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Parental Alienation: A Measurement Tool

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ABSTRACT

The Rowlands' Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) was administered to 592 parents along with measures of convergent and discriminant validity. The scale was designed to capture the eight domains of parental alienating behavior posited in the literature. Factor analysis extracted only six factors, one of which was not included in the original eight: (a) campaign of denigration towards the alienated parent, (b) the independent thinker phenomenon, (c) reflexive support, (d) presence of borrowed scenarios, (e) spread of animosity to extended family, and (f) lack of positive affect towards the alienated parent. Parents who reported either that a court evaluation or court findings had confirmed the presence of parental alienation scored significantly higher on all six RPAS factors as well as on the overall RPAS score.

KEYWORDS

Parental alienation; parental alienating behaviors; high-conflict divorce; child custody evaluations; parental alienation syndrome

Parental alienating behavior and its impact on children have been identified in the literature for more than 60 years (Bernet, Boch-Galhau, Von, Baker, & Morrison, 2010; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Gardner, 1985; Johnston, 1994; Johnston, Campbell, & Mayes, 1985; Kopetski, 1998a, 1998b; Myers et al., 2002; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Watson, 1969; Westman, Cline, Swift, & Kramer, 1970). Gardner (1985) was the first to identify a constellation of manifestations that he labeled “parental alienation syndrome” (Gardner, 1985). Gardner (2003) described this phenomenon as

a childhood disorder that arises almost exclusively in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against the parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent. When true parental abuse and/or neglect is present, the child's animosity may be justified and so the parental alienation syndrome explanation for the child's hostility is not applicable. (p. 2)

Prior to the alienation, these children experience a normal parent-child relationship with the alienated parent (Lowenstein, 1999).

Gardner described eight symptoms and concluded that the greater the number and severity of symptoms, the greater the severity of the syndrome (Gardner, 1998a). Gardner (2003) wrote:

Parental alienation syndrome is characterized by a cluster of symptoms that usually appear together in the child, especially in moderate and severe types. These include: a campaign of denigration of one of the parents; weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations for the deprecation; lack of ambivalence; “the independent thinker” phenomenon; reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict; absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the alienated parent; the presence of borrowed scenarios; and the spread of animosity to the friends and/or extended family of the alienated parent. (pp. 3–4)

Many professionals dispute the conceptualization of this problem as a formal syndrome (Warshak, 2001), although there is near universal agreement that the phenomenon is genuine (Baker, Jaffe, Bernet, & Johnston, 2011; Warshak, 2015b). The literature has moved in the direction of referring to this disturbance as *parental alienation*, with no implication that it constitutes a syndrome. Additionally, evolving consensus describes the related term *parental alienation* as referring to the symptoms and behaviors of the alienated child and the term *alienating behaviors* as referring to the activities that contribute to the child’s rejection of the alienated parent.

Children exposed to parental alienating behavior can suffer negative impacts on their emotional, cognitive, and social well-being (Baker, 2010; Baker & Darnall, 2007; Boyan & Termini, 2005; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Garber, 2011; Kopetski, 2006; Lowenstein, 1999; Raso, 2004; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001; Warshak, 2015a). The literature has documented severe short- and long-term effects of exposure to parental alienating behavior and effects of becoming unreasonably alienated from a parent (Baker, 2010; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Davies & Martin, 2014; Lowenstein, 1999; Raso, 2004). There are reports of alienated children acting manipulative, resisting authority, and disregarding social norms (Baker, 2007; Gardner, 1998b; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Also, alienated children have shown problems with aggression, peer relationships, school adjustment, and impulse control (Buchanan et al., 1991).

More than 1,000 references throughout 35 different countries have described the phenomenon of children’s unreasonable rejection of a parent (Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013). Harman, Leder-Elder, and Biringe (2016) estimated that 9% of U.S. parents were alienated from their children. However, this is likely an overestimate because their study focused on the experience of alienating behaviors and no attempt was made to assess whether and how many participants in the study were actually alienated from their children. Fidler and Bala (2010) estimated that 11 to 15% of children in divorcing families were alienated from one parent and aligned with the other. Bernet et al. (2010) estimated that 1% of the children and adolescents in the United States were alienated from a parent (Bernet

et al., 2010). Warshak (2015a) estimated that between 2% and 4% of children become alienated from a parent following divorce.

In some cases, parental alienation processes and impacts are poorly understood (Bernet et al., 2010; Darnall, 2011; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Jaffe, Ashbourne, & Mamo, 2010). Mental health professionals might unknowingly contribute to the problem by providing misinformation to decision makers, implementing adverse treatment protocols, and making detrimental custody recommendations (Cartwright, 1993; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Gardner, 1998a; Greenberg, Gould, Gould-Saltman, & Stahl, 2003; Lowenstein, 1999; Warshak, 2015b). The disconnect between the presence and detection of parental alienation can be attributed, in part, to the lack of standardized assessment tools designed to identify this phenomenon (Baker, Burkhard, & Kelly, 2012; Baker & Darnall, 2007; Ellis, 2008; Rueda, 2004). Huff, Anderson, Adamsons, and Tambling (2017) reported a beginning effort to fill the gap with a scale to measure children's refusal of contact with parents following a divorce. The scale was administered to young children and it is not clear whether the scale is suitable to be administered to children and adolescents (Huff et al., 2017).

The purpose of this study was to design and validate an assessment tool for administration to parents to assist in measuring the presence and severity of parental alienation in children.

Method

Participants

The participants were 592 parents: 299 fathers (50.4%), 291 mothers (49.2%), and 2 transgender persons, all of whom identified themselves as alienated from their children. The sample answered questions about the child with whom they believed they had the most troubled relationship. The target children were 274 males (46.4%), 315 females (53.4%), 1 transgender, and 2 for whom the parent failed to identify the gender. [Table 1](#) gives a summary of information regarding the participants.

Measures

A background questionnaire elicited demographic information about the respondents and their children. Also, the questionnaire elicited information based on the respondent's perception related to the family dynamics history; that is, parent-child relationship history, child custody history, parental relationship history, and so on. The questionnaire also asked: "Has any court-appointed evaluator concluded that your child's rejection of you was NOT reasonable and was NOT justified by your behavior?" and "Has any court made a finding or included in

Table 1. Sample Demographic Details.

Variable	Total number	Total percentage
Participant gender		
Male	299	50.5%
Female	291	49.2%
Transgender	2	0.3%
Child gender		
Male	274	46.4%
Female	315	53.4%
Transgender	1	0.2%
Participant's relationship history with other parent		
Married	464	78.4%
Once lived together	98	16.6%
Never married/never lived together	28	4.7%
Nonresponsive	2	0.3%
Participant once had a positive relationship with child		
Yes	576	97.3%
No	14	2.4%
Unresponsive	2	0.3%
A court-appointed evaluator concluded rejection was not reasonable and not justified		
Yes	158	26.7%
No	429	72.5%
Unresponsive	5	0.8%
A court made a finding, or included in its decision, that the child alienation was not reasonable and was not justified		
Yes	87	14.7%
No	499	84.3%
Unresponsive	6	1.0%
Participant's child's other parent ever diagnosed with a mental illness		
Yes	165	27.9%
No	182	30.7%
Unknown	243	41.0%
Unresponsive	2	0.3%

its decision that your child's alienation was NOT reasonable and was NOT justified by your behavior?"

The Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) was developed and administered to the study sample to measure the presence and severity of parental alienation. The RPAS was designed to capture the eight manifestations posited by Gardner as distinct domains. An item pool was generated to reflect these domains, items were shared with recognized experts in the field, and as a result of the experts' review, redundant items and items not related to the construct of parental alienation were removed. The final item count was 42 (see Table 2). A measure was designed using a Likert-type scale response format asking respondents to rate each item on a 5-point scale: 0 = *never*, 1 = *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *often* and 4 = *almost always*.

The Baker and Darnall (2007) 33-item survey was administered to measure convergent validity. The survey was designed to assess the

Table 2. Original Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) Items.

Item no.	Original factors	Questions
rpas1	1	How often does/did your child call you names?
rpas2	1	How often does/did your child refuse to follow your directions?
rpas3	1	How often does/did your child belittle or make fun of you?
rpas4	1	How often does/did your child say mean things to you?
rpas5	1	How often does/did your child say positive or complimentary things about you?
rpas6	2	Does/did your child ever give you weak or absurd reasons for rejecting you?
rpas7	2	Does/did your child ever give you weak or absurd reasons for being mean to you?
rpas8	2	Does/did your child ever express he/she is afraid of you with no legitimate reason?
rpas9	1	How often does/did your child refuse to spend time with you?
rpas10	2	Does/did your child give good reasons for rejecting you?
rpas11	3	Does/did your child idealize the other parent?
rpas12	3	Does/did your child express belief that you are a bad person?
rpas13	3	Does/did your child identify any positive aspects of you?
rpas14	3	Does/did your child identify any negative aspects of the other parent?
rpas15	3	Does/did your child believe that the other parent can do no wrong?
rpas16	3	Does/did your child believe that you can't do anything right?
rpas17	4	Does/did your child say mean things to you that the other parent has also said?
rpas18	4	Does/did your child insist that his decision to be mean to you is his own decision and not influenced by the other parent?
rpas19	4	Does/did your child deny that the other parent is influencing his/her beliefs about you?
rpas20	4	Does/did your child admit that his or her beliefs are influenced by the other parent?
rpas21	1	Does/did your child act rudely towards you?
rpas22	6	Does/did your child express gratitude towards you?
rpas23	6	Does/did your child express guilt for their behavior towards you?
rpas24	6	Does/did your child act emotionally cold towards you?
rpas25	6	Does/did your child express love and affection towards you?
rpas26	5	Does/did your child ever take your side when you and the other parent don't agree?
rpas27	5	Does/did your child express unconditional support of the other parent?
rpas28	5	Does/did your child support the opinions expressed by the other parent?
rpas29	5	Does/did your child support the opinions you have expressed?
rpas30	5	Does/did your child speak in a robotic fashion when describing negative events about you?
rpas31	7	Does/did your child make false accusations about you that cannot be supported with details or facts?
rpas32	7	Does/did your child make false accusations about you for events when your child was not present or was too young to remember?
rpas33	7	Does/did your child make accusations against you that the other parent has also made against you?
rpas34	7	Does/did your child use words that are beyond his/her comprehension when describing negative events about you?
rpas35	8	Does/did your child refuse to spend time with members of your extended family?
rpas36	8	Does/did your child verbalize unjustified mean-spirited statements about members of your extended family?
rpas37	8	Does/did your child express hatred towards your significant other?
rpas38	8	Does/did your child make false allegations against members of your extended family which cannot be supported with facts or details?

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Item no.	Original factors	Questions
rpas39	8	Does/did your child express love or affection towards at least one member of your extended family?
rpas40	1	Does/did your child express an interest in going to court to tell the judge how he/she feels about you?
rpas41	3	Does/did your child describe the other parent as the victim?
rpas42	1	Are you embarrassed by the way your child treats/treated you?

Note: Originally there were eight factors based on parental alienation literature. Factor 1 = campaign of denigration; Factor 2 = weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations; Factor 3 = lack of ambivalence; Factor 4 = the independent thinker phenomenon; Factor 5 = reflexive support; Factor 6 = absence of guilt; Factor 7 = presence of borrowed scenarios; Factor 8 = spread of animosity to extended family.

presence of the eight manifestations of parental alienation in children identified as severely alienated. Responses are coded on a 5-point frequency scale or a 5-point quantity scale. Baker and Darnall found that their survey supported Gardner's formulation of eight manifestations that comprise parental alienation. However, no reliability or validity data were reported for the survey.

The Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS; Pianta, 1992) was administered for the purpose of establishing discriminant validity. The CPRS is a self-report instrument that assesses the parents' perceptions of their relationships with their children using 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The ratings are summed into groups of items that comprise conflict and closeness subscales. Driscoll and Pianta (2011) found many statistically significant correlations between the CPRS (parent reports) and observer report. Dyer, Kaufman, and Fagan (2017) found that the CPRS closeness scale demonstrated measurement equivalence across time and both reliability and validity; the conflict scale showed both convergent and predictive validity.

Procedures

After procuring approval from a university review board, a convenience sample was obtained from multiple parental alienation online parent forums. These forums included [facebook.com/Parental-Alienation-Support](https://www.facebook.com/Parental-Alienation-Support), ParentsAgainstParentalAlienation@yahoo.com, <http://againstrpasrrpas.org/>, <http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Lost-My-Children-To-Parental-Alienation/>, and parentsagainstalienation@yahoogroups.com. These forums provide platforms for parents who believe they have been alienated from their child(ren). The forums' administrators agreed to post study-related information. Some forum participants brought the study to the attention of

other prospective participants who were not members of online forums, creating an unintended snowball contribution to the sample.

Survey Monkey was used to collect data. The informed consent, background questionnaire, RPAS, Baker and Darnall (2007) survey, CPRS (Pianta, 1992), and Hurt, Insult, Threaten, Scream Assessment (HITS; Sherin, Sinacore, Li, Zitter, & Shakil, 1998) were included in the survey, although data from the HITS are not reported in this article.

The total number of study participants on the date the data were downloaded from Survey Monkey was 634. Of these 634 total participants, 41 were excluded because their children were over 25 years of age and one was excluded because the identified child was deceased; these participants were excluded because a longer time gap creates a higher potential for errors in recall. Not all participants remaining in the sample completed all questions included in the overall survey. Scales were not computed for any participants who were missing more than 20% of the items on any given scale. In cases with less than 20% missing data, mean substitution was used in the factor analysis. The final sample size included 592 for the background questionnaire, 589 for the RPAS, 588 for the Baker and Darnall survey, 589 for the CPRS, and 591 for the HITS Assessment.

Results

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to develop subscales for the RPAS. The factor solution was obtained using principal components axis factoring and a Promax oblique rotation with Kaiser normalization. The 23 items with factor loadings above .50 were retained and a second factor analysis was run to obtain a final factor solution. Table 3 shows the communalities as extracted through principal components axis factoring; Table 4 shows the total variance as determined through principal axis factoring; and Table 5 shows the final factor loadings, resulting in six factors: lack of positive affect toward the parent, campaign of denigration, unconditional reflexive support, presence of borrowed scenarios, spread of animosity toward extended family, and independent thinker phenomenon. The internal consistency of the factors was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As shown in Table 6, all six factors as well as the overall RPAS scale (the mean of all 23 items) were internally consistent, with alpha coefficients ranging from .78 to .93, demonstrating moderate to strong reliability.

The average overall mean score generated by the 589 participants completing the RPAS was 3.55 on the 4-point scale; the average standard deviation was .82. Four of the six subscales were skewed, as indicated by the *z* scores (skewness divided by the standard error of skewness, SK/SE). A normalizing transformation was applied to all skewed variables prior to running parametric statistics. For these variables skewed to the high end, the

Table 3. Communalities.

	Initial	Extraction
rpas1	.571	.597
rpas2	.619	.638
rpas3	.662	.732
rpas4	.742	.838
rpas5	.612	.634
rpas11	.643	.697
rpas13	.690	.756
rpas15	.624	.693
rpas18	.705	.827
rpas19	.662	.738
rpas22	.706	.765
rpas25	.650	.677
rpas27	.678	.738
rpas28	.675	.711
rpas29	.532	.558
rpas31	.665	.730
rpas32	.565	.663
rpas33	.626	.705
rpas34	.471	.508
rpas35	.564	.605
rpas36	.591	.804
rpas38	.436	.426
rpas39	.462	.466

Note: Extraction method: principal axis factoring;
Rowland Parental Alienation Scale reverse-scored
item.

Table 4. Total Variance Explained.

Factor	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	9.990	43.434	43.434	9.684	42.103	42.103	7.137
2	2.341	10.179	53.613	1.994	8.671	50.773	5.925
3	1.735	7.542	61.156	1.424	6.191	56.965	6.880
4	1.423	6.189	67.345	1.090	4.739	61.704	5.679
5	1.050	4.564	71.909	0.733	3.186	64.890	4.877
6	0.855	3.718	75.627	0.582	2.529	67.418	6.581
7	0.655	2.849	78.475				
8	0.485	2.108	80.584				
9	0.446	1.941	82.524				
10	0.419	1.820	84.344				
11	0.400	1.741	86.085				
12	0.373	1.622	87.707				
13	0.363	1.578	89.285				
14	0.338	1.468	90.753				
15	0.301	1.310	92.063				
16	0.280	1.218	93.281				
17	0.268	1.165	94.446				
18	0.249	1.083	95.529				
19	0.230	0.999	96.528				
20	0.220	0.955	97.483				
21	0.207	0.901	98.384				
22	0.195	0.849	99.234				
23	0.176	0.766	100.000				

Note: Extraction method: principal components axis factoring.

Table 5. Final Factor Loadings.

	Lack of positive affect toward this parent 1	Campaign of denigration 2	Unconditional reflexive support 3	Presence of borrowed scenario 4	Spread of animosity toward extended family 5	Independent thinker 6
rpas1		0.791				
rpas2		0.707				
rpas3		0.824				
rpas4		0.862				
rpas5 ^a	0.773					
rpas11			0.839			
rpas13 ^a	0.899					
rpas15			0.853			
rpas18						0.862
rpas19						0.829
rpas22 ^a	0.864					
rpas25 ^a	0.715					
rpas27			0.834			
rpas28			0.673			
rpas29 ^a	0.690					
rpas31				0.766		
rpas32				0.857		
rpas33				0.811		
rpas34				0.650		
rpas35					0.544	
rpas36					0.870	
rpas38					0.536	
rpas39 ^a	0.604					

^aReverse-scored.

Table 6. Cronbach's Alpha.

Factor	Name	Items	Cronbach's alpha
1	Lack of positive affect toward this parent	rpas5 ^a , rpas13 ^a , rpas22 ^a , rpas25 ^a , rpas29 ^a	.887
2	Campaign of denigration	rpas1, rpas2, rpas3, rpas4	.900
3	Unconditional reflexive support for other parent	rpas11, rpas15, rpas27, rpas28	.899
4	Presence of borrowed scenario	rpas31, rpas32, rpas33, rpas34	.872
5	Spread of animosity toward extended family	rpas35, rpas36, rpas39 ^a , rpas38	.785
6	Independent thinker	rpas18, rpas19	.873
	Overall RPAS		.938

Note: RPAS = Rowland Parental Alienation Scale.

^aReverse-scored.

natural logarithm of the inverse was used. Two of the RPAS factors could not be normalized and results of these analyses were confirmed using a nonparametric equivalent statistic, Spearman correlation. As indicated by the standard errors of measurement, the factor scores had a relatively high level of accuracy with the 95% confidence levels varying by only a point or less in either direction around the average scores. The summary statistics for the RPAS are provided in Table 7.

Table 7. Summary Statistics for Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS).

	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	SEM ^a	Skewness	SE	SK/SE	
							Original	Normalized ^b
Parent Alienation Scale								
RPAS Factor1	590	3.77	0.91	0.31	-0.78	0.10	-7.76	0.25
RPAS Factor2	581	2.84	1.10	0.35	0.00	0.10	-0.01	
RPAS Factor3	584	4.18	1.02	0.32	-1.35	0.10	-13.35	6.93
RPAS Factor4	578	3.48	1.10	0.39	-0.51	0.10	-4.98	-2.69
RPAS Factor5	582	3.13	1.17	0.54	-0.22	0.10	-2.14	
RPAS Factor6	579	3.85	1.40	0.50	-0.92	0.10	-8.97	4.66
Overall RPAS	589	3.55	0.82	0.20	-0.72	0.10	-7.09	-0.06

^aStandard error of measurement. ^bNatural logarithm of the inverse.

Responses to the two questions on the background questionnaire related to independent sources confirming parental alienation were compared using *t* tests between parents who answered “yes” to either of these two questions and those who answered “no” to both questions. Parents who reported that a court evaluation or court finding had confirmed their experience of parental alienation scored significantly higher on all six RPAS factors as well as on the overall RPAS score. The results are provided in Table 8.

Pearson correlations between the RPAS and the Baker and Darnall (2007) survey determined convergent validity. All relationships were highly significant ($p < .001$), supporting strong convergent validity. Given that four of the factors could not be normalized, Spearman correlations using the original factors and scales confirmed the strength of the relationships. Again, all relationships were highly significant. Pearson correlations between the RPAS and the Baker and Darnall survey are illustrated in Table 9; Spearman correlations are illustrated in Table 10.

Pearson correlations between the RPAS and the CPRS (Pianta, 1992), the Closeness subscale and the Conflict subscale, determined discriminant validity.

Table 8. *t* Tests Confirmed Versus Unconfirmed Parental Alienation.

Factor	Name	Court ^a	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
1	Lack of positive affect toward this parent ^b	Yes	171	0.66	0.42	-2.41	582	.016
		No	413	0.75	0.40			
2	Campaign of denigration	Yes	170	3.02	1.12	2.40	574	.017
		No	406	2.78	1.08			
3	Unconditional reflexive support for other parent ^b	Yes	172	0.38	0.46	-2.80	576	.005
		No	406	0.51	0.49			
4	Presence of borrowed scenario ^b	Yes	168	0.72	0.45	-3.11	570	.002
		No	404	0.86	0.47			
5	Spread of animosity toward extended family	Yes	170	3.44	1.09	4.16	574	< .001
		No	406	3.00	1.18			
6	Independent thinker ^b	Yes	168	0.47	0.56	-2.48	571	.014
		No	405	0.61	0.63			
Overall RPAS ^b		Yes	172	0.75	0.34	-4.11	581	< .001
		No	411	0.87	0.32			

Note: RPAS = Rowland Parental Alienation Scale.

^aCourt-appointed evaluation or finding confirmed parent alienation. ^bNormalized scores (logarithm of the inverse); lower means indicate higher scores.

Table 9. Pearson Correlations Between Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) and Baker and Darnall (2007) Survey Scales.

Baker and Darnall scale		RPAS						Overall RPAS ^a
		F1 ^a	F2	F3 ^a	F4 ^a	F5	F6 ^a	
F1 ^a	<i>r</i>	.784	.612	.584	.443	.564	.618	.804
	<i>N</i>	586	578	581	576	579	577	586
F2 ^a	<i>r</i>	.498	.291	.475	.463	.437	.498	.576
	<i>N</i>	573	566	569	563	566	565	573
F3 ^a	<i>r</i>	.481	.328	.665	.395	.365	.441	.578
	<i>N</i>	584	574	580	572	576	574	583
F4 ^a	<i>r</i>	.523	.426	.541	.392	.384	.738	.635
	<i>N</i>	583	574	577	571	574	574	583
F5 ^a	<i>r</i>	.531	.240	.392	.137	.245	.351	.424
	<i>N</i>	585	575	580	573	577	574	584
F6 ^a	<i>r</i>	.647	.469	.717	.356	.448	.545	.677
	<i>N</i>	579	570	576	569	570	570	578
F7 ^a	<i>r</i>	.285	.451	.390	.655	.449	.464	.579
	<i>N</i>	587	577	582	574	578	577	586
F8 ^a	<i>r</i>	.474	.240	.340	.343	.613	.453	.540
	<i>N</i>	586	576	581	574	578	578	585

Note: All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

^aNormalized scales were used; direction of the relationships was adjusted to reflect original scoring.

Table 10. Spearman Correlations Between Survey Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) and Baker and Darnall (2007) Survey.

Baker and Darnall scale		RPAS						Overall RPAS
		F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	
F1	<i>r</i>	.784	.610	.550	.446	.556	.613	.805
	<i>N</i>	586	578	581	576	579	577	586
F2	<i>r</i>	.489	.285	.448	.464	.428	.488	.565
	<i>N</i>	573	566	569	563	566	565	573
F3	<i>r</i>	.469	.321	.638	.390	.349	.431	.562
	<i>N</i>	584	574	580	572	576	574	583
F4	<i>r</i>	.523	.425	.512	.403	.381	.735	.644
	<i>N</i>	583	574	577	571	574	574	583
F5	<i>r</i>	.530	.228	.361	.127	.238	.342	.418
	<i>N</i>	585	575	580	573	577	574	584
F6	<i>r</i>	.634	.454	.658	.349	.421	.521	.651
	<i>N</i>	579	570	576	569	570	570	578
F7	<i>r</i>	.279	.454	.375	.660	.436	.458	.575
	<i>N</i>	587	577	582	574	578	577	586
F8	<i>r</i>	.480	.251	.333	.348	.625	.461	.546
	<i>N</i>	586	576	581	574	578	578	585

Note: All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

All relationships were highly significant ($p < .001$). High scores on the conflict subscale were comparable to high scores on the RPAS scale and likewise a negative correlation between alienation and closeness was identified. Spearman correlations using the original factors and scales confirmed the strength of the relationships. Again, all relationships were highly significant. The Pearson correlations between the RPAS and the CPRS (Pianta, 1992) are illustrated in Table 11; the Spearman correlations are illustrated in Table 12.

Table 11. Pearson Correlations Between Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) and Parent–Child Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1992).

Pianta Parent–Child Relationship Scale	RPAS						Overall RPAS ^a	
	F1 ^a	F2	F3 ^a	F4 ^a	F5	F6 ^a		
Closeness ^a	<i>r</i>	-.687	-.402	-.472	-.290	-.410	-.476	-.598
	<i>N</i>	587	579	582	577	579	577	586
Conflict ^a	<i>r</i>	.502	.628	.522	.379	.403	.522	.644
	<i>N</i>	587	579	581	575	579	577	587

Note: All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

^aNormalized scales were used; direction of the relationships was adjusted to reflect original scoring.

Table 12. Spearman Correlations Between Rowland Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) and Parent–Child Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1992).

Pianta Parent–Child Relationship Scale	RPAS						Overall RPAS	
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6		
Closeness	<i>r</i>	-.695	-.408	-.462	-.297	-.406	-.480	-.599
	<i>N</i>	587	579	582	577	579	577	586
Conflict	<i>r</i>	.493	.632	.499	.389	.386	.510	.642
	<i>N</i>	587	579	581	575	579	577	587

Note: All correlations are significant at $p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to develop, administer, and psychometrically test a scale to measure the presence and severity of parental alienation. Findings of the exploratory factor analysis of the RPAS were promising. Through the analysis, six factors were extracted from the 42 original items. Specifically, the following five factors, which were included in the original eight, were extracted: campaign of denigration toward the alienated parent, the independent thinker phenomenon, reflexive support, presence of borrowed scenarios, and spread of animosity to extended family. One extracted factor was not included in the original eight factors: lack of positive affect toward the alienated parent. Three factors from the original eight factors were not extracted as factor loadings were below .50: weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations; lack of ambivalence; and absence of guilt.

Several explanations are possible for the discrepancy between the factors hypothesized and those revealed in the analyses. First, parental perceptions regarding their child's emotional, behavioral, and cognitive manifestations might have been inaccurate, leading to false extraction or null extraction. Second, items identified as directly related to these factors and included in the item pool might, in fact, not have directly measured these factors and hence were not able to produce factor loadings above .50 leading to extraction. Third, the factors not extracted might not be significant, essential features required to identify parental alienation.

The RPAS was also developed to measure the severity of parental alienation. The analysis confirmed that parents who reported either that a court evaluation or court findings had confirmed the presence of parental alienation scored significantly higher on all six RPAS factors as well as on the overall RPAS score. These results support the validity of this scale as both a measure of parental alienation and a measure of severity. Confirmation of parental alienation through a court evaluation or court findings does not necessarily indicate that these cases represented more severe parental alienation; it is possible that in the cases where parental alienation was not confirmed by a court evaluation or court finding, there was no court involvement or court evaluation.

The study has several limitations related to the sample, the measures used to collect the data, and the operational definition of severe parental alienation used to quantify severity. In the case of the sample, the self-identified group of alienated parents was presumably more knowledgeable about parental alienation than the general population. There is no way to know whether or not the responses provided were based on their actual experiences or exaggerated to “fit” the participants’ presumed understanding of parental alienation criteria. Thus, the use of a convenience and snowball sample in this study limits the generalizability of the findings.

The measurement tools have some important limitations. First, the measures relied on the participants’ self-reporting, which can be influenced by selective memory, exaggeration, inaccurate attribution of events, and dishonesty. The accuracy of the self-reports was not independently verified. Also, parents’ reports of their children’s behavior would likely differ from what the children would report about themselves. Second, one of the comparison measures used to determine convergent validity, the Baker and Darnall (2007) survey, has not been validated as an accurate measure to identify parental alienation. Third, severity of parental alienation was based on the assumption that parental alienation was more severe in cases where a court evaluator or court judgment confirmed the presence of parental alienation. Because this assumption might be incorrect, the study’s conclusion should be limited to noting that scores on the RPAS are higher in cases where a court-appointed evaluator or court made a finding that the child’s alienation was not reasonable and was not justified by the alienated parent’s behavior.

The development and use of a standardized measurement tool could contribute to the clinical and judicial acceptance of parental alienation. An instrument to measure the presence and severity of parental alienation, when further developed and tested, can assist child custody evaluators, child welfare workers, family law practitioners, courts, and mental health professionals who are tasked with making or contributing to custody and treatment decisions for children and families.

The RPAS developed for this study shows promise in both identifying the presence and severity of parental alienation. Future studies should examine whether additional items related to the original eight factors would support the three factors that were not supported in this study, or confirm that these three factors are not essential elements of parental alienation. Also, future studies should use the newly identified factor to determine whether it is essential to identifying parental alienation. Future studies should also examine reports of alienation by court-appointed evaluators and judicial findings of alienation to estimate the severity of alienation and compare these estimates with the RPAS severity levels of parental alienation. Future studies should also include a more heterogeneous sample population representing both presumably alienated parents and presumably nonalienated parents. Finally, a future study could administer the RPAS to parents and the Huff et al. (2017) scale to the children in the same families to assess the similarity versus differences in the reports of alienated children and the parents they reject.

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