

Parental Alienation: The Blossoming of a Field of Study

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Abstract

Parental alienation has been an unacknowledged and poorly understood form of family violence. Research on parental alienation and the behaviors that cause it has evolved out of decades of legal and clinical work documenting this phenomenon, leading to what could be considered a “greening,” or growth, of the field. Today, there is consensus among researchers as to what parental alienating behaviors are and how they affect children and the family system. We review the literature to detail what parental alienation is, how it is different from other parent–child problems such as estrangement and loyalty conflicts, and how it is perpetuated within and across different social systems. We conclude by highlighting research areas that need further investigation to develop and test effective solutions for ameliorating the devastating effects of parental alienation that, we posit, should be considered and understood not only as abusive to the child but also as a form of family violence directed toward both the child and the alienated parent.

Keywords

parental alienation, divorce, separation, family violence, child abuse

Since the early 1800s, courts in the United States and England have documented volumes of family law cases involving one parent vilifying the other parent and poisoning the minds of their children against the rejected parent. By the mid-1940s, clinicians working with divorced families started publishing their observations about parents who tried to break down the child’s love for the other parent and to enlist their children as “allies” against the rejected parent (Rand, 2013). It was not until the 1980s that a label was coined for this phenomenon: *parental alienation syndrome* (Gardner, 1985). For a variety of reasons (e.g., whether it constitutes a valid syndrome; Warshak, 2001), the term most commonly used today is simply *parental alienation* (Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013). Research on this topic has increased substantially over recent decades; today, there are over 1,000 books, book chapters, and articles in professional journals on the topic across 35 countries and six continents (Bernet, 2013).

Despite extensive historical documentation of parental alienation across legal and clinical arenas, accumulated data on this topic have been largely descriptive in nature. However, there has been extensive research on processes that constitute parental alienating behaviors (e.g., gatekeeping behaviors; Austin & Rappaport, 2018). We argue that our understanding of parental

alienation has moved from a “greening,” or what is considered a growth, stage of development into a “blossoming” stage, which is characterized by greater development and integration of theories and hypothesis testing (Simpson & Campbell, 2013).

What Parental Alienation Is

Parental alienation refers to a psychological condition in which a child allies himself or herself strongly with an alienating (or preferred) parent and rejects a relationship with the alienated (or targeted) parent without legitimate justification (Lorandos et al., 2013). Parental alienation often occurs in families in which a more powerful parental figure (the alienating parent) engages in abusive behaviors intended to damage and destroy the relationship between the other, less powerful parent (the targeted parent) and the child (Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018). Parental alienation is not typically an outcome that arises when both parents contribute to

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the arguing and fighting (Warshak, 2015b). When parents reciprocate conflictual behavior, they often have similar levels of power—in such cases, the outcome for the child is a loyalty conflict rather than parental alienation (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016). Although parental alienation can occur or begin in intact families, it most commonly occurs after the parental relationship ends.

The manifestations of parental alienation in the child consist of (but are not limited to) the following: a campaign of denigration against the targeted parent; weak, frivolous, or absurd rationalizations for the deprecation; a lack of ambivalence; an “independent-thinker” phenomenon in which the child denies being influenced to feel negatively about the targeted parent; an apparent absence of guilt for actions and attitudes toward the targeted parent; borrowed scenarios about past events; and the spread of animosity to other people associated with the rejected parent (e.g., extended family members; Gardner, 1992). Of these outcomes, those most strongly associated with parental alienation are the first two: the child’s campaign of denigration against the rejected parent and the child’s frivolous rationalizations for the denigration. Outcomes that are readily identified objectively and measured quantitatively are the child’s rejection of the parent (Huff, Anderson, Adamsons, & Tambling, 2017) and the child’s lack of ambivalence toward the parents, namely, one parent is all good, the other is all bad (otherwise known as *splitting*; Bernet, Gregory, Reay, & Rohner, 2018).

Parental alienation outcomes are classified in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as a mental condition under the diagnosis “child affected by parental relationship distress” (CAPRD; Bernet et al., 2016). This condition appears in the same chapter as child sexual abuse, parent–child relational problems, and other forms of domestic violence (“other conditions that may be a focus of clinical attention”), and CAPRD can be diagnosed independently or as a modifier of a mental disorder (e.g., major depressive disorder). Estimating the prevalence of parental alienation among children is challenging because a psychological assessment is typically needed to determine whether and to what extent a child has been alienated. If we extrapolate from published research and use deductive methods, we find that an estimated 1% of all children in the United States are alienated from a parent (Bernet, 2010; Warshak, 2015a). Another estimate, albeit one based on a relatively small sample, suggests that around 29% of children from divorced homes experience alienating behaviors from a parent (Hands & Warshak, 2011).

What Parental Alienation Is Not

It is important to distinguish parental alienation from parental estrangement (Kelly & Johnston, 2001), as the

terminology used in this context is slightly different than definitions in most dictionaries, in which *alienation* is described as an emotional detachment and *estrangement* adds an element of physical disconnection (Warshak, 2010). In this article, estrangement refers to problems with a parent–child relationship that are due to issues within the relationship itself. For example, a parent may have poor parenting skills and engage in physically or emotionally abusive behaviors that make the quality of the parent–child relationship poor. Hence, the child is explicably and realistically estranged from a parent on the basis of and in reaction to the child’s lived experience. In contrast to estrangement, the cause of the parent–child problem in cases of parental alienation lies primarily with the alienating parent. Through words and actions, the alienating parent influences the child to such a degree that the child begins to reject a relationship with the targeted parent. The child’s rejection is not typically due to the actions of the targeted parent; if it is, then it is grossly exaggerated and out of proportion to his or her actual experience with the parent. Indeed, the child’s rejection of the targeted parent can be irreconcilable with and contradicted by the child’s lived experience of the targeted parent. When allegations of abuse are raised during custody disputes, this distinction between estrangement and parental alienation becomes important. If there is a substantiated history of domestic violence or child abuse over the course of the relationship, the accuser’s and child’s behaviors are explicable; if the accusation is manufactured as a strategy to gain the upper hand in a custody dispute, then the accusation is a parental alienating behavior.

How Do Parents Alienate Their Children?

Parental alienating behaviors have recently been considered a form of family violence, which has generally been understood as behaviors that coerce, control, and generate fear in the child. This behavior makes it child abuse for children as victims and intimate-partner violence for the targeted parent as the victim. Parental alienation is the result of an alienating parent’s coercion, control, and generation of fear in the child toward the targeted parent, making this a very complex form of family violence (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Harman et al., 2018). Hundreds of parental alienating behaviors have been documented by researchers, including badmouthing the targeted parent and his or her extended family, engaging in coercive controlling behaviors to force an alliance with the child and to reject the targeted parent, saying the targeted parent does not love the child, confiding in the child about adult matters, limiting the child’s contact with the other parent, violating court orders regarding parenting time and communication, undermining the targeted parent’s authority with the child,

letting the child choose whether to visit with the targeted parent, and making false allegations of abuse (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Harman, Biringen, Ratajck, Outland, & Kraus, 2016; Harman et al., 2018).

Obviously, no parent is perfect; an occasional negative comment or discrete action is not considered a parental alienating behavior. It is the use of clusters of behaviors over an extended period of time, commonly used with the intent to harm the relationship between the child and the other parental figure (or just the other parent because of his or her relationship with the child), that characterizes an action as a parental alienating behavior (Harman et al., 2018). Whereas the repetition of one or more behaviors over time is important for creating or cementing the child's negative and rejecting view of a parent, the nature and content of those behaviors (e.g., suggestions to the child that he or she has been sexually abused by the targeted parent or that the targeted parent has attempted to kill the child) will impact the rapidity of rejection and alienation.

More than 22 million American adults are estimated as having experienced alienating behaviors by the other parent, with over half reporting this experience as being severe (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016). Fortunately, parental alienating behaviors do not always lead to the ultimate alienation of a child from a parent. Alienating behaviors (the actions of the alienating parent) are very common and can have very negative consequences for the child; parental alienation (the child's refusal to have a relationship with the targeted parent) is much less common. There may be many reasons for this discrepancy, such as the amount of parenting time the targeted parent has with the child; the quality of the parent-child relationship prior to the initiation of parental alienating behaviors; the severity and longevity of the alienating behaviors; the child's temperament, age, and birth order; the extent to which other people reinforce or counter alienating influences; and the social sanctioning of the parental alienating behaviors.

How Are Parents Who Alienate Their Children Enabled To Act This Way?

Families exist within communities, societies, and cultures that can promote or deter parental alienation. Research does not yet provide support for there being gender differences in who alienates their children; mothers and fathers appear similarly likely to be perpetrators (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016), but they may use different types of behaviors (e.g., mothers may use more indirect and fathers more direct forms of aggression; López, Iglesias, & García, 2014). Gender differences do arise in how parental alienating behaviors

are perceived and addressed by third parties. For example, mothers who use parental alienating behaviors are not perceived as negatively as when a father or a gender-neutral "parent" uses them (Harman, Biringen, et al., 2016). Arguably, gender biases may have influenced how parental alienation has been handled in social institutions such as family court (Lorandos, 2017), indicating that perceptions of mental health, legal, and law-enforcement professionals; financial resources; established distribution of custody practices; and other factors can generate great disparities in terms of who is more affected by parental alienating behaviors. Therefore, gender biases, outmoded institutional practices, and other social factors play an important role in the promotion and deterrance of parental alienation.

What Impact Do Parental Alienating Behaviors Have?

The impact of parental alienation on children, the targeted parent, and the entire family system is substantial. Ongoing and unresolved conflict between parents may be associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms (Basile-Palleschi, 2002) and other negative consequences in children (Cummings & Davies, 2010). However, alienated children experience more psychosocial adjustment disorders (e.g., internalizing and externalizing problems) than children who have not been alienated (Johnston, Lee, Oleson, & Walters, 2005). Alienated children are often separated from the targeted parent for long periods of time; this separation paired with parental alienating behaviors is associated with poor psychological adjustment among children (e.g., Seijo, Fariña, Corras, Novo, & Arce, 2016). Adults who were alienated as children report severe long-term effects of this abuse (Baker, 2005; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013): low levels of self-esteem and high levels of self-hatred, insecure attachment, substance abuse disorders, guilt, anxiety, and depression. These individuals also develop fears and phobias, experience attachment difficulties, have problems communicating with their children as adults (Aloia & Strutzenberg, 2019), and develop a lack of trust in others or themselves (see Harman et al., 2018).

Perhaps more is known about the impact of parental alienating behaviors on targeted parents because they are most easily accessed for research purposes. For targeted parents, the outcomes of parental alienation appear to be similar to other forms of intimate-partner violence; targeted parents report experiencing depression (Taylor-Potter, 2015), anxiety, and high levels of suicidality (Baker & Verrocchio, 2015; Balmer, Matthewson, & Haines, 2018). In addition, targeted parents live with unresolved grief and ambiguous loss (Boss, 2016) and

face considerable social isolation caused by either the behaviors of the alienator (e.g., loss of friends) or poor emotional coping (Harman et al., 2018).

What Remains To Be Discovered

In order for a science to mature, scientific fields become action oriented and cumulative, test integrated theories, and increase our understanding of the etiology and manifestation of the problems under study (Reis, 2007). Research on parental alienation has always been action oriented because it has arisen in response to the work of legal and mental health professionals with families affected by this problem. There has been extensive scholarship on processes that constitute parental alienating behaviors (e.g., gatekeeping, false memories), so even though it superficially appears that research on parental alienation is in its greening stage, it is actually blossoming because greater attention to theoretical extension and development has been occurring. For example, attachment theories have been applied to clinical observations in order to create a better understanding of parental rejection (Garber, 2004), and more recently, the first author has been applying interdependence theory to understand how imbalanced power dynamics characterize these family systems.

New directions forward include establishing what patterns of parental alienating behaviors have the strongest association with parental alienation outcomes, developing the best methods for assessment and treatment of parental alienation at different stages of severity, identifying more direct and indirect impacts associated with this family violence and how it is different from estrangement, assessing the global prevalence of the problem, and identifying whether particular demographic groups are more vulnerable (e.g., military personnel).

Conclusion

Parental alienation is a serious form of family violence. Although there is professional consensus about what it is and what its causes are, the field is ripe for greater research attention with more extensive theoretical and integrated methodological inquiries to inform empirically validated interventions and treatments.

Recommended Reading

Bernet, W., Gregory, N., Reay, K. M., & Rohner, R. P. (2018). (See References). An article demonstrating splitting of children's perception of parents (all good vs. all bad) that is unique for alienated children in comparison with children who were not alienated.

Harman, J. J., & Biringen, Z. (2016). *Parents acting badly: How institutions and societies promote the alienation of children from their loving families*. Fort Collins, CO: Colorado Parental Alienation Project. A book written for a general audience that provides an overview of the literature on parental alienation and how it has come to be such a serious problem.

Harman, J. J., Kruk, E., & Hines, D. A. (2018). (See References). A review of research on parental alienation and how the behaviors that cause it are considered both child abuse and domestic violence.

Lorandos, D., Bernet, W., & Sauber, S. R. (Eds.). (2013). (See References). A book with chapters explaining the different levels of outcome severity in children, legal cases in which parental alienation has been at issue, and practical advice for legal and mental health professionals working with clients who are coping with this problem.

Warshak, R. A. (2010). *Divorce poison: How to protect your family from bad-mouthing and brainwashing*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. One of the most widely read books on the topic of parental alienation and a classic guide for how to prevent and overcome the problem.

Action Editor

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