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Adult Recall of Parental Alienation in a Community Sample: Prevalence and Associations With Psychological Maltreatment

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Two hundred fifty-three adults working in a New York child welfare agency agreed to complete anonymous research packets containing, among other measures, 6 existing scales of psychological maltreatment and a single item about exposure to parental alienation as a child. Results revealed that one fourth of the full sample reported some exposure to parental alienation, which itself was associated with greater likelihood of reporting psychological maltreatment. These data document just how widespread parental alienation may be, as well as the likelihood that those exposed to it will experience themselves as having been psychologically maltreated. Implications of these findings are presented in terms of public awareness, education for divorcing families and their children, and professional training for the mental health and legal professionals working with them.

KEYWORDS *parental alienation, psychological maltreatment, adult recall*

Parental alienation, defined as the efforts on the part of one parent to foster a child's rejection of the other parent, is a long-standing yet understudied problem. Nonetheless, theory, research, and practice converge to support two related beliefs: (a) some parents exhibit alienation tactics designed to create an alliance with the child against the other parent, and (b) when parents exhibit parental alienation behaviors they are committing a form of psychological maltreatment. The purpose of this study was to further the knowledge

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base regarding both of these precepts by documenting the extent of childhood exposure to parental alienation strategies as reported by adults and to assess its association with standardized measures of childhood psychological maltreatment.

PARENTAL ALIENATION STRATEGIES

The combined knowledge accumulated from family systems theorists, observations of custody evaluators, and results of empirical studies suggests that parental alienation strategies are probably quite common and may be exhibited by the majority of divorcing parents.

Family systems theorists have long identified parent–child alignment as a significant problem in the structure and dynamics of the family—even those that are intact. In efforts to describe family processes that extend beyond the dyadic level, the idea of triangles within the family system emerged as a powerful concept. Triangulation can occur in a variety of ways, but always involves two members of the family drawing in or excluding a third family member. A common form of triangulation is cross-generational coalitions, which develop when one or both parents try to enlist the support of the child against the other parent, by confiding in the child, treating the child as a parent, or involving the child in adult disputes (Bowen, 1966; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Minuchin, 1974).

Although Minuchin, Bowen, and others did not utilize the term parental alienation, their observations are remarkably consistent with those who do, including custody evaluators working with divorcing parenting. This extensive literature has provided a wealth of observations regarding parental alienation, its variations, and likely outcomes. For example, Darnall (1998) contended that the vast majority of divorcing parents can be considered to function at a minimum as “naive” alienators, periodically exhibiting one or more parental alienation behaviors. Less common but more damaging are the “active” and “obsessed” alienating parents who more intentionally and strategically exhibit parental alienation efforts. Custody evaluators Warshak (2001) and Sauber (2006) have also both extensively referenced this problem. Even evaluators who prefer Johnston’s reformulation of the “alienated child” (Kelly & Johnston, 2001) take as a given that some parents engage in behaviors that try to and may succeed at damaging the child’s relationship with the other parent (e.g., Stahl, 2003; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001).

Empirical investigations, as well, have documented this problem. For example, Clawar and Rivlin (1991), after examining 700 divorce cases, concluded that there was some element of parental programming of false or negative ideas about the other parent in about 80% of the cases. Likewise, Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, and Raymond (2002) found that 85% of adolescents with divorced parents reported that their mother made comments to them

that indicated flaws in and anger toward the father, with 40% of the adolescents saying that this happened in a way that revealed “quite a bit of detail” regarding the complaint. No comparable data were reported about the extent to which adolescents believed that their fathers engaged in the same activity.

Retrospective qualitative data from Baker (2007) also provide evidence of the presence of parental alienation strategies in some families. In that study responses to interviews were analyzed for 40 adults who described themselves as having the childhood experience of being turned against one parent by the other parent. Because the interviewees had a realization of this event, they were able to reflect on the experience and shed light on the processes that allowed them to become manipulated to reject one parent in the absence of abuse or neglect. They identified many parental alienation strategies that were employed in service of the alienation, 12 of which were mentioned by at least one fifth of the sample: general bad-mouthing of the targeted parent, limiting contact between the child and the targeted parent, withdrawing love and becoming angry with the child when the child exhibited a positive attitude toward the targeted parent, telling the child that the targeted parent does not love him or her, forcing the child to choose between parents, bad-mouthing the targeted parent with the specific aim of creating the impression that that parent is dangerous, confiding in the child about adult matters related to the marriage and family finances, limiting mention and photographs of the targeted parent, forcing the child to reject the targeted parent, limiting the child’s contact with the extended family and belittling the extended family of the targeted parent, belittling the targeted parent in front of the child, and inciting conflict between the child and the targeted parent.

A survey of self-identified targeted parents also reveals that alienation behaviors occur and that a core set of strategies are used by alienating parents (Baker & Darnall, 2006), including bad-mouthing the targeted parent, limiting the child’s contact with the targeted parent, limiting or interfering with mail and phone communication between the child and the targeted parent, limiting or interfering with symbolic communication between the child and the targeted parent (photographs, mention of), interfering with the targeted parent’s access to information about the child, emotional manipulation of the child, and creating an unhealthy alliance with the child.

Thus, theory, clinical observation, and empirical research indicate that some parents engage in a set of behaviors known as parental alienation. There is also compelling evidence that these behaviors are likely to result in negative outcomes for children. For example, cross-generational coalitions have been found to be associated with psychosomatic illness in children (Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978). A recent literature review identified triangulation as one of three elements of interparental conflict following divorce that is most harmful to children’s long-term adjustment (Grych,

2005). Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) found that adolescents who reported feeling caught between their parents (which itself was predicted by parental ratings of discord and conflict between the parents) following divorce had poorer outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and deviant behaviors. Baker (2007) proposed that a likely mechanism of this association between exposure to parental alienation and poor outcomes is psychological maltreatment.

PARENTAL ALIENATION AS PSYCHOLOGICAL MALTREATMENT

In the field of child maltreatment, different types of abuse have been delineated, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse (also referred to as psychological maltreatment). Each type is now recognized by leading clinicians and researchers in the field as having unique as well as common causes and outcomes. Although psychological maltreatment is the most recent form to gain public awareness and research attention, it is widely understood to be the core component of all other forms of abuse (Brassard, Germain, & Hart, 1987; Garbarino, Guttman, & Seeley, 1986). That is, the psychological interaction between abuser and child—even when the maltreatment itself is physical or sexual—is viewed as the most damaging aspect of the experience for the child. What the abuser says to the child and the terror and betrayal that a child experiences have as much if not more meaning and negative impact than the physical act of harm or sexual misconduct (Bingeli, Hart, & Brassard, 2001). The meaning children make of an abusive act has long-term negative consequences for their sense of themselves as safe, as belonging, as competent, and as worthy of love (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1988; Claussen & Crittenden, 1991).

There are at least three ways in which parents who exhibit parental alienation strategies can be considered as psychologically maltreating their children. First, expression of the strategies inevitably and directly results in children feeling “worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another’s needs” a commonly accepted definition of psychological maltreatment (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children [APSAC], 1995, p. 2). Thus, for example, when one parent denigrates the other parent to the child or limits contact between the child and the other parent, the parent who is doing these things directly conveys to the child negative attributions about the value and worth of the child, such as “You are only loved by me if you do what I want you to do,” or “My need for revenge is more important to me than your need to have a relationship with your other parent.” The second way that parental alienation is a form of psychological maltreatment is indirect in that children are likely to experience themselves as “worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another’s needs” when the alienation is successful

at damaging the child's relationship with the targeted parent. A child who is encouraged to reject his or her targeted parent will likely justify this behavior by concluding that the targeted parent deserves such harsh treatment and is utterly worthless (unsafe, unloving, and unavailable). In doing so, however, the child inadvertently internalizes the negative identity and concludes, "I must be a terrible child to have such a terrible parent." Thus, teaching a child to hate a parent is to teach the child to hate himself or herself. Third, parents who exhibit parental alienation strategies are likely to behave in other ways that result in the child feeling psychologically maltreated because the psychological foundation of parental alienation—lack of empathy and inability to tolerate the child's separate needs and perceptions—is also the foundation of psychological maltreatment more generally.

Parental alienation has long been considered a form of psychological maltreatment (Gardner, 1998; Rand, 1997a, 1997b), although to date there are only qualitative data to support this contention. The 40 "adult children of parental alienation" interviewed by Baker (2007) expressed the belief that being manipulated by one parent to reject the other constituted a form of abuse and their comments reflected all three possible pathways previously mentioned. Further, in that study, parental alienation strategies were described as reflective of the five behavioral manifestations of psychological maltreatment as defined by APSAC (Binggeli et al., 2001): spurning, terrorizing, isolating, corrupting or exploiting, and denying emotional responsiveness.

Spurning

Parents who spurn their child refuse to acknowledge the child's worth and the legitimacy of the child's needs, telling a child in a variety of ways that he or she is unwanted, unloved, and unworthy. Spurning is reflected in parenting that is cold, hostile, indifferent, and lacking in love and care. Expressions of these attitudes convey to the child his or her general lack of worth and acceptance.

Children exposed to parental alienation may experience spurning when the alienating parent withdraws love to punish the child for expressing positive attitudes or affection for the targeted parents. They also might experience spurning by the targeted parent when they assume false beliefs about that parent's lack of love for them. As noted earlier, the alienating parent's denigration of the targeted parent can also create a feeling of spurning in the child, who will internalize negative beliefs about the self, because the child comes in part from that rejected parent.

Terrorizing

Terrorizing occurs when parents mete out extreme punishments and create situations in which the child is likely to feel excessive fear for his or her safety

and well-being. Terrorizing is psychologically abusive because it overwhelms the child's ability to process stimulation and to protect himself or herself, especially because the person creating the fear is the same person the child would normally look to for reassurance and protection (i.e., the parent).

Alienating parents may be frightening in their own demeanor (for a child, the sudden and extreme disapproval can be terrifying) or may terrorize their children through inducing fear of the targeted parent, and through the false portrayal of that parent as dangerous and threatening. Parents who overstate and embellish minor flaws of the targeted parent can emotionally manipulate the children to experience an exaggerated and unnecessary level of fear, which can qualify as terror.

Isolating

The isolating form of psychological maltreatment entails limiting the child's participation in normal social and recreational activities, preventing the child from forming friendships, and interfering with the child's freedom to form and maintain relationships. Combined, this can result in the child experiencing a sense of being alone and adrift in the world. Isolating behaviors include not allowing the child regular contact with peers, restricting the child's participation in routine family activities, and locking the child in a room, or confining the child to a small space.

Isolation occurs when the alienating parent conditions or pressures the child to cut off relationships with the targeted parent and his or her extended family, and thus lose out on opportunities to socialize, develop a wider social and family network, and feel connected to loving people who can provide additional life opportunities for the child.

Corrupting or Exploiting

Parents who exhibit the corrupting or exploiting form of psychological maltreatment permit their children to use drugs or alcohol; to watch or participate in animal cruelty; to watch pornographic materials or adult sexual conduct; or to witness or participate in criminal activities such as stealing, assault, prostitution, gambling, and so forth. Another form of corrupting entails manipulating a child to verbally abuse, demean, or be cruel to his or her other parent.

This form of abuse was identified by both Warshak (2001) and Waldron and Joanis (1996) as particularly relevant to parental alienation. Teaching children to disrespect and demean their other parent corrupts their values and personality by encouraging them to be rude, selfish, and ungrateful. Another form of exploitation or corruption relevant to parental alienation involves confiding in children about the details of financial and legal disagreements and inciting them to be angry with the targeted parent.

This “parentification” of the child creates unrealistic expectations that the child is responsible for the parent’s happiness and well-being.

Denying Emotional Responsiveness

Parents who ignore their children’s signals and requests for affection and interaction do not show an attachment to the child or provide him or her with sufficient nurturance. They show no interest in the child and express little or no affection to the child. The parent might be physically present, but remains emotionally unavailable.

Alienating parents typically deny emotional responsiveness at least intermittently to emotionally punish the child for expressing love and affection toward the targeted parent. Alienating parents ignore their children when they associate in word or action with the targeted parent, giving them the “cold shoulder,” treating them like “the enemy” or “a traitor” when they come back from visits with the targeted parent. Parental alienation strategies can also induce in children feelings of denial of emotional responsiveness from the targeted parent. A child who rejects the targeted parent might believe that if the targeted parent really loved him or her, that parent would not have allowed himself or herself to be rejected and discarded.

In sum, according to theory and qualitative reports, parents who alienate a child from the other parent appear to be committing psychological maltreatment because the strategies used to effectuate the alienation as well as the outcome of the alienation (the loss of the relationship with the targeted parent) are likely to result in the child feeling spurned, terrorized, isolated, exploited, and denied emotional responsiveness. However, to gain confidence in these associations, they should be established with quantitative data, using standardized measures.

This article was written with this purpose in mind, and addressed two questions: (a) what proportion of a convenience sample would report experiencing parental alienation as a child, and (b) what reports of parental alienation were associated with standardized measures of psychological maltreatment.

METHOD

Sample

Full-time and part-time (at least 20 hours per week) salaried employees working in the five boroughs of New York for a large child welfare agency were included in the sample.¹ The original sample size was 589, 85 of

¹ 21 high level staff were excluded as it seemed unlikely they would participate.

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the Sample ($N = 253$)

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	47	18.9
Female	202	81.1
Marital status		
Single, never married	88	35.9
Ever married	157	64.1
Educational level		
Up to some college	62	24.9
At least 2-year college	187	75.1
Age		
20–39	108	47.2
40–59	106	46.3
60–79	15	6.5
$M = 41.46, SD = 12.20$		
No. of children		
None	71	31.4
At least 1	155	68.6

whom no longer met the inclusion criteria by the time data collection commenced in the fall of 2008. Of the remaining 504 surveys, 253 were completed, resulting in a response rate of 50%. It is likely that some of the unreturned surveys were sent to staff who did not meet the inclusion criteria although the survey itself was not returned to the research office as instructed for staff no longer at the agency (i.e., it remained in the person's inbox unopened, it was circulated to various offices, or it was thrown out, and never made its way back to the research department). Thus, it is likely that the actual response rate was somewhat higher than the known response rate reported here. See Table 1 for sample characteristics.

As can be seen, the sample was primarily female. Two thirds of the respondents were married, three fourths had at least a 2-year college education, two thirds had at least one child, and the mean age was 41 years. Although only limited data were available on those who did not respond to the survey, it was possible to ascertain that the gender distribution was comparable in the larger sample.

Measures

A survey was created as part of a larger study comparing six scales of adult recall of childhood psychological maltreatment. The survey included the original questions from five existing scales: the five-item emotional neglect scale and the five-item emotional abuse scale from the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein et al., 2003), the seven-item psychological maltreatment scale of the Child Abuse and Trauma Scale (CATS; Sanders and Becker-Lausen, 1995), the five-item psychological aggression scale of

the Conflict Tactics Survey (CTS; Strauss, 1999), and the seven-item psychological abuse scale of the Family Environment Questionnaire (FEQ; Briere & Runtz, 1988). In addition, a new measure was created derived from the five components of psychological maltreatment presented by APSAC (Binggeli et al., 2001). In addition to these 34 questions, a question was included that asked about parental alienation, worded as, “tried to turn you against your other parent—defined as: bad-mouthed the other parent, limited contact, interfered with communication, undermined his or her authority, created loyalty conflicts.”

Pilot testing of the scales revealed the necessity of creating a uniform response system. Thus, rather than utilizing the original response options for each scale, a single response system was created that contained three components: (a) a consistent time period about which the respondent should report on, in this case “growing up as a child and teenager,” (b) a consistent definition of the adults about whom the respondent should report on, in this case, “parents/parent figures (mother, stepmother, foster mother, father, stepfather, foster father, and other adults who helped raise you), and (c) a single response scale: 0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, and 4 = very often.

Procedures

The project was approved by the New York University Institutional Review Board in the summer of 2008 and the packets were mailed in early September. Respondents were provided with (a) a cover letter from the agency’s executive director, (b) a cover letter from the study investigators explaining the purpose of the project and providing necessary informed consent information, (c) a \$5 token of appreciation for considering participation, (d) the survey packet, and (e) a self-addressed internal agency return envelope. Respondents were asked to complete the packet and return it within 1 week. Several weeks later a second mailing was sent out to the complete sample (as there was no way to determine who had already completed the survey).

RESULTS

To answer the first research question, a frequency table was created of the 5-point parental alienation item, indicating the frequency with which each respondent reported one parent trying to turn him or her against the other parent. Results are presented in Table 2.

As can be seen, 180 (71.4%) responded that this never happened to them. Of the remaining 73 respondents (28.5% of the sample), 23 (9.1% of the sample) reported that this happened rarely, 26 (10.3% of the sample)

TABLE 2 Frequency Distribution of 5-Point Parental Alienation Variable ($N = 253$)

	<i>n</i>	%
0	180	71.4
1	23	9.1
2	26	10.3
3	11	4.4
4	12	4.7
$M = .62, SD = 1.1$		
Missing = 1		

TABLE 3 Associations Between Demographics and Dichotomous Parental Alienation Variable ($N = 253$)

	<i>n</i>	%	Significance
Gender			
Male	11	23.4	
Female	58	28.9	<i>ns</i>
Marital status			
Single, never married	31	35.6	
Married, remarried, divorced, widowed	38	24.2	.08
Educational level			
Up to some college	19	30.6	
At least 2-year degree	53	28.5	<i>ns</i>
Number of children			
None	22	31.4	
One or more	46	29.7	<i>ns</i>
Raised by stepparent			
Yes	12	44.4	
No	60	26.5	.047

^aNo parental alienation, M age = 42.63, $SD = 12.0$. ^bParental alienation, M age = 38.4, $SD = 12.0$.

reported that this happened sometimes, 11 (4.4% of the sample) reported that this happened often, and 12 (4.7% of the sample) reported that this happened very often.

Additional analyses were conducted to determine whether reporting of parental alienation was associated with any of the demographic variables. To do so, the parental alienation variable was recoded into a dichotomous variable as never happening (0) or ever happening (1, 2, 3, or 4). Chi-square analyses were then conducted comparing education level, marital status, age, number of children, and gender on the proportion who reported that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent. These results are presented in Table 3.

There was no association between gender and parental alienation, which was reported for 23.4% of males and 28.9% of females. Likewise there was no association with educational status or number of children.

However, there was an association with both age and marital status. Those who reported presence of parental alienation were younger ($M = 38.4$, $SD = 12.0$) than those who did not report parental alienation ($M = 42.63$, $SD = 12$), $t(226) = 2.46$, $p < .01$. In terms of marital status, there was a marginally statistically significant relationship in that those who were single or never married were more likely to report parental alienation (35.6%) than those who were married at least once (24.2%), $\chi^2(N = 1,244) = 3.61$, $p < .08$. In light of the association between age and marital status, a logistic regression was conducted, indicating that marital status was no longer significant once age was entered into the equation. Those who were younger were more likely to report parental alienation.

There also was a statistically significant association with whether or not the person had a stepparent. Those with a stepparent were more likely to report parental alienation (44.4%) than those without a stepparent (26.5%), $\chi^2(N = 1,252) = 3.73$, $p < .047$, in a one-tailed test.

To answer the second research question, analyses were conducted to determine whether there was an association between parental alienation and psychological maltreatment. Five two-by-two cross-tabulations were conducted to determine whether those who reported parental alienation were more likely to also report being psychologically maltreated using the APSAC-derived variables (spurned, terrorized, isolated, exploited or corrupted, and denied emotional responsiveness).

There were statistically significant associations between reporting parental alienation and all five of the APSAC-derived variables (see Table 4). Specifically, of the 72 survey respondents who reported parental alienation, 44 (61.1%) reported being isolated compared to 49 of the 180 who did not report parental alienation, $\chi^2(N = 1,252) = 25.37$, $p < .001$. Of the 72 who reported parental alienation, 37 (51.4%) reported being terrorized compared to 13 of the 180 who did not report parental alienation (7.2%), $\chi^2(N = 1,252) = 63.08$, $p < .001$. Of the 71 who reported parental alienation, 45 (59.2%) reported being spurned compared with 15 of the 180 who did not report parental alienation (8.3%), $\chi^2(N = 1,251) = 74.93$, $p < .001$. Of the 71 who reported parental alienation, 26 (36.6%) reported being exploited or corrupted compared with 7 of the 180 who did not report parental alienation

TABLE 4 Cross-Tabulations Between Dichotomous Parental Alienation Variable and Five American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children Dichotomous Variables ($N = 252$)

	No PA	PA	χ^2	Significance	D
Isolating	27.2	61.1	25.37	.001	0.67
Terrorizing	7.2	51.1	63.08	.001	1.16
Spurning	08.3	59.2	74.93	.001	1.30
Exploiting	03.9	36.6	47.77	.001	0.97
Denying emotional responsiveness	21.7	73.2	58.60	.001	1.10

Note. PA = parental alienation.

TABLE 5 Correlations Between Continuous Parental Alienation Variable (0–5) and Each of the Five American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children-Derived Continuous Variables (0–5; $N = 251$)

	Parental alienation
Isolating	.39*
Terrorizing	.55*
Spurning	.61*
Denying emotional responsiveness	.51*
Corrupting or exploiting	.58*

* $p < .001$.

(3.9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 251) = 47.8, p < .001$. Of the 71 who reported parental alienation, 52 (73.2%) also reported being denied emotional responsiveness compared with 39 of 180 who did not report parental alienation (21.7%), $\chi^2(N = 1,251) = 58.6, p < .001$. Not only was each chi-square statistically significant, but the effect size was well above the criteria for meaningfulness, ranging from .67 to 1.31. These analyses were rerun as logistic regression to determine whether the effect held up after entering age into the question as a covariate, which it did, for all five variables.

Next, Pearson correlations were conducted between the continuous (0–4) parental alienation variable with each of the five APSAC-derived continuous (0–4) psychological maltreatment variables. Because these variables were not normally distributed (the kurtosis was greater than 1.0), these results, presented in Table 5, are considered supplemental.

The 5-point parental alienation scale was statistically significantly correlated with each of the five continuous APSAC-derived scales at $p < .001$: isolated ($r = .39$), terrorized ($r = .55$), spurned ($r = .61$), exploited or corrupted ($r = .51$), and denied emotional responsiveness ($r = .58$). Partial correlations were also conducted to control for age; all correlations remained statistically significant.

Next, two new variables were created that represented how many of the APSAC-derived variables each respondent reported (0–5) and whether any of the APSAC-derived variables were reported (0 = none, 1 = at least one). Analyses revealed an association between the number of APSAC-derived variables and the frequency of parental alienation ($r = .62, p < .001$) and an association between reporting parental alienation (yes or no) and reporting any of the APSAC-derived variables (yes or no) in that of the 72 who reported parental alienation, 66 (91.7%) also reported at least one APSAC-derived variable, compared to 65 of 180 who did not report parental alienation (36.1%), $\chi^2(N = 1,252) = 63.59, p < .001$. Partial correlation and logistic regression controlling for age resulted in the same findings.

The next approach to answering this research question entailed comparing the single parental alienation item to each of the five existing psychological

maltreatment scales (CTQ emotional abuse, CTQ emotional neglect, CATS, CTS, and FEQ; see Table 6). Prior to doing so, reliability analyses were conducted to confirm appropriateness of using these scales, which revealed excellent reliability for all scales with alpha coefficients between .83 and .94. Total scale scores were created by summing the items within each scale and using mean imputation to replace no more than one item per scale. Independent *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether mean scores on the existing scales were different for the parental alienation and the no parental alienation group.

Mean differences between the two groups were statistically significantly different for each of the standardized measures of psychological maltreatment at the .001 level. Effect sizes were close to or above 1.0 in all cases. Linear regressions were conducted to control for effects of age, and the findings remained.

Table 7 presents statistically significant associations between the continuous parental alienation variable and the five continuous psychological

TABLE 6 Mean Scores of Five Existing Psychological Maltreatment Scales by Dichotomous Parental Alienation Variable ($N = 252$)

	No parental alienation		Parental alienation		<i>t</i>	Significance	<i>D</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
CTQ EA	1.8	3.0	6.5	4.8	7.58	.001	1.6
CTQ EN	3.3	4.5	6.8	5.4	4.85	.001	0.9
CATS	5.6	4.6	12.2	6.5	7.79	.001	1.6
FEQ	5.3	5.5	12.26	7.1	7.57	.001	1.5
CTS	3.7	3.4	7.9	4.5	7.22	.001	1.4

Note. CTQ EA = Childhood Trauma Questionnaire emotional abuse; CTQ EN = Childhood Trauma Questionnaire emotional neglect; CATS = Child Abuse and Trauma Scale; FEQ = Family Environment Questionnaire; CTS = Conflict Tactics Survey.

TABLE 7 Correlations Between Continuous Parental Alienation Variable and Five Existing Psychological Maltreatment Scales ($N = 252$)

	Parental alienation
CTQ EA	.52 *
CTQ EN	.42 *
CATS	.56 *
FEQ	.55 *
CTS	.52 *

Note. CTQ EA = Childhood Trauma Questionnaire emotional abuse; CTQ EN = Childhood Trauma Questionnaire emotional neglect; CATS = Child Abuse and Trauma Scale; FEQ = Family Environment Questionnaire; CTS = Conflict Tactics Survey.

* $p < .001$.

maltreatment scales with correlations ranging from .42 to .56, also all significant at the .001 level. Again, due to lack of normalcy of the distribution of these variables, these findings should be considered supplemental. Partial correlations controlling for age resulted in similar findings.

A final analysis involved conducting a cross-tabulation between a single item from the CTQ phrased as “I was emotionally abused” recoded (0 = not at all, 1 = rarely, sometimes, often, or very often) and the recoded parental alienation variable (0 = no parental alienation, 1 = parental alienation). Results revealed a statistically significant association with 47 of the 71 parental alienation group reporting that they had been emotionally abused (66.2%) compared to 36 of the 179 no parental alienation group (20.1%), $\chi^2(N = 1,250) = 48.68, p < .001$. Logistic regression controlling for age resulted in the same effect.

To rule out a response set, analyses were conducted to ascertain whether there were individuals who reported maltreatment but not parental alienation. Although it was expected that the majority of those who reported parental alienation would also report maltreatment (Tables 4–7), the converse was not expected (i.e., there was no expectation that everyone exposed to psychological maltreatment would also be exposed to parental alienation). According to this thinking, parental alienation is a subset of psychological maltreatment such that most parental alienation cases would also report maltreatment but many cases could exist in which maltreatment existed in the absence of parental alienation. This analysis was conducted with the dichotomous APSAC-derived measure and the results supported the hypothesis: 92% of those who reported parental alienation also reported psychological maltreatment, whereas only 50% of those who reported psychological maltreatment also reported parental alienation.

Also of concern was the possibility that when respondents reported both parental alienation and psychological maltreatment, they were not referring to the same parent. Although this would not be consistent with theory and existing data, it is a possibility. Thus, the associations exist but do not indicate that the same parent who is exhibiting parental alienation is also exhibiting psychologically maltreating behaviors. Although the data from this sample cannot definitively rule this out (given how the directions were written to include parents, stepparents, foster parents, and other adults who helped raise the individual), initial analyses do not support it. For example, within the small sample of 32 cases in which the respondent was raised only by the mother, associations between parental alienation and psychological maltreatment were statistically significant. It seems highly plausible that in this sample, the respondents were reporting on the parental alienation of the mother (presumably toward the absent father) and the maltreatment of the mother, as no other parents were reported to have helped raise the respondent.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to answer two main questions: (a) what proportion of adults would report being exposed to parental alienation efforts on the part of one or both parents, and (b) would people who reported exposure to parental alienation also report experiencing components of psychological maltreatment utilizing the APSAC definition of isolating, terrorizing, spurning, exploiting or corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness; and using existing measures of psychological maltreatment.

First, some limitations bear mentioning. Respondents were not asked to report on which parent(s) exhibited the parental alienation and which exhibited the psychological maltreatment. Theory and prior research support the idea that in many families it is the same parent. Likewise, the subset of respondents in this study who were raised by only one individual reported a strong association between the two variables. However, future research should include an explicit mechanism for respondents to report which parent(s) exhibited which behaviors to further the confidence in this important finding.

Second, respondents were not asked to indicate whether their parents had divorced. Presumably the rates of parental alienation in this subsample would be even higher. Again, data in this study could be used to begin to explore this by comparing rates of parental alienation in the subsample who had a stepparent and those who did not (although presumably some respondents in the nonstepparent group also had divorced parents). Initial data were encouraging but more explicit variables in a larger sample clearly would be helpful.

Third, it is also important to note that the sample of staff at a child welfare agency is not strictly a community sample and that it might differ in ways directly related to experience of childhood abuse (psychological and otherwise). To begin with, employees of child welfare agencies must pass a background check that screens for documented abusive behaviors. To the extent that people who are abusive themselves are more likely to have been abused (Kaufman & Zigler, 1987) the study sample might have fewer people with abuse histories than a representative community sample. At the same time, interest in the field of child welfare might be particularly strong for individuals who were abused as children. To that extent, there might be a greater number of people with abuse histories in the study sample, especially those who were able to resist becoming abusive themselves. There were considerably more females in this sample than in a community sample, although there is no reason to believe that female children would be more likely to be subjected to parental alienation than male children.

Despite these methodological limitations, two notable findings emerged. First, it was found that more than one fourth of the sample reported being exposed to parental alienation, defined as the effort of one

parent to turn the child against the other parent. Of those 72 individuals, one third each reported that this happened rarely, sometimes, often, or very often. These are the first data to present results of the frequency of this experience in a nonclinical and nondivorced sample and they begin to shed light on just how common an experience parental alienation is, with one fourth of the full sample and 44% of the stepparent sample reporting it.

The second aim of the study was to determine whether those who experienced parental alienation also reported higher rates of psychological maltreatment using several different standardized measures. Regardless of measure or statistical test, statistically significant, large, and meaningful effects were found. For example, those who reported the presence of parental alienation were more likely to report being spurned, terrorized, isolated, exploited or corrupted, and denied emotional responsiveness, the five constituent components of psychological maltreatment according to APSAC (Binggeli et al., 2001). As a group, all but a few of those who reported parental alienation also reported at least one of these core components of psychological maltreatment, whereas that was true for only one third of the no parental alienation group. The parental alienation group also reported higher levels of psychological maltreatment using five different standardized measures. Using a single item, "I was emotionally abused," as the indicator, two thirds of the parental alienation group endorsed this item compared to only 20% of the no parental alienation group. By all accounts, those who reported parental alienation also reported being psychologically maltreated. Further, those who reported more frequent parental alienation also reported more severe and frequent psychological abuse.

These findings taken together lead to the conclusion that greater public and professional education is required for the extent and severity of the problem to be recognized. It no longer seems reasonable to assume that this is a limited problem affecting only a small proportion of families (although probably only a subset of children exposed to the strategies ultimately rejects the targeted parent and becomes alienated). To that end, a number of public awareness, professional education, and public education approaches are outlined next.

First, educating divorcing families seems to be a critically important mechanism for providing information to potential alienating and targeted parents about the impact of parental alienation strategies on children. However, according to a recent review of the content of such programs (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004), neither the short-term universal nor the long-term targeted programs focus specifically on parental alienation strategies (other than discussing the negative impact of bad-mouthing the other parent in front of the child). Incorporating a parental alienation perspective could be useful for at least two purposes. First, it is possible that some parents who are engaging in parental alienation strategies could be inspired to reform their negative behaviors. Using Darnall's (1998) typology,

this could be true of some naive alienators but probably not true for the active or obsessed. Even reducing the presence of parental alienation from “rarely” to “never” could potentially make a difference. (Comparing the 23 respondents who reported parental alienation as “rarely” with those who reported it as “never” revealed that they were statistically significantly more likely to report psychological maltreatment.)

Second, public education aimed at divorcing parents could alert them to the problem before their children succumb to the pressure to choose sides. Too often targeted parents do not see the pattern of the alienation campaign being waged against them or assume that as long as their relationship with the child is positive, they do not need to counter the various attacks on their relationship with their child. This is not always an effective strategy, but by the time targeted parents recognize that the various behaviors of the other parent constitute a pattern executed with a specific goal of turning the child against them, it is too late; the child is already so alienated that minor adjustments of the targeted parent’s behavior would likely be pointless. Therefore, it is important that potential targeted parents become educated about what parental alienation is and why it is important to intervene sooner rather than later. Needless to say, targeted parents need to be provided with tools for countering parental alienation that do not in themselves constitute an alienation campaign (i.e., bad-mouthing the alienating parent, interfering with communication between the child and that parent, etc.). Some suggestions for how to do this can be found in Baker and Fine (2008). At a minimum, parents who believe that the other parent of their child may be engaged in parental alienation efforts should begin to systematically and objectively document their areas of concern in preparation for discussion with legal and mental health professionals.

In addition to educating divorcing parents, another fruitful area is professional development within the legal and mental health communities regarding the prevalence of parental alienation and its links to psychological maltreatment. This includes attorneys, judges, guardians ad litem, custody evaluators, and all court-appointed mental health specialists. Too often parents who perpetrate parental alienation justify their actions as indications of their loving and appropriate parenting and natural desire to protect the child from a bad and unnecessary parent. However, once abuse of the targeted parent has been ruled out as a cause of the child’s rejection, parents who exhibit parental alienation strategies should themselves be considered exhibiting a form of psychological maltreatment. This information should be factored into all custody decisions and mental health treatment of the child and family. This will not happen, however, until the legal and mental health professionals involved in these cases become fully educated themselves about the signs of parental alienation.

In addition to educating divorcing parents and the professionals who interact with them, education of the general public is also a great need.

Targeted parents interact with a variety of adults each day (friends, relatives, neighbors, work colleagues) and have a need to be understood and believed. Many contend with the problem of being overwhelmed with shame at being rejected by their own children and not being believed that the rejection was engineered by the other parent rather than a deserved response to some parenting flaw or misdeed. Children exposed to parental alienation and loyalty conflicts also come into contact with numerous secondary authority figures each day (teachers, tutors, coaches, clergy, parents of friends) who need to be educated that children should not be forced or encouraged to reject one parent to please the other. Too often these other adults function as silent bystanders in the alienation because they do not understand how helpful it would be to serve as an “enlightened witness” who could validate the value of the targeted parent and thereby gently encourage the child to resist the pressure to choose. Presumably if the public understood that when children are exposed to parental alienation strategies, they are being exposed to a form of psychological maltreatment, they might be more inclined to become involved.

Another function of public awareness could be to educate children about the problem so that they do not feel alone or helpless in the face of one parent waging a campaign of alienation against the other parent. Simply having a name to label the overall problem rather than having to describe a series of events and behaviors can help children seek and obtain the help that they need. Professionals who come into contact with children (teachers, school social workers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, child therapists, etc.) could educate children about parental alienation and the importance of not giving in to the alienating parent. Ideally, these professionals would have access to state-of-the-art resources that they could provide to all children of divorcing families that are age appropriate and specific to this problem, as opposed to the more general “children of divorce” materials that already exist (e.g., Andre & Baker, 2009).

Clearly, there is much work to be done to refine research methodologies, collect increasingly sophisticated data, and apply that data to the real lives of children and families whose needs are otherwise unmet.

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