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# Parent–Child Communication Apprehension: The Role of Parental Alienation and Self-Esteem

Lindsey S. Aloia & Claire Strutzenberg

*This study examined communication apprehension within parent–child relationships as a function of parental alienation and self-esteem. We posited that parental alienation in childhood was positively associated with parent–child communication apprehension in adulthood, and that self-esteem in adulthood mediated the association. Results from 211 college-aged students indicated that parental alienation from male and female caregivers in childhood was positively associated with communication apprehension with female caregivers in adulthood. In addition, parental alienation from male caregivers in childhood was positively associated with communication apprehension with male caregivers in adulthood. The findings also indicated a stronger positive relationship between parental alienation and parent–child communication apprehension when self-esteem was low rather than high.*

**Keywords:** *Communication Apprehension; Parental Alienation; Self-Esteem*

Communication apprehension, defined as a broadly based fear related to real or anticipated oral speech (McCroskey, 1970, 1976), is experienced in an array of interpersonal relationships, including family kinships (Lucchetti, Powers, & Love, 2002). Previous research demonstrated that communication apprehension can produce a myriad of negative outcomes. More specifically, communication apprehension in parent–child relationships discourages children from sharing information (Lucchetti et al., 2002) and seeking parental guidance (Cascio, Guzzo, Pace, & Pace,

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2013) resulting in decreased relationship quality and satisfaction. In addition to relational damage, parent–child communication apprehension is associated with increased distress (Wright, 2000), decreased self-esteem (Cascio et al., 2013), and lowered self-efficacy for the child (Dwyer & Fus, 2002).

Not surprisingly, such findings prompted researchers to understand the genesis of communication apprehension within parent–child relationships. Some scholars suggested that an insecure attachment relationship with a primary caregiver encourages apprehensive behaviors (Critchfield & Benjamin, 2008). Social learning theory suggests that communication apprehension is likely the result of exposure to anxious parental communicative models (Bandura, 1973). Ayres (1988) specified that “communication apprehension is a learned trait, one that is conditioned through reinforcement of the child’s communication behaviors” (p. 80). Consistent across the aforementioned sources of communication apprehension is the influence of precarious parent–child interactions. Because parental alienation communicates disdain toward the other parent and damages parent–child relationships (Warshak, 2001), we saw utility in exploring how parental alienation parent–child communication in childhood may condition parent–child communication apprehension in adulthood.

The extent to which parental alienation in childhood leads to parent–child communication apprehension in adulthood may be influenced by self-esteem. Self-esteem is defined as a generalized sense of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1979). High self-esteem refers to a favorable global evaluation of the self and is associated with independence (Prager & Buhrmester, 1998) and general life satisfaction (Myers & Diener, 1995). People with high self-esteem also benefit relationally by experiencing greater social connection (Prager & Buhrmester, 1998) and increased affiliative warmth (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008). Conversely, low self-esteem denotes an adverse self-evaluation and is related to anxiety (Leary & MacDonald, 2003) and depression (Dumont & Provost, 1999). Individuals with low self-esteem also tend to socially isolate (Murray et al., 2008) encouraging relational dissatisfaction (Leary & MacDonald, 2003). We expect high self-esteem to reduce the connection between parental alienation in childhood and communication apprehension in adulthood by promoting self-worth in parent–child relationships.

Our goal was to examine communication apprehension within parent–child relationships in adulthood as a function of parental alienation in childhood. In addition, we used the buffering hypothesis as a foundation to consider the mitigating effects of self-esteem. In the sections that follow, we review research highlighting the consequences of parental alienation in childhood. Then, we define the buffering hypothesis and consider how self-esteem may buffer the effects of parental alienation.

### *Consequences of Parental Alienation*

Parental alienation is the process of psychological manipulation of a child by a parent intended to exclude, isolate, and ostracize the other parent (Warshak, 2001). Evaluated on a continuum, parental alienation is situated between parental marginalization, which

describes the process of differentiation and distancing within a parent–child relationship (Dorrance Hall, 2015; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017), and parental estrangement, which describes the decision to discontinue communication because of significant damage to the parent–child bond (Carr, Holman, Abetz, Koenig Kellas, & Vagnoni, 2015; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). Derived from research on family separation and divorce, parental alienation often creates an unhealthy relationship between the manipulative parent and the child by distorting the child’s beliefs about the other parent through disparaging speech against the other parent and resistance regarding parental contact between child and parent (Gardner, 1998). Although the majority of previous research investigating parental alienation occurred in the context of legal conflicts regarding child custody and parental visitation (Darnall, 1998; Warshak, 2001), Baker (2006) demonstrated that parental alienation also occurs within intact families. Furthermore, parents in intact families use the same strategies to manipulate the child’s relationship with the other parent despite living in the same household (Baker, 2006).

Parental alienation in childhood has psychological, behavioral, and physiological ramifications for the child. There is an association between parental alienation during childhood and psychological problems, such as increased anxiety (Schrodt & Shimkowski, 2013), higher distress (Amato & Afifi, 2006), and lesser happiness (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Children are also more likely to develop behavioral problems, such as resistance to authority, hostile behavior with parents, and peer conflict instigation (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Finally, recent research points to disturbances in physiological patterns for children who are alienated by parents, such as children’s arousal patterns and emotional adaptive capacity (DeCaro & Worthman, 2008).

Although the aforementioned body of work focuses on contemporaneous consequences, disconnection from parents during childhood can have long-term consequences. Parental alienation during childhood is linked to psychological deficits, such as low self-esteem, depression, and limited trust in adulthood (Baker, 2005a). In addition, parental alienation in childhood is associated with behavioral issues, including drug and alcohol abuse, alienation of children, and divorce in adulthood (Baker, 2005a). These patterns suggest that parental alienation influences an individual’s psychological and behavioral outcomes in adulthood.

Building from contemporaneous and long-term consequences of parental alienation, our first hypothesis reflects the expected effect of parental alienation in childhood on parent–child communication apprehension in adulthood. Given that parental alienation encourages the exclusion, isolation, and ostracization of the other parent (Gardner, 1998; Warshak, 2001), we anticipate that parental alienation in childhood corresponds with a greater likelihood to communicate apprehensively with the other parent in adulthood. While the manipulative behavior of one parent may damage the parent–child relationship with the other parent, it may create a strained relationship with the manipulative parent. More specifically, Baker’s (2005b) results reveal that parental alienation creates an unhealthy parent–child relationship with the manipulative parent that requires excessive devotion and loyalty at the

expense of the child's psychological well-being. Accordingly, we advance the following hypothesis:

H1: Parental alienation in childhood is positively associated with communication apprehension toward both parents in adulthood.

### *Buffering Effects of Self-Esteem*

Buffering refers to the development of a particular resource or positive personality quality that protects an individual against the adverse impact of life events (Carver, 1996). More specifically, the buffering hypothesis asserts that social support protects against stress that incites psychological and physiological disorder or disease (Cohen & Wills, 1985). According to stress and coping theory, social support protects people from the consequences of stressful episodes by influencing how individuals think about and handle such events. The buffering hypothesis states that social support promotes adaptive appraisal and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, Kawachi and Berkman (2001) found that the perceived availability of social support buffers the effects of stress on psychological well-being and distress, including depressive symptoms and anxiety.

Building from the buffering hypothesis, we suggest self-esteem can also work as a type of defense mechanism against life adversities. Maintaining a positive self-view may encourage individuals to process information in self-serving manners (Baumeister, 1993). Furthermore, individuals with high self-esteem may internalize a more stable sense of self and be less influenced by stressors (Longmore & DeMaris, 1997). Finally, self-esteem may afford individuals more cognitive resources to attack difficult circumstances (Baumgardner, Kaufman, & Levy, 1989). Self-esteem may be especially relevant to the experience of parent-child communication apprehension in response to parental alienation in childhood; the consequences of parental alienation in childhood are likely to be assuaged by individuals with high self-esteem. In turn, individuals could experience parental alienation as less adverse, which should decrease the tendency to behave apprehensively when communicating with parents. Accordingly, we posit that high self-esteem can protect an individual against the adverse consequences of parental alienation in childhood reflected in parent-child communication apprehension in adulthood.

H2: There is an interaction between parental alienation in childhood and self-esteem, such that the association between parental alienation in childhood and parent-child communication apprehension in adulthood is weaker when self-esteem is high, rather than low.

## **Method**

We tested our hypotheses using self-report data collected from college students. Participants were e-mailed a URL that directed them to an online survey hosted by

Qualtrics. All participants received a code number to ensure the confidential nature of the research. The survey collected demographic information and items to capture the variables of interest. Given that parental alienation occurs in intact, separated, and divorced family structures (Baker, 2006; Darnall, 1998; Warshak, 2001), participants were not required to provide the marital status of their parents. The survey was available to participants for a 2-week period.

### *Participants*

Two hundred and eleven students (149 female, 62 male) were recruited from a communication course to participate in the study. Ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old ( $M = 19.79$ ,  $Median = 19$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ). Students were primarily sophomores (44.07%), but also included freshmen (28.44%), juniors (19.90%), seniors (5.69%), and nontraditional students (1.90%). The majority of the sample identified as White (84.84%), but also included individuals who identified as Latinx (9.00%), Black (5.69%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (0.47%).

### *Measures*

All of the variables required to assess our hypotheses were operationalized using closed-ended multi-item self-report scales. We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis of the measurement model for all variables simultaneously using the SPSS Amos18 program. The fit of the model was judged to be acceptable: TLI = 0.93 (Tucker & Lewis, 1973), CFI = 0.94 (Bentler, 1990), and RMSEA = 0.04 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

### *Parental Alienation*

Participants responded to items from Baker and Chamber's (2011) Baker Strategy Questionnaire to measure their childhood exposure to alienating communication from caregivers (e.g., "Made comments to me that fabricated or exaggerated the other caregiver's negative qualities while rarely saying anything positive about that caregiver"). We defined caregivers for participants as individuals who took primary responsibility for them as children, including but not limited to mothers, fathers, stepparents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. We asked participants to focus on experiences during middle childhood (i.e., third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade) because experiences during this period of life are more easily recalled than those in early childhood (Burnett Heyes, Zokaei, van der Staaij, Bays, & Husain, 2012). Participants responded to 20 items about their female caregiver and the same 20 items about their male caregiver using a 5-point scale (0 = *Never* to 4 = *Always*; female caregiver:  $M = 1.32$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ,  $\alpha = .95$ ; male caregiver:  $M = 1.31$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ,  $\alpha = .97$ ).

*Parent–Child Communication Apprehension*

Twelve items were used from Lucchetti et al.’s (2002) Child-Parent Communication Apprehension Measure to assess apprehension when communicating with caregivers (e.g., “I feel relaxed when talking with my female (male) caregiver about things that happened during the day”). We reiterated that caregivers are individuals who were primarily responsibility for them as children. Participants responded to these statements for female caregivers and male caregivers using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Agree* to 5 = *Strongly Disagree*; female caregiver:  $M = 1.92$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ ; male caregiver:  $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ,  $\alpha = .94$ ).

*Self-Esteem*

Participants replied to 10 items from Rosenberg’s (1965) Self-Esteem Scale to measure their evaluation of personal worth (e.g., “I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others”). Participants replied using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 5 = *Strongly Agree*;  $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ).

**Results**

As preliminary analyses, we examined sex differences for our variables of interest. Specifically, we compared female and male participants’ evaluations of parental alienation from female and male caregivers; parent–child communication apprehension with female and male caregivers; and self-esteem. The  $t$ -tests revealed significant differences between female and male participants’ scores for communication apprehension with male caregivers ( $t(209) = 2.52$ ,  $p < .01$ ; female participants:  $M = 2.67$ , male participants:  $M = 2.30$ ) and self-esteem ( $t(209) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ; female participants:  $M = 3.84$ , male participants:  $M = 4.17$ ).

Table 1 reports the correlations among our variables of interest. As predicted by H1, parental alienation from a female caregiver was positively associated with communication apprehension with a female caregiver and communication apprehension with a male caregiver. Furthermore, parental alienation from a male caregiver was positively associated with communication apprehension with a male

**Table 1** Correlations Among Variables of Interest

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Parental alienation–female caregiver	—				
2. Parental alienation–male caregiver	.64***	—			
3. Communication apprehension–female caregiver	.35***	.11	—		
4. Communication apprehension–male caregiver	.26***	.45***	.42***	—	
5. Self-esteem	-.14*	-.10	-.26***	-.32***	—

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

caregiver (H1). Relevant to H2, self-esteem was negatively associated with parental alienation from a female caregiver, communication apprehension with a female caregiver, and communication apprehension with a male caregiver.

To test our hypotheses, we employed two hierarchical multiple regression analyses with communication apprehension with a female caregiver and communication apprehension with a male caregiver as the dependent variables. On the first steps of both analyses, we entered participant sex as a control variable. On the second steps, we entered parental alienation from a female caregiver, parental alienation from a male caregiver, and self-esteem scores. The third steps evaluated three product terms that represented the two-way interactions between all pairs of independent variables, and the fourth steps included a product term representing their three-way interaction. The results of the analyses are reported in Table 2.

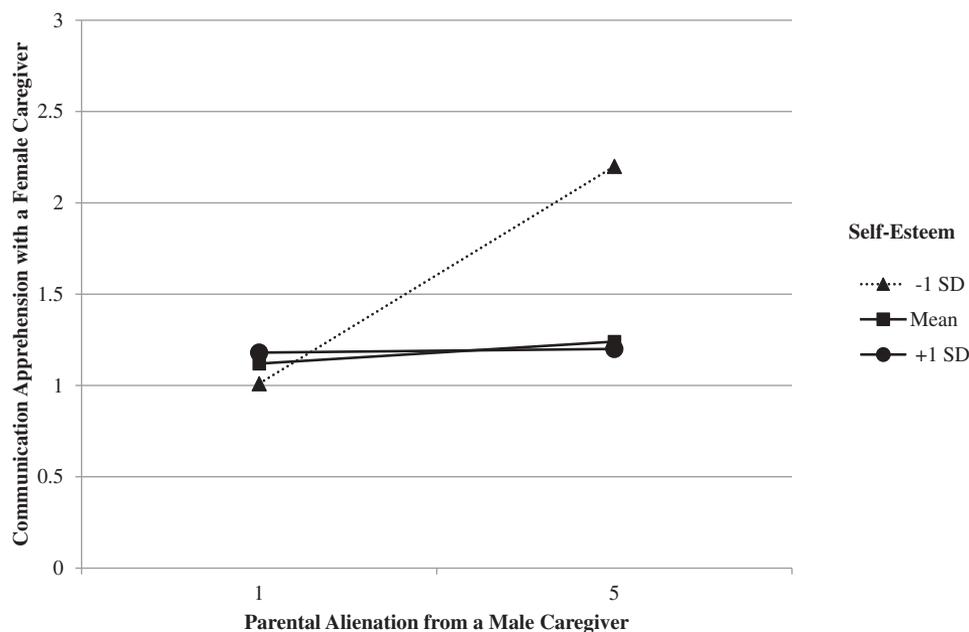
On the second step of the analysis with communication apprehension with a female caregiver as the dependent variable, we observed significant coefficients for parental alienation from a female caregiver, parental alienation from a male caregiver, and self-esteem. Results also revealed a significant interaction between parental alienation from a male caregiver and self-esteem on the third step of the analysis. To determine the form of the significant interaction, we plotted the regression of communication apprehension with a female caregiver onto parental alienation from a male caregiver

**Table 2** The Regression of Communication Apprehension onto Parental Alienation and Self-Esteem

	Unstandardized slopes	$R^2$ $R^2$	$R^2$ change	$F$ change
Step 1:				
Participant's sex	<b>.03</b> (.19*)	<b>.00</b> (.06)	—	<b>.42</b> (2.61*)
Step 2:				
Parental alienation–female caregiver	<b>.63***</b> (.13)	<b>.19</b> (.37)	<b>.18</b> (.31)	<b>15.96***</b> (22.77***)
Parental alienation–male caregiver	<b>.24*</b> (.70***)			
Self-esteem	<b>.24**</b> (.32***)			
Step 3:				
PA–female × Self-esteem	<b>.01</b> (.45**)	<b>.19</b> (.45)	<b>.03</b> (.08)	<b>1.12</b> (17.27***)
PA–male × Self-esteem	<b>.21*</b> (.12)			
PA–female × PA–male	<b>.01</b> (.40***)			
Step 4:				
PA–female × PA–male × Self- esteem	<b>.02</b> (.12)	<b>.19</b> (.46)	<b>.01</b> (.01)	<b>.13</b> (1.67)
<b><math>F(8,195) = 6.93, p &lt; .001</math> (<math>F(8,195) = 11.32, p &lt; .001</math>)</b>				

*Note.* The regression results with communication apprehension with a female caregiver as the dependent variable are bolded. The regression results with communication apprehension with a male caregiver as the dependent variable are in parentheses.

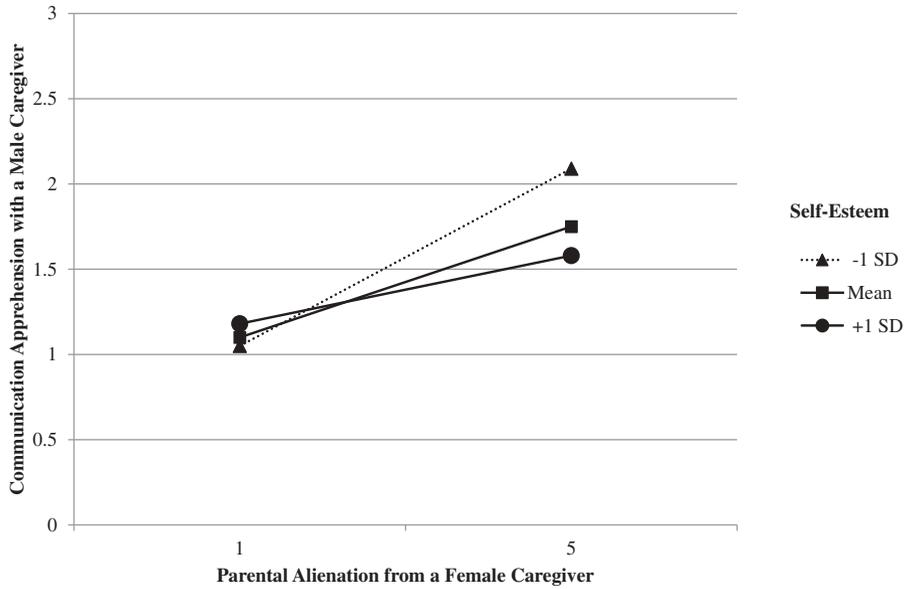
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .



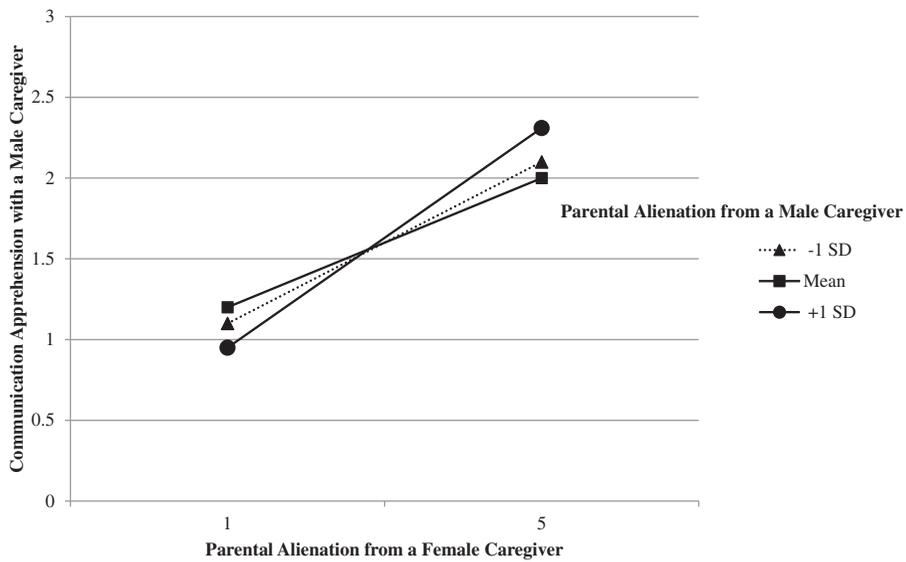
**Figure 1** Parental alienation from a male caregiver as a predictor of communication apprehension with a female caregiver moderated by self-esteem.

at different levels of self-esteem. Parental alienation from a male caregiver was positively associated with communication apprehension with a female caregiver for low levels of self-esteem ( $-1\ SD$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but the association was not significant at moderate ( $M$ ,  $p = .13$ ) or high ( $+1\ SD$ ,  $p = .18$ ) levels of self-esteem (see [Figure 1](#)).

On the first step of the analysis with communication apprehension with a male caregiver as the dependent variable, we observed a significant coefficient for participant sex. On the second step of the analysis, we observed significant coefficients for parental alienation from a male caregiver and self-esteem. Results revealed significant interactions between parental alienation from a female caregiver and self-esteem, and parental alienation from both female and male caregivers on the third step of the analysis. Next, we plotted the regression of communication apprehension with a male caregiver onto parental alienation from a female caregiver at different levels of self-esteem. Consistent with H1, parental alienation from a female caregiver was positively associated with communication apprehension with a male caregiver for all levels of self-esteem. Consistent with H2, the association decreased as self-esteem increased from low ( $-1\ SD$ ,  $p < .001$ ), to moderate ( $M$ ,  $p < .01$ ), to high ( $+1\ SD$ ,  $p < .05$ ) levels (see [Figure 2](#)). Finally, we plotted the regression of communication apprehension with a male caregiver onto parental alienation from a female caregiver at different levels of parental alienation from a male caregiver. Parental alienation from a female caregiver was positively associated with communication apprehension with a male caregiver for low ( $-1\ SD$ ,  $p < .01$ ), moderate ( $M$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and high ( $+1\ SD$ ,  $p < .001$ ) levels of parental alienation from a male caregiver (see [Figure 3](#)).



**Figure 2** Parental alienation from a female caregiver as a predictor of communication apprehension with a male caregiver moderated by self-esteem.



**Figure 3** Parental alienation from a female caregiver as a predictor of communication apprehension with a male caregiver moderated by parental alienation from a male caregiver.

## Discussion

Building on previous research that demonstrated the negative consequences of parental alienation, this study examined parent–child communication apprehension in adulthood as a result of parental alienation in childhood. Both the zero order correlations and regression analyses indicated that parental alienation from male and female caregivers in childhood were positively associated with communication apprehension with female caregivers in adulthood. In addition, the zero order correlations and regression analyses indicated that parental alienation from male caregivers in childhood was positively associated with communication apprehension with male caregivers in adulthood. Although parental alienation is intended to isolate the other parent, our results suggest that disparaging speech against the other parent and resistance regarding parental contact was related to denigration in the child’s relationship with the manipulative parent. Gardner (1998) stated that parental alienation strengthens the relationship between the manipulative parent and the child by misrepresenting the other parent. Our findings, however, demonstrate that the adverse relationship between parental alienation in childhood and parent–child communication apprehension in adulthood were not limited to the other parent.

In addition, we investigated the moderating effect of self-esteem on the relationship between parental alienation and parent–child communication apprehension. Drawing from the buffering hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985), we reasoned that high self-esteem can protect an individual against the ramifications of parental alienation in childhood mirrored in parent–child communication apprehension in adulthood. Consistent with our reasoning, results indicated a stronger positive relationship between parental alienation and parent–child communication apprehension when self-esteem was low rather than high. Interestingly, the interaction between self-esteem and parental alienation from a female caregiver significantly predicted communication apprehension with a male caregiver, and the interaction between self-esteem and parental alienation from a male caregiver significantly predicted communication apprehension with a female caregiver. These findings demonstrate that a strong, positive view of self may increase resiliency to the experience of parental alienation. Individuals with high self-esteem continued to engage with parents despite receiving messages from one parent that endorsed ostracizing the other parent. Further, the association between parental alienation from a male caregiver and communication apprehension with a female caregiver was most strongly influence by self-esteem. Feldman and Klein (2003) demonstrated that children’s compliance with instruction is higher with fathers compared to mothers, and our results suggest that self-esteem may be an important factor influencing this relationship. Although speculative, children’s assertion of autonomy through noncompliance with a male caregiver’s parental alienation may boost children’s self-esteem and, subsequently, discourage communication apprehension with a female caregiver.

The zero order correlations and regression analyses demonstrated a negative association between self-esteem and parental alienation. This finding is consistent with Barber and Harmon’s (2002) results, which found that parental psychological

control contributes to the development of low self-esteem in children. Children often reported feeling powerless in response to messages of parental control (Baker, 2005a). Taken together, the control disseminated through alienating communication may create a critical self-representation due to parents' tendencies to disregard children's perspectives and dictate how children should feel in reference to the other parent.

The regression analyses also indicated that female participants experience higher levels of communication apprehension with male caregivers compared to male participants. This is congruent with previous research which found that females generally experienced higher levels of communication apprehension compared to males (Donovan & MacIntyre, 2004). When investigating sex differences in parent-child relationships, Russell and Saebel (1997) stated that mother-daughter relationships were characterized by higher levels of expressiveness, connectedness, and intimacy compared to father-daughter relationships. Our results also underscore Cowan, Cowan, and Kerig's (1993) contention that specifying the sex of both parents and children when examining dyadic relationships within family systems is important.

The conclusions offered are qualified by the limitations of our study. Because direct evidence regarding parental alienation in childhood is rarely available, we obtained information from participants using retrospective self-reports. Adult self-reports of childhood events are challenging for reasons such as meeting standards of content validity and accuracy. Accordingly, our results are limited to the extent that individuals can recall childhood experiences of parental alienation. The restricted age range and limited racial diversity reduces the generalizability of the findings. We also did not require participants to provide the marital statuses of their parents. Additional research investigating the influence of parents' marital statuses on the relationships between parental alienation, communication apprehension, and self-esteem would strengthen this line of inquiry.

This study examined parent-child communication apprehension in adulthood as a function of parental alienation in childhood and self-esteem. Parental alienation in childhood was positively associated with parent-child communication apprehension in adulthood, and this association was weaker for individuals with higher self-esteem compared to individuals with lower self-esteem. In addition, this study found a positive correlation between parental alienation in childhood and self-esteem. We see potential for research that uses a diverse participant sample and alternative methods, such as daily diaries, to more accurately capture parental alienation and communication apprehension in parent-child relationships.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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