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The Linkage Between Parental Alienation Behaviors and Child Alienation

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ABSTRACT

One hundred and nine college students completed an anonymous and confidential survey regarding their childhood exposure to parental alienation strategies by each parent as well as their own actions and attitudes toward each parent. Results revealed statistically significant associations between parental alienation behaviors and behaviors of an alienated child, even after controlling for the quality of parenting of the rejected parent. The findings are discussed in light of attachment theory, social learning theory, and family systems theory.

KEYWORDS

Child alienation; college students; parental alienation

The theory of parental alienation has received widespread attention over the past decade, evidenced by among other things the focus of the annual conference of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts in 2010, several new books on the topic (e.g., Baker, 2007; Baker & Fine, 2014a, 2014b; Baker & Sauber, 2013; Bernet, 2010; Darnall, 2008; Eddy, 2012; Gottlieb, 2012; Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013; Warshak, 2010), and continued discussion of this phenomenon in the courts. There is nearly universal consensus that some children can be manipulated by a parent to unjustifiably reject the other parent (e.g., Baker, Jaffee, & Johnston, 2011), although there is disagreement about whether this constitutes a syndrome and the appropriate treatments for children who adamantly reject one parent (Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Gardner, 1999; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Parental alienation theory asserts that children who are exposed to certain parental behaviors might come to unjustifiably reject the other parent and that when they do so, they will exhibit specific behavioral markers that differentiate them from children who reject a parent based on the abuse or neglect, or seriously deficient parenting on the part of the parent being rejected. Gardner (1998) referred to these behaviors as the eight behavioral manifestations of alienation, and Kelly and Johnston (2001) referred to them as behaviors exhibited by “the alienated child.” Semantics aside, the descriptions show remarkable concordance. In fact, Kelly and Johnston began their description by saying that, “For the most part, our observations of the behaviors

and emotional responses of alienated children are similar to those reported by others (Gardner, 1998; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980)” (p. 262). They defined the alienated child thusly:

By definition, the core feature of alienated children is the extreme disproportion between the child’s perception and beliefs about the rejected parent and the actual history of the rejected parents’ behaviors and the parent–child relationship. . . . Most often, as stated above, rejected parents have had at least an adequate relationship with these children, and the angry rejection is not merited, even when contributions of the rejected parent are taken into account. (p. 262)

Thus, they start from the same premise as Gardner that some children unjustifiably reject one parent, ruling out reasonable explanations for the child’s rejection. In Table 1, their descriptors and those of Gardner (1998) are compared.

Despite the theoretical consensus, there is limited empirical data on these eight behaviors. In a small study, Baker, Burkhard, and Kelly (2012) found that children

Table 1. Descriptors of Kelly and Johnston (2001) and Gardner (1998).

Kelly and Johnston (2001)	Gardner (1998)
Alienated children freely express hatred or intense dislike toward the rejected parent . . . not reticent about broadcasting the perceived shortcomings of the parent to others . . . strongly expressed resistance to visiting . . . in any setting, including a therapeutic one, and a desire to unilaterally terminate the parent–child relationship	Campaign of denigration including willingness to broadcast with others the flaws of the rejected parent
Often present trivial reasons to justify their hatred They demonize and vilify that parent (rejected) . . . alienated children often idealize or speak glowingly of the aligned parent as an adult and parent	Weak, frivolous, absurd reasons for the rejection Lack of ambivalence
Their allegations about the rejected parent are mostly replicas or slight variants of the aligned parents’ . . . scripted lines are repeated endlessly but most often are hollow, without underlying substance, texture, or detail to support the allegations. They have adopted the allegation(s) but, unlike children with histories of abusive treatment, do not have compelling supporting information . . . sound very rehearsed, wooden, brittle, and frequently use adult words or phrases	Borrowed scenarios
They vigorously reject any suggestion that their obsessive hatred of the rejected parent has any relationship to the views or behaviors of the aligned parent	Independent thinker phenomenon
They appear not to be guilty or ambivalent as the children denigrate, often viciously, the rejected parent . . . no obvious regret	Lack of remorse or guilt
They refuse to consider any information that might undermine this viewpoint of their perfect companion and parent	Reflexive support for the favored parent
Alienated children have essentially been given permission to be powerful and to be hostile and rude toward the rejected parent, grandparents, and other relatives	Spread of hatred to family of rejected parent

designated by the courts as alienated (as opposed to estranged) exhibited more of these behaviors in a paper-and-pencil self-report measure than children designated as having difficulty adjusting to their parents' divorce, but were not alienated *per se*. Targeted parents also concurred that their alienated children were behaving in a manner consistent with alienation theory (Baker & Darnall, 2006). What is missing from the empirical literature, however, is evidence of the linkage between exposure to alienation behaviors on the part of the parent and alienation behaviors on the part of the child. This study was designed to test this linkage.

This study

This study was designed to address three questions:

- (1) Do adults report engaging in the eight behavioral manifestation of parental alienation?
- (2) Are reports of engaging in these behaviors associated with reports of exposure to parental alienation strategies?
- (3) Do the associations between parent and child behaviors exist even after controlling for poor parenting on the part of the rejected parent?

Method

Participants and procedures

In the fall of 2013, college students in general psychology classes at a small southwestern U.S. university were informed about the anonymous survey (and an alternative activity) for extra credit through flyers and announcements and, if interested, directed to a URL. The study was approved by the university's institutional review board and the survey itself included a detailed informed consent prior to the beginning of the survey.

Sample

Of 161 eligible students, 109 responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 68%. The sample was 68.7% women, ranging in age from 18 to 49 years ($M = 20.0$, $SD = 4.6$).

Measures

Baker strategy questionnaire

The Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ) is comprised of 19 items about specific behaviors and 1 item about a general behavior parents might engage in to induce loyalty conflict in their child (Baker & Chambers, 2011). Each

item was answered on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*), with missing or “I don’t know” responses (which were infrequent) recoded as 0. A summary score of number of behaviors endorsed was created for each parent. These two variables were normally distributed and had high internal consistency. The variable for mothers (parental alienation by mother) ranged from 0 to 20 ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 5.1$), $\alpha = .93$. The variable for fathers (parental alienation by father) ranged from 0 to 18 ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 4.7$), $\alpha = .91$.

Baker child alienation questionnaire

The Baker Child Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ) is an eight-item measure asking respondents to indicate whether (and how often) they exhibited each behavior toward a parent. Each of the eight behaviors represents one of the eight behavioral manifestations of parental alienation syndrome as described by Gardner (1998). A summary score was created to reflect the number (out of eight) behaviors engaged in with respect to each parent. For behaviors against the mother (rejection of mother) the variable ranged from 0 to 7 ($M = 1.3$, $SD = 1.8$), $\alpha = .79$. For behaviors against the father (ejection of father), the variable ranged from 0 to 8 ($M = 1.7$, $SD = 2.2$), $\alpha = .83$.

Psychological maltreatment measure

The Psychological Maltreatment Measure (PMM; Baker & Festinger, 2011) is a five-item measure of exposure to parental behaviors that are consistent with the definition of psychological maltreatment by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (Binggeli, Brassard, & Hart, 2001) and has been validated against four existing measures of psychological maltreatment. As there is no cutoff score to designate maltreatment (high scores) from poor parenting (low scores) on many psychological maltreatment scales, including this one, low levels of the scale can be considered indicators of poor parenting as opposed to maltreatment per se. Each of the five items on the PMM is rated separately for mother/stepfather and father/stepmother on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Total scores can range from 0 to 20 for each parent and in this sample ranged from 0 to 19 for mothers (poor parenting by mother; $M = 1.7$, $SD = 3.4$), $\alpha = .88$, and 0 to 20 for fathers (poor parenting by fathers; $M = 1.9$, $SD = 3.5$), $\alpha = .89$.

Results

Table 2 presents the proportion of participants who reported engaging in rejection of each parent. Each item was endorsed by between 6.4% and 31.2% of the sample. With respect to rejection of the mother, the campaign of denigration was endorsed by 6.4% of the sample, lack of ambivalence was

endorsed by 16.5% of the sample, lack of remorse was endorsed by 31.2% of the sample, borrowed scenarios was endorsed by 18.3% of the sample, automatic support was endorsed by 23.9% of the sample, and spread of the animosity was endorsed by 11.9% of the sample. On the total rejection of the mother scale, about half of the sample endorsed none of the items and the other half endorsed at least one item. Specifically, 14.0% endorsed just one item, 8.3% endorsed two items, 12.8% endorsed three items, and 5.5% or fewer endorsed four, five, six, or seven items each.

With respect to rejection of fathers, the campaign of denigration was endorsed by 11.9% of the sample; weak, frivolous, or absurd reasons for the rejection was endorsed by 11.9% of the sample; lack of ambivalence was endorsed by 22% of the sample; lack of remorse was endorsed by 31.2% of the sample; borrowed scenarios was endorsed by 18.3% of the sample; automatic support was endorsed by 28.4% of the sample; and spread of the animosity was endorsed by 22.0% of the sample. On the total rejection of the father scale, about half of the sample endorsed none of the items and the other half endorsed at least one. Specifically, 11.9% endorsed just one item, 12.8% endorsed two items, 11.0% endorsed three items, and 5.5% or fewer endorsed four, five, six, seven, or eight items each.

Next we examined whether the total parental alienation scores for each parent were related to total child alienation scores. We began by calculating correlations for mother data and father data separately. We found that parental alienation by mother was statistically associated with the child's rejection of the father ($r = .67, p < .011$). Likewise, parental alienation by father was associated with child's rejection of mother ($r = .51, p < .001$). We also examined whether respondents who reported that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent (Item 20 on the BSQ) reported engaging in a greater number of parental alienation behaviors with respect to the other parent. We found that respondents who reported that their mother tried to turn them against their father reported a statistically significantly greater number of parental alienation behaviors against their father ($M = 3.6, SD = 2.6$) as compared to those who did not endorse that item ($M = 1.2, SD = 1.8$), $t(27.9) = 4.2, p < .001$. Likewise, respondents who reported that

Table 2. Proportion Endorsing the Eight Behavioral Manifestations.

Behavior	Against mother		Against father	
Campaign of denigration	7	6.4%	13	11.9%
Weak, frivolous reasons	Missing		21	19.3%
Lack of ambivalence	18	16.5%	24	22.0%
Lack of remorse	34	31.2%	34	31.2%
Borrowed scenarios	19	17.4%	20	18.3%
Independent thinker	20	18.3%	20	18.3%
Automatic support	26	23.9%	31	28.4%
Spread of animosity	13	11.9%	24	22.0%

their father tried to turn them against their mother reported exhibiting a greater number of alienation behaviors against their mother ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 2.3$) than those who did not report that their father was trying to turn them against their mother ($M = 1.0$, $SD = 1.5$), $t(25.6) = 2.5$, $p < .02$.

Next we examined whether the child's rejection of a parent was associated with the other parent's alienation behaviors after controlling for the poor parenting of the rejected parent. To do this we conducted two stepwise hierarchical linear regression analyses. In the first analysis, we regressed father's alienation behaviors onto child's rejection of mother after controlling for mother's parenting. In the second, we regressed mother's alienation behaviors onto child's rejection of father after controlling for father's parenting. Results are presented in Table 3.

In both regression analyses, parental use of parental alienation strategies was statistically significantly associated with the child's rejection of the other parent over and above the targeted parent's suboptimal parenting, as measured by engaging in psychological maltreating behaviors. For child's rejection of the mother, the contribution of father's alienation accounted for 5% of the variance ($\beta = .28$, change in $R^2 = 5\%$, $p < .001$). For child's rejection of the father, the contribution of the mother's alienation accounted for 15% of the variance ($\beta = .47$, change in $R^2 = 15\%$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This study was conducted to test one piece of parental alienation theory, which is that children's exposure to one parent's alienation strategies is associated with their rejection of the other parent. Results from our analyses revealed that participants who reported that their fathers tried to turn them against their mothers and engaged in alienation strategies were more likely to exhibit unreasonable rejection of their mother and, likewise, participants who reported that their mothers tried to turn them against their fathers and engaged in alienation strategies were more likely to exhibit unreasonable

Table 3. Linear Regression Analyses on Rejection of a Parent From Child's Exposure to Other Parent's Alienation After Controlling for Rejected Parent's Parenting.

	B	β	R^2	Change
Rejection of mother				
Constant	3.4			
Parenting by mother	.25	.55	.45	.001
Alienation by father	.04	.28	.05	.001
Rejection of father				
Constant	.44			
Parenting by father	.20	.32	.35	.001
Alienation by mother	.20	.47	.15	.001

rejection of their fathers. These associations persisted even after controlling for the parenting behaviors of the rejected parent.

These data contribute to the growing body of empirical studies documenting the negative impact on children's exposure to parental alienation strategies, especially vis-à-vis their relationship with the other parent. The data support the theory that one parent can mediate or influence the child's relationship with the other parent over and above the child's own relationship and experience with that parent. Thus, mothers can shape how their children feel about and behave toward their fathers, even after taking into account the father's own behaviors. Likewise, fathers can shape how their children feel about and behave toward their mothers over and above how the mothers themselves behave.

This pattern of results can be understood in the context of several different theories of development. For example, attachment theory articulates the nature of a child's relationship with his or her caregivers as resulting from the caregiver's ability to sensitively and contingently respond to the child's needs for security (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). Over the second year of life, the child develops an internal working model (IWM) of that caregiving relationship—a mental template of that parent's history of responsiveness to guide the child in future situations—which helps the child respond to new internal and external triggers for security seeking based on the parent's history of responsiveness to the child (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). The IWM, however, is not set in stone and is able to accommodate new information about the caregiver that might result in a revised IWM. Thus, a caregiver who in the past was harsh and unavailable might become more sensitive toward the child's emotional cues. Over time, the child's IWM of that caregiver could change in response to this improvement, which could be reflected in the child's increased security in that relationship. The data presented in this article suggest that the child's IWM of a caregiver can also be modified to take into account information about the caregiver provided to the child by a third party, in this case the other parent. This position was first described by Garber (2004): "In the extreme one (actor) caregiver's denigrating and inaccurate messages can prompt a child to accommodate her IWM of another (object) caregiver such that her subjective experience of security with that caregiver has little or no relationship to his or her actual sensitivity and responsiveness. In effect, the child's security with the (object) caregiver has been corrupted and distorted" (p. 61). Thus, the child's rejection of one parent is predicated on the undue influence and misinformation provided to the child by the other parent as it becomes incorporated into the child's ever evolving IWM of his or her caregivers. The linkages found between exposure to parental alienation behaviors of the parent and the child's rejection of the targeted parent suggest that the child's attachment to the targeted parent had been corrupted and compromised.

Another theoretical framework relevant for understanding these findings is social learning theory, which posits that children can learn novel behaviors through observation and identification with a role model (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). In seminal research in this field, children behaved more aggressively toward an inflatable doll after observing others do so even though they ostensibly had no reason to be angry at the doll or were no more aggressive in general than children who had not observed the role model and hence were not aggressive with the doll. They had observed a role model and incorporated this novel behavior into their repertoire. In addition to observational learning, vicarious acquisition occurs through conditioning and instruction (Rachman, 1977, 1991). That is, children can be directly taught or rewarded for their behaviors as well. The parental alienation behaviors assessed in this study can be understood as reflecting opportunities for the child to learn through observation, conditioning, and instruction to fear and reject the targeted parent much the way that maternal modeling can result in children's acquisition of fear and avoidance of objects that they had up until that time had positive or at least neutral associations with (Dubí, Rapee, Emerton, & Schniering, 2008).

Family systems theory, as well, provides a useful framework for understanding the pattern of findings presented in this study. According to structural family systems theory, parents and children form a dynamic system of interrelated components that require proper balance and coordination to maintain optimal health of the family (Minuchin, 1993). In the ideal family system, parents form a unified and coherent subsystem differentiated from the children in the family. The adults have a healthy and mutually satisfying relationship and make parenting decisions jointly. There is a clear boundary between the roles of the parents and those of the children, with parents holding the seat of power and authority within the family system. The parental alienation behaviors described and measured in this study would reflect a violation of the proper parent-child relationship boundary as they create a power alliance between a child and one of his or her parents at the expense of the child's relationship with the other parent. This would create a "triangulated" relationship in which the child is caught in the middle of the parents' relationship rather than residing outside and separate from it. As Minuchin (1974) himself noted, when a child is looking down on a parent it is most likely because he or she is standing on the shoulders of the other parent. By this he meant that when children behave in an entitled, thoughtless, arrogant, and rude manner toward a parent, it is usually because they are aligned with the other parent and are enacting that parent's negative beliefs and attitudes toward the rejected parent. Thus, the parental alienation behaviors measured in this study reflect ways in which one parent dissolves the parent-child boundary to create a "cross-generational" alliance with a child against the other parent.

All of these frameworks are consistent with both the data and parental alienation theory and suggest that at least a portion of a child's rejection of a parent is associated with the other parent's engaging in parental alienation behaviors. These

data are in contrast to Johnston's (2003) data, in which the rejected parents were found to be the "architects" of their own rejection. One reason for the apparent discrepancy is that Johnston included abusive parents in her study and thus might have been detecting estrangement rather than alienation dynamics. In this study, measures on the PMM scale were quite low (mean under 2.0 for a scale that ranges from 0–20), indicating that few if any parents were actually abusive.

It is important to note that the study is not without methodological limitations, which bear noting. First, the study took place at a single setting at a single point in time with primarily participants within a small age band. Despite the high response rate, there is still reason to be cautious about the external validity of the study. For example, inferences are made about the temporal associations between child exposure to parental alienation behaviors and a child's exhibiting child alienation behaviors when in fact all of the data were collected at a single point in time retrospectively. Ideally future research can take the next step and examine associations between parent and child behaviors prospectively. Therefore, the findings should be considered preliminary, awaiting replication in other settings and in other samples of various ages, backgrounds, and life experiences. Second, all data are self-report and there is no way to ascertain whether student reports of their parents' behavior or even their own behavior growing up is reliable and valid. The theoretically consistent pattern of findings indicates the validity of the data but, again, replication in other settings, with other samples and perhaps even with other measures is a desirable next step for the field.

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