

# Parental Bonding and Parental Alienation as Correlates of Psychological Maltreatment in Adults in Intact and Non-intact Families

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**Abstract** Seven hundred and thirty nine (739) Italian adults completed a survey about (A) the extent to which each parent engaged in parental alienation behaviors (B) the extent to which each parent engaged in psychological maltreatment and (C) a measure of parental bonding for each parent. Associations between these variables were examined for each parent and separately for participants whose parents remained married and those who divorced/separated. Results revealed that across the board, parental alienation was associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the effects of parental bonding. These data are understood in the context of a relationship-specific model of psychological maltreatment in which the child experiences parental acceptance of the self as distinct from parental acceptance of the child's relationship with the other parent.

**Keywords** Parental bonding · Psychological maltreatment · Parental alienation

## Introduction

Psychological maltreatment is a widespread form of child maltreatment both in high-risk and maltreating families as well as in the general population of parents. In a nationally representative telephone survey of parents conducted

by Straus and Field (2003), 90 % of respondents admitted using psychological aggression—one form of psychological maltreatment—with their children. In a recent meta-analysis, Baker and Maiorino (2010) found that 15 % of community samples of adults recalled severe to extreme childhood emotional abuse (a form of psychological maltreatment). Worldwide, there is evidence that verbally aggressive parenting practices (a form of psychological maltreatment) are extremely common (e.g., Dunne et al. 2009). Not only is psychological maltreatment widespread, but it is also damaging. Retrospective studies with adults have examined and found associations between psychological maltreatment and negative outcomes such as eating disorders (e.g., Allison et al. 2007), substance abuse (e.g., Eiden et al. 2007), and psychiatric conditions (e.g., Garno et al. 2008). Even at low levels, some forms of psychological maltreatment can be detrimental to children's social and emotional development and well-being (e.g., Binggeli et al. 2001; Brassard and Donovan 2006; Kairys et al. 2002; English and LONGSCAN Investigators 1997; Trickett et al. 2009; Wright 2007). Evidence of these negative effects have been found in a range of behavioral and emotional domains of development including problems of intrapersonal thoughts, feelings and behaviors (e.g., depression, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation); emotional problems (e.g., emotional instability, impulse control problems, substance abuse); social competency problems and anti-social functioning (e.g., self-isolating behavior, social phobia, aggression and violent behavior); learning problems (e.g., decline in mental competence, academic problems); and physical health problems (e.g., asthma, hypertension; somatic complaints). There can be no doubt that a child's experience of being psychologically maltreated by a parent has long-lasting and far reaching effects.

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Despite initial lack of consensus in the field on what constitutes psychological maltreatment, a definition of psychological maltreatment has emerged with consensus and support from the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (Bingeli et al. 2001). According to this definition, psychological maltreatment is defined as caregiver behaviors that result in a child feeling unloved, worthless, and only of value in meeting another's needs and can take five primary forms: spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness.

Most measures of psychological maltreatment operationalize the construct as parental behaviors that convey the parent's displeasure in the child such as yelling at the child, calling him names, and rejecting him (Baker 2009). In these ways, the parent signals his lack of care and affection for the child, which the child then internalizes as a feeling of being unloved and worthless. One way to think about psychological maltreatment, then, is that it represents a failure of parental bonding, which has been defined as appropriate levels of parental care and control directed towards the child (Parker et al. 1979). That is, too much/too little or the wrong kinds of parental control and not enough or the wrong kinds of parental care can result in children feeling spurned, isolated, terrorized, exploited, and/or denied emotional responsiveness.

Although no study has examined statistical associations between parental bonding as measured with the parental bonding instrument (PBI) and psychological maltreatment, an examination of the items on the PBI suggests strong concordance is likely. Items on the Care scale of the PBI include "Spoke to me in a warm and friendly voice," "Was affectionate," and "Frequently smiled at me." Parents who engage in these behaviors frequently are likely to have children who feel admired, loved, and valued (i.e., not psychologically maltreated); while parents who do *not* engage in these behaviors sufficiently will likely have children who experience themselves as unloved, rejected, and worthless (i.e., psychologically maltreated). Likewise, items on the Overprotection/control scale of the PBI include "Tried to control everything I did", "Invaded my privacy," and "Tried to make me feel dependent on him." Parents high on these qualities would likely have children who experienced themselves as worthless and uncared for (i.e., psychologically maltreated).

Items on the PBI reflect ways in which parents send messages to their children about their children's worth and value. When parents smile to their children, are affectionate and warm towards them, allow them freedom to grow and explore, children internalize the message that they are loved and valued and in response do not feel themselves to be psychologically maltreated.

A potential limitation of the PBI, however, is that it only addresses the child's relationship with the parent (that is, it is relationship specific). It is possible that a child's experience of feeling loved, valued, and of worth (i.e., not psychologically maltreated) is also based at least in part on the parent's messages to the child about his relationship with *other* people.

Parental alienation is the term used to describe parental behaviors that signal to the child that it is not acceptable to have a loving relationship with his other parent. Research has identified specific behaviors that parents can engage in that represent the parent's efforts to turn the child against the other parent including denigrating the other parent to the child, interfering with the child's contact and communication with the other parent, creating situations in which the child will feel forced to choose or reject the other parent, asking the child to spy on and keep secrets from the other parent, and so forth. Research has linked these types of parental alienation behaviors to poor outcomes and to psychological maltreatment in a number of independent samples. For example, Baker (2010) found linkages between exposure to parental alienation behaviors and reports of psychological maltreatment in a community sample of adults working in a social service agency, using four different widely used measures of psychological maltreatment. Other studies as well have linked parental alienation to psychological maltreatment (Baker 2010; Baker and Ben Ami 2011; Baker and Eichler 2014; Baker and Verrocchio 2013; Verrocchio and Baker 2013). As Baker and Ben Ami (2011) argue, "The psychological foundation of parental alienation—lack of empathy and the inability to tolerate the child's separate needs and perceptions—is also the foundation of psychological maltreatment" (p. 473). What remains unknown is whether parental alienation behaviors *independently* contribute to a child's experience of being psychologically maltreated over and above the child's experience of parental bonding. The question is whether parental messages to the child about his relationship with other people (in this case his other parent) contribute to a child's experience of psychological maltreatment in addition to and separate from the parent's messages to the child about the child himself.

Based on clinical observations, it seems possible that a parent can engage in all of the warm and loving behaviors directed towards the child that comprise positive care and appropriate control while simultaneously being psychologically maltreating towards the child in the context of the child's relationship with the other parent. That is, a parent could be generally loving and warm with the child except when he shows positive regard for the other parent such that the child could internalize negative messages about his worth and value. Specifically, a parent who is usually accepting of the child becomes harsh and rejecting when

the child demonstrates love and affection for the other parent and hence could induce the child to feel spurned. A parent who is otherwise sensitive to a child's needs becomes angry and threatens abandonment when the child shows love and affection for the other parent could thereby induce feelings of terror in the child. A parent who is usually supportive of a child's friendships and social interactions wants to keep him away from the other parent can induce feelings of isolation in the child. A parent who usually holds a child to high moral standards asks the child to betray the other parent's trust can make the child feel exploited and corrupted. A parent who is usually attentive and affectionate may reject the child when he shows love and affection for the other parent can thereby deny the child emotional responsiveness. The model proposed is a context specific multi-dimensional model of psychological maltreatment and parental bonding.

Such a model should be tested to determine the individual and combined associations between parental bonding, parental alienation, and psychological maltreatment in intact and non-intact families. This is essential because it is possible that both the prevalence of these various parental behaviors varies by family status and that the pathways of influence are unique. As Klosinski (1993) noted, dissolution of the marriage can set the stage for psychological maltreatment of children by overtaxing parents' ability to cope and provide appropriate levels of care and control of their children. That children of divorce consistently fare worse has long been established (Amato 1994, 2000). Likewise, Peris and Emery (2005) identify parental separation and divorce as a context in which parental empathy and boundaries can become compromised, leading to both decreases in parental bonding and increases in parental alienation and psychological maltreatment.

It is also would help move the field forward to examine all statistical associations in a parent-specific manner. That is, to ask whether reports of parental bonding by the mother and reports of parental alienation by the mother were associated with reports of psychological maltreatment by the mother; and likewise we examined whether reports of parental bonding by the father and reports of parental alienation by the father were associated with reports of psychological maltreatment by the father. This approach represents a significant advance in the field as it allows greater confidence in the validity of the associations found while ruling out a limitation of prior data which was the inability to determine whether the reports of parental alienation and the reports of psychological maltreatment were in reference to the same parent.

The specific questions we addressed included: (1) Did recall of parental alienation vary by marital status of parents; (2) did recall of parental bonding vary by marital

status of parents; (3) did recall of psychological maltreatment vary by marital status of parents; (4) were reports of parental bonding and parental alienation associated with reports of psychological maltreatment? and (5) was recall of parental alienation associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the effects of parental bonding?

## Method

### Participants

The sample was comprised of 759 adults 18–66 years of age (Mean = 27.5, SD = 9.4) living in Southern Italy. The sample was roughly evenly divided by gender, with eight in ten having a high school degree or higher. Of this sample 258 were from intact homes and 481 from non-intact homes. The two groups did not differ on gender or educational status but did on age, with the sample from intact homes being somewhat older (Mean = 30.1, SD = 11.5) than the sample from non-intact families (Mean = 26.0, SD = 7.6),  $t(382.28) = 5.1, p < .001$ . For that reason, age was entered as a covariate on all subsequent analyses.

### Procedures

A convenience sample was recruited in Southern Italy by a group of psychology students who promoted the study to their colleagues, friends, and family. Initial participants identified additional people via snowball sampling to participate in the study. In all 960 people were invited to participate, 759 of whom agreed to participate (70 % response rate). Of those who agreed to participate all but 20 actually completed the survey (97 % completion rate). The investigators asked individuals to voluntarily participate in the study by answering some questions regarding the relationships with their parents. Respondents were told that results of the study would be used to help psychologists better understand some familial dynamics. The questionnaires were distributed and participants were asked to return them within 2 weeks. Volunteers who agreed to participate were asked to complete a consent form. The consent forms were maintained separately in order to provide anonymity. After giving informed consent, the subjects responded to the written questionnaire.

### Measures

The paper and pencil survey consisted of a series of demographic questions (age, gender, level of education, and marital status of parents) and a series of standardized measures, three of which were examined for this study.

### *Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ)*

The BSQ is a 20-item measure comprised of a list of 19 specific behaviors and one general behavior that parents might engage into turn the child against the other parent. The respondents answered separately for mother and father on a five-point scale from never (0) to always (4). Total scores could range from 0 to 80 for each parent. In the present study, the measure demonstrated high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .95$  for maternal data and  $\alpha = .94$  for paternal data). This measure has been found to be associated with long-term negative outcomes in retrospective studies of adult recall of exposure to parental alienation (e.g., Baker and Ben Ami 2011; Ben Ami and Baker 2012; Bernet et al., in press; Baker and Eichler, in press).

### *Psychological Maltreatment Measure (PMM)*

A five item measure of respondent exposure to behaviors by a parent that meets the definition of psychological maltreatment was developed by Baker and Festinger (2011). The measure is modeled on the definition of psychological maltreatment endorsed by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (Binggeli et al. 2001) and has one item each relating to spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness. In prior research the measure was validated against four already established measures of psychological maltreatment, with statistically significant correlations indicating good validity. We used Italian version of the measure, which was translated and validated into Italian. Reliability and validity properties of the Italian version of the measure were demonstrated (Verrocchio et al. 2014). Each of the five items is rated separately for mother/step father and father/step mother on a five point scale from never (score of 0) to very often (score of 4). For some analyses the items were used individually and for others a total score was used. For mothers total scores ranged from 0 to 18 (Mean = 1.41, SD = .29) with an internal consistency coefficient of  $\alpha = .83$ . For fathers total scores ranged from 0 to 20 (Mean = 2.18, SD = 3.5) with an alpha coefficient of  $\alpha = .79$ .

### *Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker et al. 1979; Scinto et al. 1999)*

The quality of the parent–child relationship was measured with the PBI, a widely used research tool for assessing adult retrospective accounts of two dimensions of the parent–child relationship: Care (12 items) and overprotectiveness (13 items). The measure has been used extensively in social science research and has been found to be valid in observational, interview and self-report studies both prospectively

and retrospectively (e.g., Parker undated document; Sarason et al. 1987).

In this study, respondents completed the scale separately for mother and father. The Care scale consists of items tapping warmth, understanding, and acceptance (e.g. “Enjoys talking things over with me”, “Makes me feel better when I’m upset”). The Overprotection scale measures control, intrusiveness, and encouragement of dependence (e.g. “Tries to control everything I do”, “Invades my privacy”). Total scale scores could range from 0 to 36 (Care scale) and from 0 to 39 (Overprotection scale). The mean scores in this sample were: maternal care = 25.22, SD = 7.7, maternal overprotection = 13.81, SD = 6.7, paternal care = 20.53, SD = 8.4, paternal overprotection = 12.10, SD = 6.6. Cronbach’s alpha for the four scales were: mother care  $\alpha = .93$ , mother overprotection  $\alpha = .85$ , father care  $\alpha = .92$ , father overprotection  $\alpha = .83$ .

### Data Analysis

To determine whether prevalence of parental alienation varied by marital status of the parents, two MANCOVAs were conducted to determine if, overall, there was a group effect for marital status—intact or non-intact—controlling for age. The first MANCOVA analyzed the 20 maternal PA variables and the second MANCOVA analyzed the 20 paternal PA variables.

Next we examined whether the parental bonding scales varied by marital status—intact or non-intact—after controlling for age. One MANCOVA was conducted for the two maternal parental bonding variables (care and overprotection), controlling for age and another MANCOVA was conducted for the two paternal bonding variables (care and overprotection), also controlling for age.

To determine whether prevalence of psychological maltreatment varied by marital status, we examined the five psychological maltreatment items, first with a MANCOVA controlling for age and then with follow-up univariate analyses. Maternal and paternal psychological maltreatment data were examined separately.

The next step was to conduct a series of Pearson correlations to determine whether parental alienation, parental bonding, and psychological maltreatment were associated with each other in intact and non-intact families.

The final set of analyses were conducted to ascertain whether—for the intact and the non-intact samples—parental alienation was associated with each of the five psychological maltreatment variables, after taking into account the effects of the two parental bonding variables and age. Ten multiple linear regression analyses were conducted for maternal data and ten for paternal data, examining these associations for the intact and the non-intact samples. In each regression, a psychological

maltreatment variable was the dependent variable and parental care, parental overprotection, and age were entered as a block followed by parental alienation in the second block.

## Results

The first question was whether recall of parental alienation varied by marital status of parents. Results of the MANCOVA for the maternal data revealed a statistically significant effect  $F(20, 717) = 10.9, p < .001$ . Follow-up univariate analyses revealed a group effect for all 20 variables. Likewise, the overall  $F$  for the MANCOVA for paternal data was significant  $F(20, 717) = 9.6, p < .001$  and the follow-up univariate tests were statistically significant for all 20 variables (see Table 1).

All 20 parental alienation behaviors for both mothers and fathers were endorsed at a higher rate in the non-intact than the intact group. That is, participants whose parents were divorced rated their mothers and their fathers as engaging in higher rates of PA than participants whose parents were not divorced. The effect size for these 40 tests (20 for maternal data and 20 for paternal data) were between .20 and .49 (small) for 11 of the 40 tests, between .5 and .79 (moderate) for 22 tests, and over .80 (large) for 7 tests. The variables with the largest effect sizes were: making negative comments about the other parent (mothers and fathers), limiting contact with the other parent (mothers), showing discomfort when the child spoke about or looked at photos of the other parent (mothers and fathers), became cold or detached or upset when the child showed positive attention with the other parent (mothers only), confided in the child (mothers only).

This indicates that although the difference in the means was for the most part meaningful as well as statistically significant. Comparisons were also made between the intact and the non-intact samples for the 20 PA maternal variables and the 20 PA paternal variables for the likelihood of rating a parent as engaging in the behavior “often” or “always” versus “never” “rarely” or “sometimes.” In all but one analysis, the Chi square was statistically significant.

The second question we addressed was whether recall of parental bonding varied by marital status of the parents. In the maternal MANCOVA the overall  $F$  was significant  $F(2, 735) = 12.41, p < .001$  as it was in the paternal MANCOVA as well,  $F(2, 732) = 18.75, p < .001$ . In both analyses only the Care scale was significant in the univariate analyses. These data are presented in Table 2. As can be seen for maternal and paternal data, Care scores were significantly higher in the intact group than the non-intact group. Scores on the Overprotection scale did not vary by group.

Next, we asked whether recall of psychological maltreatment varied by marital status of the parents. The group effect for the maternal data in the MANCOVA was significant,  $F(5, 728) = 5.3, p < .001$ . For the paternal data the group effect was also significant,  $F(5, 730) = 8.6, p < .001$ . The univariate results are presented in Table 3. For all five variables, scores were higher in the non-intact group than in the intact group for both mother data and father data. Effect sizes were, for the most part, small.

The fourth question of the study was whether parental bonding and parental alienation were associated with psychological maltreatment in intact and non-intact families. These data are presented in Table 4. As can be seen both PBI scales as well as the BSQ scores were statistically significantly associated with total psychological maltreatment scores for both reports of maternal behaviors and reports of paternal behaviors for both intact and non-intact families. Lower Care scores, higher Overprotection scores, and higher parental alienation scores were all associated with higher psychological maltreatment scores.

The final set of analyses aimed to determine whether parental alienation was associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the effects of parental bonding. The maternal data for the intact sample is presented in Table 5, the maternal data for the non-intact sample is presented in Table 6, the paternal data for the intact sample is presented in Table 7, and the paternal data for the non-intact sample is presented in Table 8. In all 20 regression analyses, the change in  $r$ -square for parental alienation was statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the effects of age, parental care, and parental overprotection.

## Discussion

This study was conducted to examine rates of parental alienation, parental bonding, and psychological maltreatment by mothers and fathers in both intact and non-intact families. A number of notable findings were evident in the data.

First, reports of parental alienation were higher in the participants from non-intact families than those in intact families. This was true for all 20 parental alienation items about the mother and the 20 items about the father. As expected, participants whose parents had separated or divorced recalled their parents engaging in a greater amount of parental alienation, behaviors likely to foster a child’s unjustified rejection of the other parent. These data add to the growing body of evidence that these are the kinds of behaviors that divorcing parents engage in (Kelly and Emery 2003) and constitute an “unpacking” of the black box of parental alienation (Baker and Chambers 2011), although terms vary when describing these behaviors.



**Table 1** Means of parental alienation (BSQ) by marital status of parents

	Intact (n = 250)	Non-intact (n = 481)	F(sig)	d
<i>BSQ maternal variables</i>				
Made negative comments	.63	1.70	128.09***	.94
Limited contact	.06	.72	94.18***	.82
Withheld or blocked messages	.03	.27	27.90***	.41
Made communication difficult	.07	.46	46.65***	.54
Discomfort at other parent	.12	1.17	161.37***	1.07
Upset at child's affection with other parent	.14	.96	108.35***	.89
Said parent was unloving	.11	.62	53.61***	.61
Made child choose	.07	.71	76.64***	.73
Said parent was unsafe	.14	.54	39.19***	.46
Confided in child	.26	1.10	97.48***	.80
Required favoritism of child	.22	.88	78.48***	.74
Asked child to spy	.14	.60	42.55***	.54
Asked child to keep secrets	.12	.72	63.65***	.72
Called other parent by first name	.05	.30	25.69***	.41
Referred to New spouse Mom/Dad	.03	.19	17.87***	.30
Encouraged reliance on him/herself	.34	.97	57.39***	.62
Encouraged disregard of other parent	.08	.53	50.16***	.59
Hard to be with extended family	.07	.45	38.48***	.51
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	.10	.57	51.63***	.62
Tried to turn against other parent	.13	.76	69.67***	.67
<i>BSQ paternal variables</i>				
Made negative comments	.52	1.53	124.06***	.90
Limited contact	.07	.51	56.65***	.59
Withheld or blocked messages	.05	.19	11.61***	.27
Made communication difficult	.07	.34	26.51***	.41
Discomfort at other parent	.11	.96	122.15***	.95
Upset at child's affection with other parent	.13	.81	82.41***	.75
Said parent was unloving	.10	.43	29.66***	.44
Made child choose	.10	.62	56.82***	.62
Said parent was unsafe	.08	.41	32.65***	.47
Confided in child	.16	.76	63.20***	.68
Required favoritism of child	.22	.72	48.09***	.56
Asked child to spy	.09	.37	28.13***	.45
Asked child to keep secrets	.14	.56	37.58***	.54
Called other parent by first name	.07	.27	16.96***	.34
Referred to New spouse Mom/Dad	.05	.14	8.83**	.20
Encouraged reliance on him/herself	.38	.83	26.79***	.43
Encouraged disregard of other parent	.14	.53	33.51***	.48
Hard to be with extended family	.05	.41	41.39***	.54
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	.11	.49	35.85***	.51
Tried to turn against other parent	.13	.68	60.30***	.63

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ 

Second, reports of parental care were lower in the non-intact families than the intact ones. These data also contribute to the evidence base that parental love and affection can

become compromised as a result of the stressors associated with the dissolution of the marriage. As Emery (1999) notes, it is the children most in need of parental care and attention

**Table 2** Means of parental bonding (PBI) by marital status of parents

	Intact (n = 258)	Non-intact (n = 451)	F	Sig.
<i>PBI maternal variables</i>				
Care	27.22 (6.1)	25.11 (7.8)	23.32	.001
Overprotection	13.91 (6.1)	13.87 (6.8)	.08	ns
<i>PBI paternal variables</i>				
Care	23.67 (6.6)	20.42 (8.4)	36.22	.001
Overprotection	12.48 (6.5)	12.17 (6.9)	.18	ns

**Table 3** Means of psychological maltreatment measure (PMM) items by marital status of parents

	Intact (n = 258)	Non-intact (n = 451)	F	Sig.	d
<i>PMM maternal variables</i>					
Spurning	.14 (.51)	.34 (.87)	12.19	.001	.28
Terrorizing	.12 (.47)	.29 (.83)	09.5	.002	.25
Isolating	.28 (.69)	.46 (.93)	10.9	.001	.27
Exploiting/corrupting	.05 (.25)	.19 (.65)	14.77	.001	.28
Denying emotional responsiveness	.20 (.68)	.48 (.96)	19.70	.001	.34
<i>PMM paternal variables</i>					
Spurning	.20 (.65)	.50 (1.0)	20.38	.001	.36
Terrorizing	.21 (.68)	.46 (1.0)	19.50	.001	.29
Isolating	.33 (.81)	.49 (.99)	10.16	.002	.18
Exploiting/corrupting	.09 (.45)	.21 (.67)	06.6	.01	.21
Denying emotional responsiveness	.43 (.97)	1.0 (1.3)	45.03	.001	.50

**Table 4** Associations between parental bonding (PBI care and PBI overprotection) and parental alienation (BSQ) and psychological maltreatment (PMM) by parent and family status

	PMM maternal data		PMM paternal data	
	Intact (n = 258)	Non-intact (n = 481)	Intact (n = 258)	Non-intact (n = 481)
PBI care	-.51***	-.61***	-.44***	-.58***
PBI overprotect	.50***	.46***	.26***	.35***
Parental alienation (BSQ)	.50***	.63***	.64***	.56***

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

(those whose families are in upheaval) who are least likely to receive it due to the competing demands for the parent’s time and attention, at least during the initial stages of the family dissolution. This finding is echoed in the 25 year landmark study of children of divorce reported by Wallerstein et al. (2001). Our data suggest that this linkage between parental divorce and lower levels of perceived care persists although the causal mechanisms are not yet clear. It is important to remember when considering these data that the measures of parental care represent subjective ratings, measuring the perceptions and experiences of the children. We don’t consider this a limitation per se as Rohner and Khaleque (2005) rightly note that the subjective experience of parental care measured by items such as those in the PBI have demonstrated validity. Research has established that up to one-fourth of the variability in children’s psychological adjustment can be accounted for by their subjective experience of parental acceptance.

A third finding was that reports of psychological maltreatment were higher in the non-intact than the intact sample, again suggesting that divorce of one’s parents is associated with decreased parental care and increased compromised parenting. This was true for each of the five subtypes of psychological maltreatment, meaning that the effects were experienced as acts of omission (isolating and denying emotional responsiveness) as well as acts of commission (spurning, terrorizing, and exploiting).

The final finding was that the data supported the hypothesis that reports of psychological maltreatment were associated with both parental attitudes towards the child (parental care) and parental attitudes towards the child’s relationship with the other parent (parental alienation). In each of the 20 regression analyses, the total BSQ scores contributed a statistically significant amount of the variance in explaining psychological maltreatment. These data suggest that the child’s experience of being psychologically

**Table 5** Change in  $R^2$  and beta weights for predictors of psychological maltreatment (PMM) by mothers for intact sample

Predictor	Isolating		Terrorizing		Spurning		Exploiting/Corr.		Denying Emo.	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.25 <sup>c</sup>		.19 <sup>c</sup>		.21 <sup>c</sup>		.06 <sup>c</sup>		.25 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		-.05		-.13 <sup>a</sup>		-.18 <sup>b</sup>		-.10		-.10
PBI care		-.29 <sup>c</sup>		-.31 <sup>c</sup>		-.44 <sup>c</sup>		-.16 <sup>a</sup>		-.40 <sup>c</sup>
PBI overprotection		.32 <sup>c</sup>		.21 <sup>c</sup>		.08		.15 <sup>a</sup>		.20 <sup>c</sup>
Step 2	.03 <sup>c</sup>		.08 <sup>c</sup>		.09 <sup>c</sup>		.14 <sup>c</sup>		.09 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		-.02		-.07		-.12 <sup>a</sup>		-.02		.04
PBI care		-.24 <sup>c</sup>		-.36 <sup>c</sup>		-.36 <sup>c</sup>		-.05		-.32 <sup>c</sup>
PBI overprotection		.29 <sup>c</sup>		.17 <sup>b</sup>		.04		.10		.16 <sup>b</sup>
Parental alienation (BSQ)		.19 <sup>c</sup>		.32 <sup>c</sup>		.30 <sup>c</sup>		.40 <sup>c</sup>		.32 <sup>c</sup>
Total $R^2$	.29 <sup>c</sup>		.27 <sup>c</sup>		.29 <sup>c</sup>		.20 <sup>c</sup>		.35 <sup>c</sup>	

a =  $p < .05$ b =  $p < .01$ c =  $p < .001$ **Table 6** Change in  $R^2$  and beta weights for predictors of psychological maltreatment (PMM) by mothers for non-intact sample

Predictor	Isolating		Terrorizing		Spurning		Exploiting/Corr.		Denying Emo.	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.41 <sup>c</sup>		.22 <sup>c</sup>		.26 <sup>c</sup>		.11 <sup>c</sup>		.38 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		-.07		.01 <sup>a</sup>		-.01		.08		.01
PBI Care		-.31 <sup>c</sup>		-.32 <sup>c</sup>		-.45 <sup>c</sup>		-.24 <sup>b</sup>		-.57 <sup>c</sup>
PBI Overprotection		.44 <sup>c</sup>		.24 <sup>c</sup>		.12 <sup>c</sup>		.14 <sup>a</sup>		.10 <sup>a</sup>
Step 2	.05 <sup>c</sup>		.14 <sup>c</sup>		.09 <sup>c</sup>		.10 <sup>c</sup>		.03 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		.08		.01		.02		.09 <sup>a</sup>		.02
PBI Care		-.21 <sup>c</sup>		-.16 <sup>c</sup>		-.33 <sup>c</sup>		-.10 <sup>a</sup>		-.49 <sup>c</sup>
PBI Overprotection		.38 <sup>c</sup>		.15 <sup>b</sup>		.04		.07		.06
Parental Alienation (BSQ)		.28 <sup>c</sup>		.43 <sup>c</sup>		.34 <sup>c</sup>		.36 <sup>c</sup>		.21 <sup>c</sup>
Total $R^2$	.46 <sup>c</sup>		.35 <sup>c</sup>		.35 <sup>c</sup>		.21 <sup>c</sup>		.41 <sup>c</sup>	

a =  $p < .05$ b =  $p < .01$ c =  $p < .001$ 

maltreated is comprised of at least two related but distinct components: (1) the parent's care of the child and (2) the parent's acceptance of the child's relationship with the other parent. This means that a parent who is otherwise loving and accepting of the child but also engages in parental alienation will be participating in the psychological maltreatment of the child. Put another way, a child who experiences his parent as not accepting his relationship with the other parent will experience himself as psychologically maltreated regardless of the otherwise loving parenting that the parent engages in.

At least two possible mechanisms suggest themselves. The first is that children identify with their parents and

when one parent conveys to the child that the other parent is unworthy of the child's love and respect, the child will feel that the parent is conveying to the child his *own* unworthiness (If my mother wants me to reject and disrespect my father it must be because my father is bad and if my father is bad I must be bad as well). This process is consistent with object relations theory in which the "bad object" is taken in as an "introject" into the child's understanding of himself (e.g., Greenberg and Mitchell 1983). The parent's rejection of the other parent is experienced as a rejection of that part of the child that is like the other parent. The second potential pathway is that when a parent engages in parental alienation behaviors he is



**Table 7** Change in R<sup>2</sup> and beta weights for predictors of psychological maltreatment (PMM) by fathers for intact sample

Predictor	Isolating		Terrorizing		Spurning		Exploiting/Corr.		Denying Emo.	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.20 <sup>c</sup>		.12 <sup>c</sup>		.17 <sup>c</sup>		.04		.23 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		.06		.02		-.11		-.10		.07
PBI care		-.23 <sup>c</sup>		-.27 <sup>c</sup>		-.36 <sup>c</sup>		-.12		-.48 <sup>c</sup>
PBI overprotection		.31 <sup>c</sup>		.16 <sup>b</sup>		.11		.09 <sup>a</sup>		-.07
Step 2	.11 <sup>c</sup>		.31 <sup>c</sup>		.19 <sup>c</sup>		.53 <sup>c</sup>		.10 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		.10		.08		.06		-.02		-.03
PBI care		-.19 <sup>c</sup>		-.21 <sup>c</sup>		-.31 <sup>c</sup>		-.03		-.44 <sup>c</sup>
PBI overprotection		.25 <sup>c</sup>		.06		.03		-.04		.08
Parental alienation (BSQ)		.34 <sup>c</sup>		.57 <sup>c</sup>		.46 <sup>c</sup>		.66 <sup>c</sup>		.33 <sup>c</sup>
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.31 <sup>c</sup>		.43 <sup>c</sup>		.35 <sup>c</sup>		.57 <sup>c</sup>		.33 <sup>c</sup>	

a =  $p < .05$

b =  $p < .01$

c =  $p < .001$

**Table 8** Change in R<sup>2</sup> and beta weights for predictors of psychological maltreatment (PMM) by fathers for non-intact sample

Predictor	Isolating		Terrorizing		Spurning		Exploiting/Corr.		Denying Emo.	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.23 <sup>c</sup>		.17 <sup>c</sup>		.26 <sup>c</sup>		.07		.37 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		.12 <sup>b</sup>		.14		.04		-.00		.03
PBI care		-.18 <sup>c</sup>		-.28 <sup>c</sup>		-.45 <sup>c</sup>		-.21 <sup>c</sup>		-.61 <sup>c</sup>
PBI overprotection		.35 <sup>c</sup>		.17 <sup>c</sup>		.12 <sup>b</sup>		.11		-.00
Step 2	.09 <sup>c</sup>		.14 <sup>c</sup>		.09 <sup>c</sup>		.08 <sup>c</sup>		.02 <sup>c</sup>	
Age		.12 <sup>b</sup>		.13 <sup>c</sup>		.03		-.01		.03
PBI care		-.10 <sup>a</sup>		-.18 <sup>c</sup>		-.37 <sup>c</sup>		-.13 <sup>b</sup>		-.58 <sup>c</sup>
PBI overprotection		.28 <sup>c</sup>		.07		.05		-.04		-.04
Parental alienation (BSQ)		.32 <sup>c</sup>		.40 <sup>c</sup>		.32 <sup>c</sup>		.31 <sup>c</sup>		.13 <sup>c</sup>
Total R <sup>2</sup>	.32 <sup>c</sup>		.31 <sup>c</sup>		.34 <sup>c</sup>		.15 <sup>c</sup>		.39 <sup>c</sup>	

a =  $p < .05$

b =  $p < .01$

c =  $p < .001$

encouraging the child to believe that the other parent does not love him. From this the child can infer that he is unworthy of the other parent’s love (i.e., if my mother doesn’t love me, I must be unlovable). In both scenarios, the child is internalizing the negative messages that the parent is conveying to the child about the other parent as a negative message about *himself*. This could in part explain the linkages between exposure to parental alienation and long-term negative outcomes such as adult attachment relationships (e.g., Ben Ami and Baker 2012). That is, according to Critchfield and Benjamin (2008) children internalize their childhood relationships in specific ways

that create the blueprint for all of their subsequent relationships.

Directions for Future Research

The evidence base continues to grow regarding the negative impact on children’s development when their parents do not nurture and support their relationship with the other parent. Nonetheless, there are several important areas for future research. First, prospective studies should be conducted to replicate and refine the findings presented here, in the United States and in other countries and with other

types of samples. Many important questions could also be addressed with respect to the timing of the parental behaviors in relation to the divorce. For example, is engaging in parental alienation behaviors more harmful if they occur immediately following the divorce when new boundaries and relationships are being established? Resiliency to exposure to parental alienation is another very important area to consider. It would be helpful to know from a prevention perspective whether there are child, family, or relationship characteristics that protect children from the effects of parental alienation. If so, efforts can be made to develop and evaluate programs to strengthen these factors in children of divorce.

In the meantime, the information from the study could be used to increase awareness about the harmful effects of parental alienation which influence children's experience of being psychologically maltreated over and above the effects of parental care. Divorcing parents should take these data to heart and understand that their children internalize important messages about themselves based on the extent to which their relationship with the other parent is supported. They should be aware of the specific behaviors that comprise parental alienation so that they can avoid them in their own behavior and respond in a timely and decisive manner should their former spouse engage in them. Moreover, mental health and legal professionals working with divorcing families should be aware of the specific parental alienation behaviors and ways to address them (Baker and Sauber 2013).

## Limitations

The primary limitation of the study is the cross-sectional and retrospective nature of the design and data. This is a common design in studies of parental alienation and strongly points to the need for prospective studies in order to build into the research methods greater controls and mechanisms for establishing causal pathways. The fact that the participants were residents of another country could be considered both a strength and a limitation and certainly points to the need to replicate the findings elsewhere.

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