent the intricacies of "feeling parent-child alienation" within minority populations because the sample did not include equal proportions of ethnic minorities to the population at large.

Finally, caution must be exercised when identifying the level of "feeling parent-child alienation." The "high" RDQ total scores were not nearly as high as the maximum level on this assessment. The highest score of 125 does not come close to the maximum of 162. Perhaps the range of responses indicates what Kelly and Johnston (2001) referred to as the continuum of children's experiences with each parent. More research is needed in order to gather further information regarding the effects of the extreme on this quality as opposed to the "high" levels reported herein. However, with even more extreme levels of "feeling parent-child alienation" as measured by the RDQ, it is unlikely that parent-child relationships would be better in quality than those found in this research. Perhaps further inquiry will also be able to empirically generate

some distinct delineations between low, moderate, and severe on this quality.

Despite these caveats, the current investigation is the first published account on this topic. Future research with varied ages and diverse population as well as potential interviews and/or observations will add to this initial information on “feeling parent-child alienation.”

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