Family Members' Narratives of Divorce and Interparental Conflict: Implications for Parental Alienation

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This study focused on the internal dynamics of family members who experience divorce and interparental conflict. Interparental conflict and triangulating children increase the likelihood of alienating children from a parent. Narrative interviews with members of three families were used to explore meaning structures. Results showed how parents and children thought, felt, and created meaning about their experiences; how family members responded to conflict and behaviors associated with parental alienation; and how they viewed family relationships. Metalevel findings suggested each family member held dichotomous views and used cognitive and behavioral control response strategies. Thus, parental alienation stems from a relational dynamic and needs to be addressed from a family systems perspective.

KEYWORDS divorce, family conflict, narrative, parental alienation, parent–child relationships

Parental conflict following divorce usually diminishes in about 2 to 3 years (Kelly, 2003). Some parents, however, do not reduce their conflict after the initial postdivorce adjustment. When this occurs, the ongoing interparental conflict is regarded as more hurtful to children's adjustment than the parents'

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actual divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). For families in which the parents' conflict remains high even years after divorce, the children are at highest risk for adjustment difficulties; their risk for adjustment problems is higher than that of their peers who live in an acrimonious two-parent home (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

When parents engage in conflict, children attach meaning to and create perceptions of what they experience based on how conflict is handled in their families (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Further, when children hear negative remarks about a parent, they report that such information destroys more than their relationship: Interparental conflict affects how children perceive and react to the emotional landscape in their families (Cummings & Davies, 2002), and sows the seeds of loyalty conflicts (Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009) and poor long-term adjustment (Kelly, 2000).

Given that children can detect the emotional landscape in their families, they can also detect sentiments their family members have about each other, even if feelings are not openly discussed. Specifically, when parents argue with one another, their emotion spills over to the parent–child relationship and can create triangulation between the child and both parents (Erel & Burman, 1995). It is clear that the effects of parental conflict emanate beyond the marital relationship; each family member can suffer in profound ways.

INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT, LOYALTY CONFLICTS, AND ALIENATION

If children are asked to or believe they should choose sides in parents' conflict, children likely experience loyalty conflicts and feel emotionally pulled between their parents. Consciously or not, some parents attempt to capitalize on children's loyalty by involving them in parental conflict topics, producing further triangulation. Parents might use this triangulation to their benefit in an attempt to win the emotional approval of children while alienating them from their other parent. Thus, children are likely to feel alienated from one parent and aligned with the other parent if children feel emotionally pulled between their parents' conflict and if parents denigrate one another at the expense of the other parent–child relationship.

Clearly interparental conflict, loyalty conflict, and parental alienation[1] are related yet distinct concepts. Not all interparental conflict creates loyalty conflicts, and loyalty conflicts do not automatically yield feelings of alienation toward a parent (see Johnston, 2003). Estimates are inexact but

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[1] Various terms have been given, each with its own emphasis, to characterize the emotional and relational tension children can experience when one parent attempts to distance the other parent from a close, loving relationship with the children. For a review of the terminology and history, see Fidler and Bala (2010). We use the term *parental alienation* to refer to parents and children who feel alienated from one another due to parent–child–parent triangulation induced by interparental conflict and parents' pejorative remarks about one another.

given the association between chronic interparental conflict and children's loyalty conflicts, parental alienation is most likely present in 10% to 20% of divorced families (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005).

PARENTAL CONFLICT AND ALIENATION AFFECT PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Not surprisingly, ongoing parental conflict also damages parent–child relationships (Erel & Burman, 1995). Moreover, this effect is detectable decades later in more distanced relationships with parents (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Disruptions in the parent–child relationship often are present years before a divorce (Amato & Booth, 1996), indicating that troubled family functioning is the root cause. Therefore, whether parents remain married or divorce, for those families embroiled in conflict, the quality of parent–child relationships are at stake.

What happens to the parent–child relationship when children experience loyalty conflicts and parental alienation? The limited clinical literature indicates that children who experience parental alienation have "obsessive hatred" for the rejected parent, and feel grief and loss akin to the death of a parent (Cartwright, 1993). Adults who remember experiencing parental alienation as children might feel guilt for betraying the rejected parent, rejection due to internalizing and personalizing negative comments one parent made regarding the other (Baker, 2005a), and loss as if there was "something missing" from their childhood (Cartwright, 1993). As well, the alienated parent struggles with the loss of a previous relationship with the child (Cartwright, 1993).

Clinicians have suggested parental alienation can permanently destroy the rejected parent–alienated child relationship even into adulthood (Gardner, 1999). Research indicates the rejected parent–alienated child's relationship does suffer and the effects are not time limited (Moné & Biringen, 2006). Rejected parents and their adult children who experienced parental alienation as children continue for years to bear the brunt of alienation. Moreover, there appears to be a backfiring effect on the relationship between the instigating parent and now adult child (Baker, 2005a, 2006; Darnall & Steinberg, 2008; Moné & Biringen, 2006). It might be that adult children come to realize the alienating parent's sabotage and when this occurs, they might distrust or distance themselves from the instigator.

HOW RESEARCH ON PARENT ALIENATION MIGHT BE ADVANCED

Much of the parental alienation literature is based on clinical and legal cases, and is speculative. Recent empirical research has challenged some of the

unverified assumptions inherent in the literature (Baker, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Johnston, 2003; Johnston et al., 2005; Kelly, 2000, 2003; Moné & Biringen, 2006). However, even with research-based findings, several aspects of alienation-focused research necessitate improvement. Given (a) the need for systemic and family-focused approaches within parental alienation instead of using a single respondent's perspective (Kelly & Johnston, 2001); (b) the fact that family members have distinct interpretations about divorce-related issues, conflict, and relationship quality (e.g., Fauchier & Margolin, 2004); and (c) the call for qualitative methods and clinical interviews to capture the phenomenology of family members' divorce-related experiences (see Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), a research project specifically to address these issues was designed. Thus, three research questions motivated this qualitative study. First, what stories do family members maintain and what meaning, including thoughts and feelings, do they derive from their experiences with divorce, interparental conflict, and parental alienation? Second, what are family members' responses to parental conflict and parental alienation? Third, how do parents and children view the relationships with one another in the context of divorce, interparental conflict, and parental alienation?[2]

METHOD

This study is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which considers reality to be a personally and socially constructed entity from which individuals interpret and attach meaning to events and their surroundings based on the lens from which they view the world (Lincoln & Guba, 2004; specific to narrative inquiry, see Josselson & Lieblich, 2003). Hallmarks of constructivist research include describing people's experience from their own point of view (Schwandt, 1990), maintaining awareness of multiple realities (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003), examining the phenomena of interest within the context in which it naturally occurs, and use of inductive procedures (Schwandt, 1990). The analytical interpretations of the researchers are not without their own subjectivity, however (Lincoln & Guba, 2004). Therefore, like many others, we include significant text to support our interpretations (Hatch, 2002; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).[3]

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[2]   For how ethical issues specific to this project were handled, see Moné (2007).

[3]   If meanings are individually and socially constructed, is interpretation merely relative? No. Just because there might be other viewpoints does not mean that *any* interpretation is justifiable (Schwandt, 1990). Although interpretations can differ, they need justification to support their assertions. Just as many viewpoints add complexity and detail about a phenomena, so can many evidence-supported interpretations be offered to illuminate the various beliefs, constructions, and contexts from which meaning is created. Also, if we know what meanings and interpretations people create, it is possible to change the "unproductive, incomplete, or misinformed constructions" and work toward creating more positive constructions that influence people's thoughts and behaviors (Lincoln, 1998, p. 16).

Participants

Due to the highly specific nature of parental alienation, we recruited participants using sources dealing with divorce and high interparental conflict. Participants were recruited (a) from a high-conflict parenting workshop by means of an oral presentation about the research project, and (b) through a mailing sent to parents who completed the workshop within the past 2 years. More than 400 letters were sent, with 20 letters returned due to mailing address changes. The sent letters generated 10 calls and two parents called after hearing the oral presentation.

All parents who called were screened for inclusion by asking about marital status, the presence of conflict with one's former spouse, the presence of overt strategies associated with parental alienation, children's ages (9 years or older), and no history of domestic violence in the marital relationship. Three parents and their children met the eligibility criteria and were admitted into the study. Each participating parent agreed to give his or her former spouse's name and contact information. These former spouses were invited to participate but none responded.

The final sample of three families consisted of one parent and one or two children from each family. The parents, ages 37 to 44, included one father and two mothers. The parents had been married to their former spouse for 4 to 12 years; one parent's divorce was still in process, another had divorced less than 1 year ago, and the third had been divorced over 9 years. Sarah had several children with her former husband, who chose to see them and contact them infrequently. Two of Mary's children, Melissa and Maggie, were Mark's stepchildren, viewed him as a father during the marriage, and participated in the interviews. In the third family, Ken had weekend visitation with Katie during the school year. In total, four children participated: one son and three daughters who were 10 to 14 years old. Parents were given a $25 gift card to enjoy a dinner with their children at a nearby restaurant.

Interviews

The data were collected using in-depth narrative interviews; narratives are a set of events and their constructed meanings (Riessman, 1991). Each family member was interviewed separately on two occasions, for 2 hours total. All interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed. Interview questions followed a flexible guide (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003), available on request. The purposes of the second interview, which took place within 2 to 5 weeks of the first, were to summarize the main points of the first interview and to probe for clarification.

To verify that the parents engaged in ongoing conflict with their former spouse, they completed the Acrimony Scale (AS; Emery, 1982), which was designed to evaluate the level of conflict between divorced or separated

parents (Emery & Wyer, 1987). The measure contains 25 questions rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Internal consistency (α = .83–.88) and test–retest reliability (r = .88) are both high. The AS correlates with levels of child adjustment (Emery & Wyer), maternal depression, and children's appraisals of cognitive competence. Parents' total scores on the AS ranged from 63 to 73, indicating moderate to high levels of acrimony.

Analysis and Coding

To preserve and draw on the contextual emphasis, we used holistic analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998) and polyvocal analysis (Hatch, 2002). Holistic content and narrative coding strategies were used for individual and family-level analyses. Typically, researchers conduct individual-level analysis to find common themes across participants' interviews; this was completed for parents and for children separately, to elucidate how parents and their children create meaning about the divorce experience and their family relationships. Given the systemic nature of this project, we also conducted family-level analyses to show how the same event can result in complex and diverse meanings for each family member.

FINDINGS

The findings include substantive text to support and illuminate the interpretations (Lieblich et al., 1998). In addition, the results and interpretation were shared with the participants, who communicated their belief that the interpretations were accurate. Pseudonyms that start with the same letter refer to members of the same family.

Common Themes From Parents

NEGATIVE YET AMBIVALENT VIEWS OF THE FORMER SPOUSE

Parents maintained entrenched negative meanings about their former spouse, yet this view was leavened with some positive terms. Although the specific terms differed across parents—irrational and inflexible for one; manipulative, controlling, and deceitful for another—parents' negative meanings were repeated often. For instance, in Mary's first interview, she showed some positive views of her ex-husband by saying, "I've given this man so many chances. I've wanted to help him because I know there's a good person in there." In her second interview, however, Mary had a more sour view of Mark: "I haven't seen anything good for a long time. . . . I can't look at him. I can't even look him in the eye because for me I'm looking at Satan. . . . He's just so evil." These remarks show Mary's evolving meaning

about how she viewed Mark, which could be a result of recent events in the in-progress divorce or because Mary's meaning-making associated with Mark is still quite transitory. Overall, Mary's comments exemplified the complex, nuanced, yet intensely held views these individuals maintained about their former spouses.

Although parents possessed complex and somewhat dualistic views of their ex-spouse, one notable commonality was that each one intimated that the former spouse was mentally ill. In reference to his ex-wife, Ken said, "I think she's mentally unstable," and Mary averred that Mark is "a sick man. He's mentally ill and he's not willing to admit it." The belief that one's former spouse is mentally ill served as a way for parents to discredit and maintain suspicion about their children's other parent despite their ambivalent attributions.

Not surprisingly, all parents in the study characterized the relationships with their former spouse as contentious. However, Sarah differentiated between the parents' relationship and her children's relationship with their father:

> It's not that I badmouth Sid or that I say, "Oh your dad is an evil, awful person and I hate him." I don't. In fact [one of my kids] made comments about how she hates her dad and I've talked to her and I've asked her to try not to hate him because he is her dad. Maybe someday she would like to talk to him or maybe someday Sid would like to talk to them when things settle down. I don't want her to cut herself off from that, you know. And quite frankly, in my prayers all the time I ask that Sid will come around. And not only that he'll come around, but I will be able to accept it and to truly know that he has sincerely come around; that I would be able to recognize that. So I don't want them to hate him. You know, I really don't. He is their father. And he has things to offer. . . . I don't even hate Sid. To tell you the truth, I don't. . . . Not to mention if I hated him, in a way I would feel like I would hate my kids, and I just can't possibly ever do that. I mean, he is their father and at one point in time I did love him, and there was something really good about him. . . . [So] I decided that even though Sid and I were splitting up, it didn't mean that the kids were splitting up from the family. So I was going to try as hard as I could to maintain relationships with the family. So like I said earlier, his mother and I hated each other. We now talk like once—once a week. And we actually get along very well now. And I flat out told her from the beginning, I said, "Whatever our problems are, are *our* problems." I said, "You are still their grandmother; they are still your grandkids. I am not going to do anything to interfere with that.

This quote exemplifies many of the ambivalent, perhaps paradoxical, sentiments of these parents: love eclipsed by anger; a partitioning of different dyadic relationships in the family; and whether to maintain relationships between the children and their extended family.

Self-protection

All participating parents believed they needed to protect themselves during interactions with their former partners, although its manifestations varied. For example, Mary talked explicitly about self-protection with Mark. "We talk on the phone, and that's it. I had to draw the line. . . . So to look at it now it's just purely unemotional and I have to keep my guard up all the time with him." Ken also talked about different ways of keeping his guard up:

> In order for [my ex-wife] to agree to sign the tax release form, she would come up with something [saying], "You have to sign this [document] before I sign that [one]." So our communication is . . . I think we don't want to be used by the other one. She called me a bully; I think she's a bully. We're both, I guess, pig-headed and stubborn. . . . When we try to talk, it's been over the phone. She talks over me and she repeats herself. I mean, she will say the same thing over and over and over, and I'm trying to talk. And I get tired of it, so I hang up. It's like, "Listen to me. I gave you a chance to talk; now give me mine." . . . And usually that's the only time we talk, or try to work something out, is over the phone. We used to argue face-to-face and finally I quit getting out of the vehicle . . . because it was, just, stressful.

Parents protected themselves emotionally by limiting contact with the other parent to brief phone conversations, as evident in Mary's and Ken's preceding excerpts. At times, as Ken admitted, parents' self-protection went as far as game-playing, even though the parents did not call it that. Neither parent wanted "to be used by the other one." Especially if fairness is an issue, parents might view a defensive posture as legitimate, even when it hinders communication or conflict resolution.

Awareness of parental conflict and its influence on children

Each parent was conscious of parental conflict's effects on children, yet they also believed at some level that these effects were minimal. Mary knew conflict was hard for her children and so tried to limit their exposure to it:

> We had just had dinner and everything fell apart again because we started fighting. And I didn't want to fight in front of the kids because it's just so awful—hard on them. So I put myself in timeout; I went back to the bedroom.

Parents also noticed children's difficulty with conflict, as when children left the room during parental arguments or tried to intervene in conflicts.

Given that these parents noticed such negative consequences, it is surprising that they minimized the effect on their children of witnessing conflict.

For instance, one parent described an argument thusly: "Well it turned into this *screaming* match, this absolutely horrendous screaming match between us [the parents]. . . . The boys got up and went into the bedroom." Later, when asked how her son reacted to hearing some negative information about his dad, she said:

> I think he was fine because I didn't have problems with him. When he gets angry . . . he'll start bossing [his siblings] around or he'll just have a temper tantrum. . . . But he was fine. I mean he was . . . it was almost really weird, you know? . . . I honestly think he understands. . . . I don't think he understands the depth of it, but on his [age] level, I think he understands.

Although this mother acknowledged that her children were upset enough to exit the room, she discounted the long-term effects by declaring that her son was "fine," primarily because he was not acting out.[4] In turn, this confirmed that she can tell him information because he appears to handle it well. Despite their awareness of the harm of parental conflict, parents tended to misinterpret the depth of influence it had on their children and construe their beliefs in ways that suited their own wants and needs.

PARENTAL ALIENATION-TYPE BEHAVIORS AFFECT CHILDREN

All of the parents described how their children were influenced by behaviors that are emblematic of parental alienation. Whether the children's parents directly told them hurtful information about the other one, or parents modeled inappropriate behavior toward the other parent that children copied, it affected how children interacted with their parents. In one prototypic example, Ken believed his ex-wife's comments motivated his daughter Katie to act out of fear:

> [Katie] will follow me around the house like a puppy dog. [My current wife, Kristine, says] "You don't need to follow your dad; you know, he's not gonna leave you." But no matter where I go, she's following me around, and . . . [at the child's current age] she still does it, you know. I guess I think she doesn't see me a lot or if I'm out of her sight, she's afraid I'm gonna leave. . . . Karen [Ken's ex-wife and Katie's mother] has told her, and still tells her, that "the only reason you are over there is for your dad. If your dad's not there, then you don't

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4   Internalizing behavior problems, which are significantly elevated in children following a high-conflict divorce (e.g., Ge, Natsuaki, & Conger, 2006), also tend to be invisible to their parents (Clarke-Stewart, Allhusen, & McDowell, 2003).

have to be there." Kristine and I have been married 8 years, and she's been in [Katie's] life since she was 2 and they have a great relationship. But Karen's like, "You know, that's not your mom; you don't have to like her," and, "When your dad's not there, you don't need to be there." I think [Karen]'s got that in [Katie's] mind: "I have to be with my dad because that's what Karen said, so when dad's there I have to be with him."

According to Ken's meaning-making, Katie follows him due to fear of him leaving and because of her mother's comments about needing to be with her dad when visiting him.

Given the totality of what these parents shared, parental alienation appears a more complex and nuanced concept than is described in some of the literature. It is not a simplistic dichotomy: Either the ex-spouses get along well and have supportive parent–child relationships, or the former spouses hate each other, have a mental illness, and poison the children's relationship with the other parent at every opportunity. These parents' comments suggest that alienating behaviors can occur in families where parents have strong negative yet ambivalent feelings about one another, and these feelings can be conveyed to the children in ways both subtle and overt.

Common Themes From Children

FEELINGS AND MEANING ABOUT PARENTAL CONFLICT

The children were very clear about their aversion to parental conflict, stating that they got upset or, in Melissa's words, "I used to go out there and try to stop them from arguing because I didn't like it." Katie described how her parents' conflicts made her angry:

> Sometimes I get mad . . . I know where I get my madness from sometimes because I do burst out sometimes when I get really mad. It's like when they [parents] fight then I'm mad, but when they're done, I'm like [in a calm, satisfied tone], "OK."

And later she reiterated her view:

> I hate it when they fight. *Every* time . . . if . . . anything goes wrong before school, and . . . I always have a bad school day the next day. It *always* happens!

Katie and Melissa not only articulated their feelings about parental conflict, they were attuned to the ripple effects of such conflict, as when Katie

recounted how it affected her at school the next day. Katie also noticed the difference between when her parents were engaged in conflict—"mad" feelings and "bursting out"—and when they were not—more at ease (e.g., "OK").

The children's meaning-making could be astute and insightful, but at other times their limited information and cognitions led them to construct different meanings about conflict than would their parents, who had more firsthand experience. Nonetheless, these children's meanings were very real to them and in some instances expressed concern, sometimes believing serious consequences might befall their parents for the ongoing fighting. When asked how she feels about her parents fighting with one another, one child replied:

> Scared, 'cause I don't know what's gonna happen, and I don't want either one of them to go to jail or anything, you know. So yeah, it's just scary. . . . Sometimes they talk about how one could go to jail for doing this and doing that, you know, like being in contempt of court. So I don't want either one of 'em to be going to jail 'cause I love them both, but I just don't want them to go to jail.

Children also suggested what parents should do to curtail their arguments. Although all children said that mothers do more to reduce conflict and fathers do more to instigate it, children also wished that both parents would be responsible for stopping the arguments, as Sam indicated:

> Sam: I think that they really don't like each other and that when they don't like each other, they're really getting into a really bad involved fight, but they just shouldn't . . . They shouldn't hear each other again and should just walk away from each other and never hear from each other again.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think one of your parents starts fights more than another or is it about . . . ?
>
> Sam: I think it's Dad who starts most of the fights . . . and then Dad turns it into something really big. . . . It's like an ant and he turns it into a lion.

Each child had different ideas as to how his or her father was responsible for escalating conflicts; Sam's metaphor of Sid turning "ant" issues into "lion" conflicts is one example. This excerpt from Sam also suggests that the way children make meaning about parental conflict can influence their view of the parental relationship, in this case "getting into a really bad involved fight" indicated to him that his parents "don't like each other." Each of the children saw his or her parents' relationship as unhealthy.

Meanings associated with parental badmouthing

As a whole, these children disliked hearing one parent make critical remarks about the other. Children also created distinct meaning-making systems about why parents engaged in badmouthing:

> Sam: . . . Mom finally told me and she says she didn't really want to tell me, but now she has to. . . .
>
> Interviewer: . . . Why do you think your mom tells you that stuff about your dad?
>
> Sam: I don't know, 'cause she's trying to tell me what to look out for from my dad, 'cause my dad can be very tricky sometimes.

Sam reveals two beliefs in this excerpt: His father is not trustworthy ("very tricky") and his mom is the protector, although reluctantly so. Sam's comments indicate an awareness of his parents' intentions that bolsters a belief about cause and effect: If his dad was more trustworthy, his mom would not have to protect him by telling him "what to look out for." This theme was often repeated in Sam's interviews and was evident as well in comments the other children made.

Ascertaining truth and parents' believability

The fact that these children heard conflicting stories and contradictory information from their parents placed them in the position of having to decide for themselves what was true and which parent was more trustworthy. Katie's comments about the ways she tried to access the truth were illuminating:

> Katie: It's funny to hear the different sides. . . . One time, I don't know if this was true or not, I mean I was just a little baby, but my dad said my mother ran over my stepmom and my mother said she didn't run her over. So I asked my dad, "So what happened? May I see the [court] papers of her [Kristine] being run over?" He's like, "Sure." So like a few days later when I was over there [with him] he showed me [the court papers] and I'm like "Oh!" And so I went back to my mother's [house], I'm like, "So what happened when you ran over my stepmom?" And she looked at me, she's like, "Well I didn't," so she just told me this story, and it was partly the same: They [dad and stepmom] were just giving me medicine and my dad says my mother backed out and hit Kristine while she was walking behind the truck. So, I don't really know the whole story, if it's true or not. . . .

Interviewer: Who do you believe?

Katie: . . . It just depends on what I've heard first and what I
                believe or not. So if I hear something first and I think I
                believe it and then I go to my dad and half of it is true,
                then I'll believe my mother. But if my mother tells a story
                and a quarter of it is true, then I don't know who I'm
                going to believe. So if it's half true, like half the things are
                the same, then I'll believe whichever one said it first.

Her account indicates that Katie realizes that she cannot trust either parent, especially regarding what they say about each other. Katie recognized that each parent has his or her own side to the story, and that contradictory claims might have to be validated by a higher authority—the court papers— or resolved by an elaborate equation that factored in who first told her a story as well as the overlap in information provided by the other parent. Later, Katie shared how she has attempted to resolve this dilemma about truth-finding:

> I'm getting stories from both parents that I shouldn't listen to one parent and then I should listen to another one. . . . And then I just listen to my heart which tells me to love everybody, just love them the same, and just ignore them when they fight.

This quotation suggests that it is hard for Katie because she does not know who to listen to or trust. Choosing to believe one parent at the expense of the other is viewed, in Katie's mind, as a betrayal that can only be avoided by turning inward to decide what is best.

Intercession in parental issues

Children varied in the extent to which they became involved in their parents' conflict or relational dynamic. For instance, one child recounted the ambivalence about intervening in parental conflict:

> Well, when they argue, they argue over little things that really shouldn't be argued over, like the time [my mom] asked my dad to pick me up at my school . . . And they were just fighting . . . [so,] guess what I did? They were both mad at each other and so I write this [to my mom], "You go tell my dad this," and I put it on a paper. I'm like, "You tell him you're sorry and that you'll do whatever he feels is right." And she said, "Well let me change a few things to make it sound like me." And so she did, I just let her do what she wanted, and they forgave each other. I never told my dad it was me that said it because he needs to think it was my mom changing. I want them to get along because nobody's getting along right now.

Later, the child said the parents do not make up after their fights "unless I write something out," indicating a belief that the child is the only one who can make the parents come to a resolution. This child made contradictory statements about the extent of intervention in parental arguments:

Child: No, I just did it 'cause this time was really bad. It was really bad [when] they were arguing.

Then later:

Interviewer: Have you ever done anything other than that one time when you . . . stepped in the middle . . . ?
Child: Well I'd tried to do that and I try to get 'em not to fight . . .

Based on this and other comments, some of these children felt conflicted about helping their parents avoid or resolve arguments. If children believe their parents are not able to navigate conflict on their own, children might be inclined to intervene, in part to reduce their own distress. On the other hand, if children do not foresee a way to end the fighting, or if the conflict is not "bad enough," then they might not intercede, for the sake of self-preservation.

Children's dynamic views of parent–child relationships

As with their parents' reports of a good parent–child relationship with each of their children, every child reported positive sentiments about his or her parents. Although children described feeling closer to their mothers, they also conveyed at least some positive views about their fathers, as Sam did:

Some things, yeah, I do like about him. Some things I absolutely hate about him. . . . I mean, it's like two halves of my heart are broken; . . . dad was in one half and mom [in the other]. Dad's half is, like, gone.

It was unclear if the missing piece Sam described was a result of not having a good relationship with his father or if his broken heart was due to lacking a relationship at this point, resulting from not seeing his father very much.

Finally, children in the study noticed how relationships could be used as weapons to hurt others, perhaps because children viewed their parents' relationship as poor. Children viewed themselves as being used by one parent for vengeance on the other. Sam captured this eloquently when he described being used like a "pawn:"

Mom doesn't want me to be used as pawn while they [parents] are the king and queen. Mom doesn't want me getting into his feelings 'cause he . . . is trying to get me on his side so I hate mom. . . . He only calls us if he wants us to come over, 'cause he really wants to get at my mom. And

half the time I think he's just trying to hurt us, so that way he can get mom. Basically he's using us as pawns. . . . Mom says that he's just trying to take us [children] out first so he can [hurt] mom. The pawns in a chess game usually get destroyed first. . . . Mom says, "I'd rather have you as the rook instead of a pawn because I don't want you getting within your dad's [trap] and then he'll just hurt you bad."

Based on this quote, Sam knows a lot of information about his parents and has made meaning out of what happens between his parents and how he is involved. Sam uses this metaphor to structure how he thinks of his dad, and how Sid uses his relationships with the children to manipulate Sarah. Sam's comment about being the "rook instead of the pawn" suggests he agreed with his mom's meaning about this metaphor, and conveys his own desire for more power in circumstances where he might have little real control over family dynamics.

Family-Level Findings

LOYALTY CONFLICTS AND PARENTS' ALIENATING BEHAVIORS

Parents and children from each family talked about loyalty conflicts or children hearing negative comments made by one parent about the other. Each one talked about slightly different ways this occurred in his or her respective family, even when it was accidental, so that behaviors associated with alienation were recognized in each family. Mary and Melissa recognized the damage Mark effected in trying to alienate Melissa from a close relationship with her mother:

> Interviewer: [Have you] seen any evidence or any instances of Mark hurting your relationship with your kids?
>
> Mary: Oh gosh, yeah! . . . He took Melissa to his lawyer . . . Poor Melissa! She sat there and she said, "Mom, I just put my head down on the desk pretending like I was asleep because I didn't want to hear the things he was saying." He was bashing me. I don't know what all he said and Melissa just can't bring herself to repeat it, but it was bad. And of course it damaged us [Mary and Melissa's relationship] *big time,* and if it weren't for *my* mom setting Melissa straight on everything; she sat Melissa down and said, "Melissa, *this* is the way it is. You *know* your mom. She loves you. She would *not* hurt you. Mark has filled your head full of lies." And so he damaged our relationship just terrible! It was awful, she wouldn't look at me; she wouldn't talk to me. When she did talk to me it was very sarcastic, *very* dis-respectful. . . . Melissa threatened to call the police on me. He tried to brainwash her.

Mary thought Mark's destructive comments were intentional, and said that she was unable to repair the harm inflicted to the mother–daughter relationship; her mother—an outsider to the relationship alienation dynamics—was the one to convince Melissa about Mark's brainwashing.

Melissa's account of how her stepfather's badmouthing got her to align with Mark provides the child's perspective:

> I've given it a lot of thought as to why I was so close to Mark. I think it was because every day he would come and pick me up from school. And then he would tell me a whole bunch of stuff and a lot of it was a lot bad stuff about my mom. . . . He was always talking behind her back and I don't remember anything he said, really. I only remember this one thing because like it shocked me the most: He wouldn't want to be married to my mom if it wasn't for [their children]. If it wasn't for [them], he would have already left.

Mary believed that Mark was deliberate in trying to destroy her relationship with her daughter; Melissa went further in portraying Mark as cunning and methodical by "always talking behind her back" and by using routine caregiving activities as opportunities to alienate Melissa from Mary. Mark's comment that "he would have already left" if he did not have his own biological children with Mary hurt Melissa and indicated that she was relatively unimportant to Mark.

Similar content yet different meanings in family members' stories

The parents and children in this study each maintained their own stories from which they made meaning about one another and family life. Although these parents and children recalled similar events and shared some commonality in reporting the incidents, at times they had different interpretations of the meanings of the events. In Sarah and Sam's family, the following stories about Sid's involvement at Christmas and a monster truck race illustrated how the same events can be viewed through markedly different lenses:

> Sid did nothing at Christmas for them. *Nothing.* He called up on the 23rd of December, and didn't even want to talk to them [the kids]. . . . In fact I *offered* to have him speak to the kids and he refused. And that's when he was like, "So do the kids have Christmas presents?" And I said, "Of course they have Christmas presents; I'm going to take care of them." And he says, "Well good, because I'm leaving for Vegas and then I'm going California and then I'm going to the Caribbean and nobody can get me there and they can't do anything to me so you're on your own and you better hope they don't need me for a blood transfusion or an organ or whatever because I won't be reached." . . . Whatever Sid's and my problems are, are our problems. It's not the kids' problem. But then I

also pointed out to Sam, I said, "Yes, your dad did want to take you to a monster truck race, *but* that was 6 weeks after Christmas. He did nothing for you for Christmas; he did nothing for your birthday; he hasn't paid his child support; he hasn't made sure that you guys have clothes, that you guys are being fed. He doesn't want any of that. He calls up out of the clear blue after weeks and weeks and weeks of not giving a crap to say, 'Hey, let's go out to a monster truck race.'" I said, "That's not being a parent. I'm sorry I can't afford to take you to those, but you're eating; you have a house; you have clothes; you're doing activities with your friends. I'm taking care of you day in and day out. So if I could come along every 6 weeks and go out to some grand event, hell yeah I'd do it, but then I wouldn't be your mother."

Sarah's story contrasted Sid's lack of concern for the children with her daily efforts to provide for them. Sarah insinuated that she did not allow the children to go to the monster truck race because Sid's parenting efforts were limited to attending fun events. Sarah's sentiments illustrate Sid's no-win situation: Sid was trying to remain involved with his children, even though the involvement was limited to exciting activities, and was criticized for it. In addition, this excerpt is one of multiple examples throughout the interviews of how a parent can be injudicious in telling a child too much information about the other parent's ineptitude while also justifying the bad-mouthing: Sarah pointed it out because Sid only wants to do the fun activities with the children and "doesn't want any of" the other more mundane duties that she does and, possibly, for which she wanted credit.

Compare Sarah's story to Sam's first account of Sid's involvement at Christmas:

> Sam: And dad supposedly wanted to see us at Christmas and
>   I said [in a sarcastic tone], "Yeah, sure." 'Cause mom said
>   he actually called during my birthday.
> Interviewer: Oh, is your birthday close to Christmas?
> Sam: Yeah, he didn't even call. He didn't even care.

Sam's account is confusing because at first he said Sid did call for his birthday and then stated that Sid did not call, which Sam took to mean that his dad "doesn't care." Sam's meaning about Sid not caring is further implied at the outset of this statement when Sam's sarcastic comment belied his doubt that Sid wanted to see the children at Christmas. Notice how Sam's meaning shifted in his second interview when he brought up the subject of Christmas again:

> Interviewer: So, tell me what you like and what you love about your
>   dad.
> Sam: He tries to help sometimes . . .

Interviewer: How does he try to help?

Sam: He tries to help us with—he tries to see us at Christmas. . . . He gave us 30 bucks to spend and he let me get a dart gun. . . . He wanted to take us to a monster truck race, . . . but we couldn't go, because the tickets were sold out.

This account exemplifies the changes in meaning one can make over time. It might be that Sam's recollection about Christmas is different during his second interview; he could have forgotten what "really" happened, or his meaning might have shifted for another reason altogether. This second account also illustrated how different family members can create distinct meanings from one another. Sam believed the reason for missing the monster truck race was due to the tickets being sold out, whereas Sarah suggested the show was missed because she would not allow Sid to take the children to the fun activities when he skipped all the mandatory parenting responsibilities. Regardless of the story family members shared, clearly these children's meaning-making involved independent constructions and was strongly influenced by what their parents told them.

DISCUSSION

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the commonalities among the parents and children from these three families cannot be used to make generalizations about families who experience divorce and parental conflict, nor was this project aimed at doing so. Broad inferences are not warranted given that so few divorced parents agreed to discuss their family dynamics with researchers. More important, the primary goal of this study was to illuminate, with in-depth narratives, how family members created meaning in the context of divorce, interparental conflict, and alienation. Accessing multiple informants from each family uncovered the contradictions and complex meanings family members maintained. This study offers a unique contribution because the findings indicate that these parents understood merely a portion of their children's experience. Although the parents' and children's descriptions of interparental conflict were thematically similar, the children's descriptions of how they were affected by such conflict indicate that these parents had a superficial comprehension of how deeply their children were affected by these issues.

A more comprehensive understanding of differing perspectives in postdivorce conflict would be achieved by including both parents, as recommended by Deal, Stanley-Hagan, Bass, Hetherington, and Clingempeel (1999). We believe that had both parents from each family elected to be involved in this study, there would have been even greater contextual information and understanding; the multiple realities (Josselson & Lieblich, 2003)

would have brought added richness of meaning. We also realize that the missing parent is an important part of the family system; their absence affects the context of the other family members' information. Despite this limitation, including parents and children constitutes a significant contribution in illuminating how children create their own meanings as well as adopt some meanings from parents. Continuing to use children in this type of research is also critical because their voices have been otherwise absent, which limits insights as to how they make meaning about parental conflict and parental alienation.

Research Question Findings

One purpose of this study was to determine the meaning family members derive from their experiences with conflict and parents' alienating behavior. These parents' narratives expressed ambivalent, although primarily negative, views of their former spouse. In addition, the parents were generally aware of the difficulties parental conflict created for their children, stating it was "hard on them" and caused them to "stress out" and to leave the room, yet parents attributed strength and understanding to their children.

Children from this study also talked in detail about their reactions to experiences associated with loyalty conflicts and badmouthing. They were distressed about having to choose between their arguing parents, consistent with previous research (Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The fact that these children created their own meanings from emotion-laden, polarizing circumstances reinforces earlier research findings (Cummings & Davies, 2002) and supports the assertion that "the various ways by which children attempt to cope with these core concerns, and defend against their fears, are likely to result in entrenched patterns of feeling, perceiving reality, solving problems, relating to other people, and dealing with emotions" (Johnston et al., 2009, p. 40). Moreover, because of children's awareness of conflict and activities associated with alienation, they were able to create meaning about the emotional landscape in their families (Cummings & Davies, 2002).

As a whole, the information and meanings these children provided about parental conflict and alienation behaviors are another important contribution of this study. It is noteworthy that participating children were so attuned to their parents' conflict, parents' alienation strategies, and family relationships. Both parents and children in this study described ways in which children were drawn into adult–adult conflict that were beyond their developmental levels. Their involvement encouraged them to serve as intermediaries and confidants such that, even at the age of 9 or 10, they were adultified. When this occurs, these children straddle two worlds— they remain in childhood doing developmentally appropriate tasks while also knowing about and dealing with emotional dynamics like adults. Their

insights became adaptive coping mechanisms to assist them in dealing with their families.

Consistent with prior research (Fauchier & Margolin, 2004), each parent and child in the family constructed different meanings about the same issues. These divergent perspectives might be due in part to different motives and developmental levels (Jensen, Xenakis, Davis, & Degroot, 1988); as well, parents refrained from disclosing information children should not hear to some extent. Yet at times, parents who were interviewed shared information with children with a specific intent to shape their views about the other parent. At other times, these parents shared information with children to counterbalance what the other parent said and to help children interpret what they had heard or experienced.

Were these children truly alienated from one or both parents? The fact that not all attempts to produce an alienated child bear bitter fruit (Baker, 2006) and not all children are equally susceptible to and affected by adversity (Hetherington, 1999) assuage our concerns. Even if these children did not become alienated, parents' alienating behaviors occurred whether or not they were intentional. Further, the participants showed diverse and nuanced understandings of the meaning of conflict and behaviors akin to parental alienation. Regardless of the extent to which these were alienated children, they viewed the parent from who they were more distant with a mix of positive and negative attributes. As such, there is merit in utilizing more holistic ways of viewing, treating, and characterizing these families rather than creating precise diagnostic criteria or rigid cutpoints incapable of encapsulating the diversity of meanings, perceived intentions, and family members' views associated with alienation.

A second purpose of this study was to ascertain family members' responses to parental conflict and parental alienation. One theme that emerged was that of self-protection: These parents gave examples of limiting their communication and access to the child's other parent as protective measures. At least one parent also indicated some interactions between parents required reciprocity (i.e., playing "tit for tat") to reach agreement on requests, and so neither parent would lose face by giving in. According to the children's reports, at times parents also responded to conflict by telling children information about the other parent. Thus, both the mothers and the father from this study acted in ways that could alienate children from their other parent, counter to previous reports that primarily blamed mothers for this (e.g., Cartwright, 1993).

Children in such high-conflict families straddle two worlds. In the world of innocence, children engage in play and hope to enjoy time with each parent. In the world of adults, children navigate dark emotions such as hate, conflicting loyalties, and complex family dynamics. In this study, the children sometimes responded to a parent acting out of fear and loyalty. They tried to ferret out the "truth" of what really happened between parents

by eavesdropping on recorded information and by asking both parents to recount particular events. They intervened when their parents fought. Yet they also acted like children, playing and forgetting to always live by loyalty rules. Loyalty conflicts became a developmental double-bind for these children. They wanted to have fun and play, yet in the presence of intense arguments and loyalty conflicts, they became privy to parental dynamics, perhaps before they felt ready to enter into that realm.

The third research question concerned how parents and children viewed the relationships with one another in the context of interparental conflict and parents' alienating behaviors. Parent participants reported having positive, even strong relationships with their children despite the family conflict. Their children, on the other hand, tempered their favorable comments about their relationships with their parents. Although they expressed a desire for close relationships with each parent, they felt closer to their mothers, even when the relationship had been restored after a period of alienation. All participating children had positive memories of their fathers, but some indicated the relationship had become strained with time, and all mentioned negative attributes about their fathers. It is likely that the family's emotional landscape shaped their views of their relationship with parents, especially if they believed their fathers to be more responsible for the conflict and acrimony.

Notably, these children did not attribute poor relationships with their fathers to unrealistic expectations, nor did they claim that extraordinary measures were required for a good relationship. They clearly remembered small efforts such as getting ice cream, spending time with a parent, or feeling protected by a parent. These simple gestures emphasize the importance of time well spent in child-focused activities.

Metalevel Findings

At a metalevel, there are three additional ways to understand the data. First, a common thread in the findings was *dichotomy.* For instance, parents in our study exhibited dichotomous views about their ex-spouse by describing their former mate in primarily negative ways and yet each one tempered the negative image with some positive attributes. Thus, it could be parental alienation occurs even when parents do not have a consuming hatred for one another or a singular goal of denigrating the other parent, as exemplified by Sarah's prayers for Sid.

Dichotomous thinking also is reflected in these children's differentiated views of their parents' badmouthing. Some children in our study justified their mother's negative comments about their fathers but judged their fathers more harshly for making similar remarks about mothers. Fathers were described as "using" children and having anger problems, whereas mothers were credited with legitimate reasons for sharing their critical remarks, as when Sam said that his mom told him the truth to warn him because his "dad can be very tricky

sometimes." This provides support for research implying parental alienation might be constructed differently depending on the gender of the instigating parent (Johnston et al., 2005; Moné & Biringen, 2006). In contrast, Kopetski, Rand, and Rand (2005) suggested that parental alienation is not determined by gender. Sound empirical studies rather than clinical descriptions are needed to determine whether the behaviors associated with parental alienation are constructed differently based on parent gender. It might be that mothers employ different mechanisms of alienation than fathers, and if so, this would suggest that a gendered definition of parent alienation is required and perhaps different intervention strategies are required.

A second metafinding involves *control,* often an underlying motivation for how family members in the study responded to conflict and a way parents organized their meaning structures. Also, the desire for control informed how these three parents interacted with their former spouse. For instance, when parents believed that the former spouse was mentally ill, it created understanding about what was occurring and gave them more power to control their situation. Control also was manifest in limiting communication or interactions with a former spouse and using legal means to control encounters with the other parent. Some mothers and fathers required reciprocal gestures from the other parent as a mechanism to accede to new requests or change the visitation schedule.

The children also employed various tactics to control their circumstances. They involved themselves in parental conflict as a way of minimizing anger and hostility, or because they believed the parents to be incapable of resolving disputes. The idiosyncratic ways children tried to ascertain the truth illustrate how they tried to control the chaos of life and make sense of what was happening around them. These behaviors represent the more general insight that when confronted with chronically unpredictable circumstances, people redouble their efforts to control the situation or lapse into helplessness (Cohen, 1980).

The third metafinding arising from the families involved in this research is that multiple family members can become involved in parental alienation; this supports the view that alienation is a *systems dynamic* (Fidler & Bala, 2010; Johnston & Goldman, 2010; Johnston et al., 2005). Essentially, the parental alienation dynamic is not the creation of only one parent; it can involve the child's characteristics and actions, such as intercession in conflicts; one parent's vulnerabilities; and the other parent's personality and behaviors (Lee & Olesen, 2001). The findings from these parents and children show that mothers, fathers, and children could be involved in the dynamic. Also, parent–child relationships were used as weapons for vengeance between the warring parents. Through their stories, the children provided evidence that both parents contributed to parental alienation, which aligns with previous research indicating that both sexes participate in emotional aggression and parental alienation strategies (Johnston, 2003).

Moreover, family members' contributions to parental alienation can be calculated, unwitting, or reactive. These complexities are a caution to eschew simplistic fault-finding in favor of a systemic, nuanced view of the dynamics of parental alienation.

Implications

Clinical, practice-oriented literature (e.g., Fidler & Bala, 2010; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Johnston & Goldman, 2010; Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001) has provided recommendations for how to work with high-conflict families where parental alienation, rejection, or alignment might be involved. Such recommendations include working with the entire family system, encouraging realistic views of family members, assisting in the creation of coping resources, restoring appropriate relationships, and encouraging parents to take responsibility for their behaviors. Our findings lend credence to these suggestions, but provide additional insights about the importance of maintaining a systemic stance and of children's perspectives.

First, including various family members in assessment, treatment, and research due to their different perspectives proves useful. Professionals have advocated for systemic clinical work (Johnston et al., 2009). Because family members have divergent perspectives, clinicians need to account for this by involving as many family members in treatment as possible, while maintaining clear goals and focus of treatment. Second, because children are the powerless victims of high interparental conflict and parental alienation, it is even more essential to provide a forum from which they can be heard. Third, employing stories to access socially undesirable information seems to provide useful information about family members and meaning making. For instance, when asked directly, children might report that neither parent tells them to think bad things about the other parent, but according to this research, children heard meaning-making suggestions from their parents and created their own meaning about why parents criticized one another. Next, providing mere psychoeducation about the dangers of conflict and parental alienation would be unhelpful for the parents in this study; they already seemed to know conflict is harmful to their children. However, they seemed unaware about the extent of harm children feel. Therefore, as a fourth suggestion, parents would benefit from specific behavioral interventions for reducing conflict and creating resolution. Furthermore, no matter how "good" the reasons seem for badmouthing the other parent, evidence from these children shows negative comments are hurtful, even when children do not overtly say so. Thus, as a final suggestion based on this research, parents would also benefit from learning how to restrain damaging comments when in front of children and expressing them in more productive, appropriate outlets, such as with counselors or adult friends.

In sum, when professionals working with alienation view parents and their children as wounded *people,* and not just those with mental illnesses or other pejorative labels, we will begin to do a better job of conceptualizing the facets of parent and child alienation. We hope that the entire field associated with alienation will continue to identify the assumptions in the existing literature and begin to systematically deconstruct them through solid qualitative and quantitative research. We believe families deserve this level of insight from us as professionals. We endorse Fidler and Bala's (2010) entreaty to resist viewing alienation in simplistic, rigid terms and use, instead, a more comprehensive view. Finally, although small-sample, qualitative studies such as this are of limited generalizability, they also offer a descriptive richness that provides fertile ground for future research. Applied research on alienation would especially benefit from greater attention to the perspectives of multiple family members, inclusion of children's voices, and the identification of possible gender differences that might be present in the behaviors of parents who alienate.

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