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# Parental Denigration Boomerangs Versus Alienates: Parent–Child Closeness, Reciprocity, and Well-Being Using Multiple Informants

**Objective:** To assess parental denigration, parents demeaning each other to or in front of their children, and whether denigration is one-sided or reciprocal, related to distance or closeness between parents and children, and associated with measures of children's well-being.

**Background:** The parental alienation hypothesis argues that denigration is one-sided and distances children from the denigrated parent. Parental conflict research suggests that denigration is reciprocal and distances children from both parents, particularly the more frequently denigrating parent.

**Method:** Convenience samples totaling 994 young adults and including 157 sibling pairs completed a structured measure of denigration as well as several measures of parent–child relationship quality and individual well-being.

**Results:** Parental denigration was measured reliably over time and between siblings. Denigration was highly reciprocal, linked to children feeling less close to both parents—particularly the one denigrating more often—and associated with a variety of measures of ill-being. Results held both within and between siblings and in the 1% of cases of unilateral denigration.

**Conclusion:** Normatively, denigration appears to boomerang not alienate. Children consistently report feeling less close to parents who denigrate more than to parents who are the target of denigration.

**Implications:** Parents, and the professionals who work with them, must recognize the damage denigration does to denigrating parents' own relationship with their children. Findings also raise questions about alienation claims, which appear to be rare exceptions to the boomerang rule.

Parental denigration occurs when one parent directly disparages or speaks negatively about the other parent to or in front of their children (Rowen & Emery, 2014). One reason for studying parental denigration is its relevance to the clinical construct *parental alienation*, the assertion that one parent's denigration of the other undermines the denigrated parent's relationship with his or her children (Darnall, 1998). A second reason for studying parental denigration is the extensive research and theory about how parental conflict affects children, juxtaposed with a dearth of research on denigration as a particular form of conflict. As detailed here, the alienation and conflict perspectives offer opposing predictions about the reciprocity and consequences of denigration. The overriding goal of the present study is to test these

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contrasting hypotheses using multiple samples, informants, and measures.

The parental alienation hypothesis—that one parent’s denigration of the other undermines the denigrated parent’s relationship with his or her children—has had substantial influence in the courtroom. For example, Richard Gardner (2001), the originator of what he termed *parental alienation syndrome*, stated that his expert witness testimony led to a change of custody or restricted parental access in 22 of 99 cases. More generally, a survey of 448 custody experts indicated that alienation claims were raised in 26% of cases and that a “campaign of denigration” was the second most important factor (after “brainwashing parent”) in assessing alienation (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009). Despite its courtroom impact, research on parental alienation has been widely deemed inadequate in both quantity and quality (Bruch, 2002; Dallam, 1999; Emery, 2005; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Hoult, 2006; Johnston, 2005; Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2016). In fact, a recent review rated no studies of alienation as being of high quality; the majority (82%) were rated low or very low quality (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2013).

Dramatic increases in divorce in the 1970s fueled interest in studying the effects of parental conflict on children. Early research often was framed as asking whether children fared better in a happy single-parent family than a conflict-ridden, intact one (Emery, 1982). Extensive subsequent research has shown that interparental conflict is a robust predictor of children’s psychological functioning. This finding has been established using a variety of methods, including field studies (Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1982), genetically informed designs (Harden et al., 2007), and laboratory analog experiments (Cummings & Davies, 2011). Moreover, researchers have identified dimensions of conflict that are more or less harmful to children. For example, Cummings and Davies (2011) found that child-focused, angry, and verbally or physically aggressive conflict is particularly harmful. However, family systems (Emery, Fincham, & Cummings, 1992) and emotional security (Cummings & Davies, 2011) theory, clinical observations (Emery, 2011; Maldonado, 2014), and research on children caught in the middle (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buehler et al., 1997; Vuchinich, Emery, & Cassidy, 1988) all suggest that children do not have to directly observe

parental disputes to be harmed by them. Denigration may be one form of harmful conflict in which children do not directly observe a dispute.

Importantly, and as noted, the alienation and conflict literatures lead to different predictions about the nature and potential consequences of parental denigration. Although authors of a reformulation of the parental alienation hypothesis argue that “alienated” parents contribute in important ways to their children’s rejection of them (Kelly & Johnston, 2001), parental alienation has been widely viewed as one-sided in its original and in many contemporary descriptions. The rejected parent is asserted to be a loving caregiver who has done nothing wrong but whose children have been brainwashed against him or her by the denigration of the other parent (Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 2002). In contrast, conflict is two-sided by definition. According to the conflict perspective, denigration should be reciprocal rather than one-sided.

Another key difference between the alienation and parental conflict literatures concerns the effects of denigration on parent–child relationships. The term *parental alienation* implies that denigration distances children from the parent who is denigrated, perhaps while bringing the child in a closer alliance with the parent who does the denigrating. In contrast, research on interparental conflict has found that increased conflict is associated with children becoming less close to both parents (e.g., Davies et al., 2016), which is perhaps not surprising given that both parents reciprocally engage in conflict.

In an earlier study of 648 undergraduate students (Rowen & Emery, 2014), we found that young adult reports of mothers’ and fathers’ denigration behaviors were highly correlated (i.e., reciprocal). More frequent denigration also was associated with feeling less close to both parents. In fact, young people reported feeling more distant from the parent who did more denigrating than from the parent who was the target of denigration. Furthermore, inspection of individual cases revealed only nine instances of one-sided denigration, and those informants reported feeling substantially closer to the denigrating than the denigrated parent in only one of those nine cases of one-sided instances of denigration. Even in this case, there was no evidence of parental rejection; the participation reported feeling close and connected to the parents who was the target of denigration.

Although group and individual results in this previous study were consistent with the conflict but not the alienation hypothesis, it nevertheless remains possible that denigration distances a child from the denigrated parent in rare instances. Thus, one purpose of the present study was to further test the conflicting predictions of the alienation and conflict perspectives, at both the group and individual levels.

Conceptually and empirically, the assessment of denigration is challenging. Parents who denigrate may not report accurately on their behavior due to social desirability or more direct legal or social consequences. Parents in conflict also may be more likely to view themselves as the victim rather than the perpetrator of denigration. Young children, in turn, may find it difficult to assess the veracity or intent of one parent's denigration of the other parent. Moreover, according to the alienation perspective, denigration is expected to "brainwash" or otherwise distort children's view of the denigration.

At present, there is no empirical evidence that parental alienation can be reliably or validly identified in the context of a custody dispute (or in any other context), despite the influence of claims of alienation on legal proceedings (Saini et al., 2016). In a previous study (Rowen & Emery, 2014), we reported on development of the Parental Denigration Scale (PDS), a 22-item, internally consistent measure of reports of parental denigration. Thus, a second goal of the present research was to replicate tests of the internal consistency of the PDS and, for the first time, assess its test-retest reliability. Importantly, a related goal was to compare young adult siblings' reports of parental denigration to assess the measure's interrater reliability (or its validity, depending on how the sibling method is construed).

Although the parental alienation perspective focuses on the hypothesis that denigration undermines the relationship between children and the denigrated parent (while strengthening children's relationship with the denigrating parent), the interparental conflict perspective suggests a much wider range of difficulties might be associated with denigration (Cummings & Davies, 2011; Emery, 1982). Thus, the present investigation assessed a number of relationship and individual adjustment indices both to test specific, competing hypotheses about closeness in parent-child relationships and to explore other potential correlates of reported

denigration. Constructs assessed include (a) children's perception of general interparental conflict, (b) multiple measures of parent-child relationship quality (attachment, parent-child relationship closeness, parenting styles), and (c) multiple measures of individual adjustment (depression, anxiety, life satisfaction, and painful feelings about divorce). One important issue that was not assessed is intimate partner violence, which is a topic we hope to address in future research on parental denigration.

In summary, the present study included data from three large samples of young adults that were not nationally representative: (a) an online survey, (b) college students and their siblings, and (c) a special group of siblings—twins. A test-retest reliability subgroup of the college student sample also was recruited. The study goals were to (a) replicate previous findings on the assessment of parental denigration using the PDS at group and individual levels; (b) assess the internal consistency of the PDS, its test-retest reliability, and its interrater reliability/validity (by obtaining sibling reports of denigration); and (c) test contrasting hypotheses about denigration based on the alienation and parental conflict perspectives, while also exploring the relationship between denigration and multiple measures of relationship and individual well-being. Notably, the inclusion of a subsample of twin and nontwin siblings allowed us to compute cross-sibling correlations between reported denigration and these measures, thus yielding an estimate of their relationship free from self-report bias.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Three samples of young adults participated in the present research, including respondents to an online survey, university students and their siblings, and twin pairs recruited at a national twins festival. Recruitment was specifically aimed toward obtaining an equal number of participants from married families and divorced families, but it was not specifically aimed at recruiting individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Recruitment was not explicitly limited to individuals with different-gender parents, but all participants reported having one male and one female parent.

Online participants ( $n = 350$ ) were recruited online via Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and were

paid 50 cents each. An age requirement of 18 to 30 years was set for participation, and an additional age-related question in the screening information was used to verify birthdates. Only participants with a quality of response reputation of 95% or above on their MTurk accounts and 0% missing data on our survey were used in analyses ( $n = 273$ ). Approximately two-thirds of this sample was female, 77% self-identified as Caucasian, mean age was 22.0 years, and 51% had divorced parents.

University students ( $n = 348$ ) were recruited through a psychology department participant pool. Respondents who indicated on a screening question that their sibling was likely to join the study were invited to participate via e-mail, and siblings' contact information was obtained. If siblings agreed to participate, both individuals were sent materials via a Survey Monkey link. A total of 166 sibling pairs responded; data from 157 sibling pairs was suitable for analysis. Parent marital status at the time of data collection was used to classify participants as being from married ( $n = 103$ ) or divorced ( $n = 54$ ) families. Two-thirds of university students and their siblings were female, 70% self-identified as Caucasian, mean age was 19.5 years, and 34% had divorced parents.

Of the 348 students originally contacted regarding sibling participation, 165 students without siblings were included in the study to obtain retest data. Sixty-seven (40.6%) of those students had divorced parents. Approximately 30 days after completing the study, university student participants were asked to retake the PDS to obtain retest data, with a high rate of participation ( $n = 325$ , 98.2%).

Twin pairs ( $n = 121$  pairs; 103 monozygotic, 18 dizygotic) were recruited from a research booth at the annual Twins Days Festival in Twinsburg, Ohio. Monozygotic and dizygotic twin pairs between the ages of 18 and 35 years were invited to participate. Approximately three-fourths of participants were female, 85% self-identified as Caucasian, mean age was 24.5 years, and 59% were from divorced families.

### Measures

*Parental denigration.* The PDS (Rowen & Emery, 2014) is designed to assess how often individuals who lived in the same home as their parents witnessed them demeaning each other

during childhood. Respondents are asked to reflect on their childhood as a whole. Items were generated from the published literature on parental alienation strategies, especially Baker and Darnell (2006). The measure contains 22 items, seven of which are reverse scored. Participants answer the same 22 questions regarding their mother's behavior and their father's behavior (e.g., "My mother said bad things about my father in front of me" and "My father said bad things about my mother in front of me"). Response options are frequencies ranging from *never* (scored as 1) to *most of the time* (5); higher scores indicate more frequent denigration. In an initial study, the measure yielded a single, internally consistent ( $\alpha = .94$ ) factor that demonstrated good construct validity based on correlations with other measures (Rowen & Emery, 2014). The 15 items that loaded onto this factor measured denigration behaviors directly and did not include any of the seven reverse-scored items included for counterbalancing purposes. For analyses, once items were reverse-scored, sums were used. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .96, for mother denigration and .94 for father denigration.

*Interparental conflict.* The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) is a 49-item measure with three subscales that assesses children's perceptions and interpretations of conflict, including conflict properties, threat, and self-blame. For the purposes of this study, participants were administered the 13-item version of this scale, which measures frequency and intensity. It has been shown to be valid and reliable in a college sample (Kline, Wood, & Moorephd, 2003). Sample items include "I often saw my parents arguing" and "My parents pushed and shoved each other during arguments." Response options range from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5), and response scores were summed; higher scores indicate more conflict. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .95.

*Attachment.* The Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) assesses the affective and cognitive dimensions of relationships with parents and peers. To assess relationship quality, participants only completed the 25-item mother section and the 25-item father section of the IPPA. Sample items include "I can count on my mother when

I need to get something off my chest” and “My father expects too much from me.” Response options range from *almost never or never true* (1) to *almost always or always true* (5), and response scores were summed; higher scores indicate a greater attachment relationship to the attachment figure (mother or father). Cronbach’s alpha in the present study was .96 for both mother and father attachment.

*Parent–child closeness.* The Networks of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Burhmester, 1985) assesses characteristics of relationships with family members and friends using 10 three-item subscales. Only five inventories (15 items) applicable to mothers and fathers were used in this study to examine the nature of participants’ relationships with their parents. Sample items include “How satisfied are you with your relationship with your mother?” and “How much does your father really care about you?” Response options range from *little or none* (1) to *the most* (5) and response scores were summed; higher scores indicate more overall closeness. Cronbach’s alpha in the present study was .95 for mother closeness and .96 for father closeness.

*Parenting style.* The Parenting Styles Index (PSI; Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992) contains items on parenting practices that correspond to three dimensions of authoritative parenting: acceptance/involvement, behavioral supervision and strictness, and psychological autonomy-granting. The two scales used for this study were the *acceptance/involvement* scale (nine items,  $\alpha = .85$  for mothers and .91 for fathers), which measures the extent to which an adolescent perceives his or her parents as loving, responsive, and involved; and the *psychological autonomy-granting* scale (nine items,  $\alpha = .78$  for mothers and .83 fathers), which measures the extent to which parents use noncoercive, democratic discipline practices and encourage the adolescent to express individuality. All participants complete the 18 questions for both their mother and father. Sample items include “When my mother wanted me to do something, she explained why” and “My father helped me with schoolwork if there was something I didn’t understand.” Response options range from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree*

(4) and response scores were summed; higher scores indicate more acceptance/involvement or psychological autonomy-granting.

*Depressive symptomology.* The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD; Radloff, 1977) measures current depressive symptomology in the general population ( $\alpha = .92$ ). It is not used for diagnosis in clinical populations, so it was an ideal measure for this study. The CESD contains 20 items, with the following sample items: “I had crying spells” and “I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.” Response options ranged from *rarely or none of the time* (1) to *most or all of the time* (4), and response scores were summed; higher scores indicate more frequently experienced depressive symptomatology.

*Anxiety.* The State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, Gorsuch, Lushene, Vagg, & Jacobs, 1983) measures trait and state anxiety in the general population ( $\alpha = .86$ –.95). Only the 20-item Trait Anxiety measure was used for the present study ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Sample items include “I worry too much over something that really doesn’t matter” and “I am a steady person.” Response options range from *almost never* (1) to *almost always* (4), and response scores were summed; higher scores indicate greater anxiety.

*Life satisfaction.* The Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a five-item instrument designed to measure global cognitive judgments of satisfaction with one’s life ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Sample items include “In most ways, my life is close to ideal” and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.” Response options range from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7), and response scores were summed; higher scores indicate greater life satisfaction.

*Feeling associated with divorce.* The Painful Feelings About Divorce Scale (PFAD; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000) is a 39-item measure that assesses painful feelings associated with divorce, such as parental blame, loss, self-blame, and seeing the world through the lens of divorce ( $\alpha$ s range from .65 to .90). Sample items include “My parents’ divorce/separation still causes struggles for me” and “I feel doomed to repeat my parents’ problems in my own relationships.” Response options range

from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5), and response scores were summed for each subscale; higher scores indicate more painful feelings associated with divorce.

### Procedures

*Online sample.* Participants completed the study via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is a website that allows investigators to post Human Intelligence Tasks in exchange for money (in this case, 50 cents). MTurk allows investigators to require certain qualifications before a participant engages in a task and to administer screening items to verify potential respondents' qualifications. An age requirement of 18 to 30 years of age was set as a qualification, and an additional age-related question was placed in the screening information to verify participants' birthdates. Investigators are also able to check participants' quality of response reputation. Only participants with an approval rating of 95% and above were accepted, to protect against individuals who had tended to provide random answers to questions or rushed through previous studies on MTurk. Once participants agreed to participate in the study and met the prescreening qualifications, they were directed to a Survey Monkey link, where they provided informed consent and completed the survey, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Once completed, participants were directed to a debriefing form, where they indicated that they read and understood the information (via a checkbox). Upon receiving that confirmation, they were paid 50 cents from our laboratory Amazon account. Data were stored in a password protected Survey Monkey account and were only available for download by authorized users.

*University students and siblings.* Participants were recruited through the university participant pool using a prescreen question that asked whether their sibling would be willing to participate in a study. Only participants who respond "yes" or "maybe" to this prescreen question were invited to participate via e-mail. In the e-mail, participants confirmed that their sibling might also be interested in participating, and siblings' e-mail addresses or telephone numbers (or both) were obtained to establish contact. We e-mailed or called siblings to ask whether they were willing to participate; no compensation

was offered. If siblings were willing to participate, the university student and sibling provided informed consent, and they were sent the study via a Survey Monkey link. The survey took approximately 40 minutes to complete. After completion, participants were sent to a debriefing form and were unable to exit until they indicated that they read the form.

Participants who were originally contacted but did not have a sibling willing to participate were e-mailed and informed that they would be participating in a two-part study to receive credit for research participation. One part would be completion of a 40-minute online survey, and the second part would be a 5-minute survey 30 days after completion of the first part. If students were willing to participate, they were given an opportunity to provide informed consent, and those who consented were sent a hyperlink to the survey via a Survey Monkey link. After completing the study, participants were led to a debriefing form and were unable to exit until they indicated that they read the form.

Approximately 30 days after completion of the first survey, to obtain retest data, all university student participants, both with and without siblings, were asked to retake the PDS. This survey took approximately 5 minutes. Once students completed the entire study, they were awarded credit for research participation. Data were de-identified and kept in a password-protected folder on a computer.

*Twins.* In the summer of 2012, our lab conducted research at the annual Twins Days Festival in Twinsburg, Ohio, which thousands of twins attend. At the festival, we recruited monozygotic and dizygotic twin pairs between 18 and 35 years of age. Twins who were willing to participate read and signed an informed consent agreement and were seated at a private table inside the research booth. Participants provided demographic information, answered questions about frequency of contact with parents, rated their relationship quality with parents, and completed the PDS. The survey took approximately 10 minutes to complete. Once completed, participants were given a debriefing form and asked whether they had any questions. After they read the debriefing form, participants were entered in a drawing to win a \$50 gift certificate. Participants were assigned unique identification numbers, and no identifying information was recorded to protect participant confidentiality.

The \$50 gift certificate winner was chosen out of a hat at random, and the winner was mailed the \$50 gift certificate 1 month after the festival.

## RESULTS

### *Parental Denigration Scale Reliability*

A confirmatory two-factor model with a GeoMin rotation was computed in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998), with seven positive items and 15 negative items from the PDS loading on separate factors, consistent with previous results (Rowen & Emery, 2014). The two factors were correlated  $r = -.70$ , fit with a CFI of .995 and a RMSEA of .085. A comparison of models where mother and father loadings either were allowed to differ or were constrained to be equal found some statistical differences, but the correlation between mother and father loadings was  $r = .78$ , and there were no theoretically important differences in the loadings. Therefore, measurement parameters for mothers and fathers were constrained to be equal. Coefficient alpha for denigration items was .94 for mothers and .95 for fathers; alpha was .90 for mothers and .88 for fathers for positive items. Only means for denigration statistically differed ( $p < .001$ ), with mothers 0.30 standard deviations higher than fathers. The two-factor solution also fit well for married and divorced families, with mean denigration for divorced families approximately one standard deviation higher than married families ( $p < .001$ ). Because the absence of positive behaviors is different conceptually from the presence of denigration, and because positively worded items were included only to counterbalance negative items, all subsequent analyses focus only on the 15-item Denigration Factor.

To assess test-retest reliability, a subsample of university participants ( $n = 325$ ) was given the PDS 30 days apart. Pearson's product-moment correlations for denigration were highly stable: .80 (fathers) to .83 (mothers).

Correlations were computed between monozygotic twin, dizygotic twin, and university sibling reports of denigration to assess interrater reliability (or concurrent validity, depending upon how this method is construed). The sibling reports of denigration were strongly related,  $r(266) = .74$ ,  $p < .001$ , mothers;  $r(266) = .73$ ,  $p < .001$ , fathers. Denigration reports by monozygotic twins were more highly correlated ( $r(98) = .85$ ,  $p < .001$ , mothers;  $r(98) = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ , fathers), but reports by other sibling pairs also were strongly related:  $r(166) = .64$ ,  $p < .001$ , mothers;  $r(166) = .66$ ,  $p < .001$ , fathers. Thus, the PDS was consistent internally, across 1 month's time, and across sibling informants.

Given that we established a reliable method of assessing parental denigration, we sought to accomplish four main goals. Specifically, our goals for subsequent analyses were to (a) test competing hypotheses about the reciprocity of denigration, (b) test competing hypotheses about denigration and parent-child closeness based on self- and sibling-report, (c) conduct these tests both at the group and the individual case level of analysis, and (d) explore the relationship between parental denigration and several measures of individual well-being both within and across siblings.

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### *Conflict Versus Alienation: Marital Status, Reciprocity, and Distance From Denigrator*

Analyses were conducted to compare predictions based on the alienation versus the interparental conflict perspectives on denigration. These included the correlation between denigration and interparental conflict, group analyses of means by gender and marital status, tests of the reciprocity of denigration, young people's reported closeness to the denigrated and the denigrating parent, and an analysis of individual subjects in search of possible cases of alienation.

More frequent denigration by both mothers and fathers was statistically and substantially associated with more frequent interparental conflict (see Table 4). This association was the case in both married families,  $r(668) = .65$ ,  $p < .001$ , mothers;  $r(668) = .61$ ,  $p < .001$ , fathers; and divorced families,  $r(326) = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ , mothers;  $r(326) = .65$ ,  $p < .001$ , fathers.

When comparing mean levels of reported denigration, statistically significant main effects for marital status,  $B = 8.93$ , 95% CI [7.51, 10.34], and parent gender,  $B = -2.23$ , CI [-2.82, -1.64] were found, as well as a statistically significant interaction between marital status and parent gender,  $B = -2.45$ , CI [-3.70, -1.20]. Reported denigration was statistically higher in divorced families, for mothers, and for mothers in divorced families.

Reported mother and father denigration scores were moderately correlated for all parents ( $r = .66$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but more strongly for

married ( $r = .73$ ) than divorced parents ( $r = .49$ ). These correlations were statistically different ( $p < .001$ ) based on Fisher's  $r$ -to- $z$  transformation. Although these correlations indicate that denigration was largely reciprocal, it is possible that, in some individual families, one parent was extremely denigrating while the other was not (see individual analyses later in the article).

Correlations were computed to examine the association between parental denigration and several parent-child relationship quality measures; specifically, the Inventory of Peer and Parent Attachment, the Network of Relationships Inventory, and the acceptance/involvement scale of the Parenting Styles Index (see Table 1). Overall, more frequent denigration was associated with poorer parent-child relationship quality across parents and marital status for both the denigrated and, importantly, the denigrator parent. In general, young adult children reported feeling less close to the parent who did the denigrating than to the parent who was the object of denigration, which is directly in contrast to alienation predictions. For example, in divorced families, child-reported mother denigration of fathers was weakly and not statistically correlated with fathers' IPPA ( $r = -.10, p = .087$ ), but was statistically negatively correlated with mothers' IPPA ( $r = -.49, p < .001$ ). The same pattern held for the NRI and PSI involvement scale for divorced families. For married families, correlations for mothers' denigration were always stronger between closeness measures and denigration by the denigrating versus the denigrated parent, but correlations were statistically significant for both parents, indicating more frequent denigration was tied to increased distance from both parents. For father denigration, every correlation was again stronger between measures of closeness and denigration by the denigrating versus the denigrated parent, with all but one correlation statistically significant (see Table 1).

This overall pattern held when computing cross-sibling correlations between denigration and the three measures of parent-child relationship quality (see Tables 2 and 3). Older siblings' reports of mother denigration behaviors were negatively correlated with younger siblings' reports of mother involvement, attachment to mothers, and closeness in divorced families, with closeness only approaching statistical significance,  $r(54) = -.24, p = .070$ . (Note that the smaller sample size limits statistical power for divorced families.) Older siblings' reports

of denigration by mothers were not statistically related to younger siblings' reports of father involvement or reported closeness to fathers.

Older siblings' reports of father denigration behaviors also were statistically negatively correlated with younger siblings' reports of father involvement, closeness with fathers, and attachment to fathers in divorced families (correlations were also negative in married families but were not statistically significant). Older siblings' reported denigration by fathers was not statistically related to younger siblings' closeness with mothers, attachment to mothers, or reported mother involvement, across marital status.

As a further test of the relationship between denigration and parent-child closeness, younger siblings' reports of denigration were correlated with older siblings' reports of parent-child relationship quality (see Tables 2 and 3). Younger siblings' reports of mother denigration behaviors were statistically negatively correlated with older siblings' reports of closeness with mothers, attachment to mothers, and reported mother involvement, in both married and divorced families. Younger siblings' reports of mother denigration behaviors were statistically related to older siblings' closeness with fathers only in married families (see Tables 2 and 3).

Younger siblings' denigration by father scores were statistically negatively correlated with older siblings' reports of closeness with fathers, attachment to fathers, and reported father involvement in married families; these variables were negatively correlated in divorced families, but only attachment was significantly correlated. Younger siblings' reported father denigration behaviors were not statistically related to any of the older siblings' reports of relationship with mothers. In summary, whether from older to younger or younger to older siblings, cross-sibling correlations were consistent with self-reports in showing that denigration is linked with children feeling more distant from the parent who does the denigrating than from the parent who is denigrated.

Given the strong correlation between denigration and conflict, differences in denigration frequency by marital status and parent gender, and questions about the denigrating versus the denigrated parent, we constructed a model that incorporated all of these factors. Denigration by mothers, denigration by fathers, gender, general conflict, and marital status were entered as fixed effects into the model using R and *lme4* (R Core

Table 1. Intercorrelations Between Denigration and Self-Reported Parent–Child Closeness by Marital Status

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Denigration by mother	—	-.49	-.45	-.38	.49	-.10	-.03	-.01
2. Attachment (IPPA) to mother	-.47	—	.77	.88	-.17	.07	.01	.06
3. Involvement (on PSI) of mother	-.39	.76	—	.77	-.14	.01	-.03	-.01
4. Closeness (on NRI) with mother	-.37	.85	.73	—	-.11	-.01	-.04	.03
5. Denigration by father	.73	-.34	-.32	-.26	—	-.42	-.23	.26
6. Attachment (IPPA) to father	-.30	.64	.50	.55	-.46	—	.75	.85
7. Involvement (on PSI) of father	-.23	.50	.56	.44	-.38	.76	—	.74
8. Closeness (on NRI) with father	-.24	.55	.46	.63	-.35	.84	.76	—

Note. Intercorrelations for divorced families ( $n = 326$ ) are presented above the diagonal, and intercorrelations for married families ( $n = 668$ ) are presented below the diagonal. Child reporters from university students, MTurk, and twin samples. IPPA, Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; NRI = Networks of Relationships Inventory; PSI = Parenting Styles Index.  
 $p < .05$  where  $|.14| \leq r \leq |.17|$ .  $p < .001$  where  $r \geq |.23|$ .

Table 2. Intercorrelations for Sibling Reports of Denigration and Parent–Child Relationship Quality Among Children With Divorced Parents ( $n = 54$ )

Younger siblings	Older siblings							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Denigration by mother	.53	-.23	-.24	.44	-.26	-.28	-.22	-.22
2. Attachment (IPPA) to mother	-.05	.21	.27	.06	.07	.09	.23	.07
3. Closeness (on NRI) with mother	-.03	.23	.27	.02	.04	.06	.33	.10
4. Denigration by father	.20	-.13	-.12	.37	-.28	-.24	-.10	-.23
5. Attachment (IPPA) to father	.00	.15	.17	-.10	.30	.24	.11	.24
6. Closeness (on NRI) with father	-.04	.14	.19	-.11	-.34	.37	.07	.27
7. Involvement (on PSI) of mother	.03	.13	.23	.01	.05	-.02	.52	.04
8. Involvement (on PSI) of father	.03	.06	.12	-.10	.33	.39	.04	.17

Note. Reporters are from the sample of nontwin university students and siblings. IPPA, Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; NRI = Networks of Relationships Inventory; PSI = Parenting Styles Index.  
 $p < .05$  where  $|.26| \leq r \leq |.32|$ .  $p < .001$  where  $r \geq |.42|$ .

Team, 2013). As a random effect, to account for the nested nature of siblings from the same family, a function was added that assigned a different intercept to each subject. Two separate models were constructed: one for mothers' IPPA and one for fathers' IPPA. (The IPPA was used because of its robust correlation with the PDS; see Table 1.)

For mothers' IPPA, denigration by the mother,  $B = -0.67$ , 95% CI  $[-0.86, -.49]$ , denigration by the father,  $B = 0.28$ , CI  $[0.07, 0.48]$ , gender,  $B = 4.50$ , CI  $[1.84, 7.15]$ , and conflict,  $B = -0.31$ , CI  $[-0.46, -0.16]$ , were statistically significant independent predictors. Interestingly, whereas denigration by mothers was a negative predictor of closeness to mothers, denigration by fathers was a positive predictor. That is, higher levels of reported denigration of fathers by mothers was associated with less closeness

to mothers, but higher reported father denigration of mothers was associated with more closeness to mothers. With other factors controlled, denigration of mothers by fathers was linked to children feeling closer to mothers—the denigrated parent. In addition, girls reported feeling statistically closer to their mothers than did boys. Marital status was not a statistical predictor in this model.

For fathers' IPPA, denigration by fathers,  $B = -0.86$ , 95% CI  $[-1.10, -0.62]$ , marital status,  $B = -6.97$ , CI  $[-10.18, -3.76]$ , and conflict,  $B = -0.24$ , CI  $[-0.42, -0.06]$ , were statistically significant independent predictors of closeness to fathers. The more fathers denigrated mothers, the less closeness children felt toward their fathers. Similarly, young adult children felt less close to their fathers when they perceived higher levels of interparental conflict. Unlike what was

Table 3. Intercorrelations for Sibling Reports of Denigration and Parent–Child Relationship Quality Among Children With Married Parents (n = 103)

Younger siblings	Older siblings							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Denigration by mother	.57	-.26	-.31	.32	-.07	.00	-.39	.17
2. Attachment (IPPA) to mother	-.28	.42	.37	-.23	.05	.07	.57	.02
3. Closeness (on NRI) with mother	-.24	.39	.37	-.20	-.01	-.03	.55	-.01
4. Denigration by father	.17	.09	-.02	.70	-.32	-.07	-.09	.00
5. Attachment (IPPA) to father	.09	.20	.16	-.32	.70	.51	.09	.27
6. Closeness (on NRI) with father	.19	.13	.13	-.26	.67	.50	.05	.33
7. Involvement (on PSI) of mother	-.29	.42	.43	-.10	-.07	-.02	.69	-.08
8. Involvement (on PSI) of father	.09	.26	.18	-.30	.60	.52	.03	.45

Note. Reporters are from the sample of nontwin university students and siblings. IPPA, Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; NRI = Networks of Relationships Inventory; PSI = Parenting Styles Index.

$p < .05$  where  $|.20| \leq r \leq|.23|$ .  $p < .001$  where  $r \geq|.33|$ .

found for mothers' IPPA, denigration of fathers by mothers was not statistically related to father IPPA in either direction. Also in contrast to findings for mothers, reporter gender was unrelated to closeness to fathers, but marital status was, as children felt less close to divorced fathers.

Finally, in an effort to identify any possible cases of parental alienation, an analysis of individual participants was conducted. Ten instances of unilateral denigration were identified in the 994 child reports (1% of the sample). Unilateral denigration was defined as one parent having a denigration score above 60, while the other parent had a score below 30. A total score of 60 indicates that denigrations is occurring with regularity; a mean score of 4 (*often*) on each of the 15 denigration items would equal a total score of 60 on the PDS. Conversely, a total score of 30 indicates that denigration tended to occur *rarely*.

Nine of the 10 parents who were identified as unilateral denigrators were mothers. Of the 10 families, five were divorced and five married. To assess closeness to parents, the IPPA, NRI, and PRI involvement scores were examined. In nine of the 10 unilateral denigration cases, children reported feeling closer to the denigrated parent than the denigrating parent. In the remaining case, the participant reported feeling equally close to both parents on the IPPA (scores for denigrating and denigrated parent were 97 and 98, respectively), closer with the denigrating parent on the NRI (scores for denigrating and denigrated parent were 69 and 55, respectively), and similar levels of involvement on the PRI (scores for denigrating and denigrated parent were 30

and 25, respectively). Thus, none of the 994 participants reported feeling alienated from the denigrated parent, including those in the 10 cases of one-sided denigration.

#### Denigration and Individual Well-Being

More frequent denigration was also associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms and less satisfaction with life in both married and divorced families. Interestingly, parental denigration was not associated with symptoms of anxiety. As noted earlier, parental denigration by both mothers and fathers had strong associations with interparental conflict. As expected from previous research, conflict was statistically associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms and less satisfaction with life (see Table 4).

Correlations were computed between denigration scores and the PFAD subscales (see Table 5). Mother denigration of father scores were positively correlated with Maternal Blame,  $r(169) = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ , Loss and Abandonment,  $r(169) = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ , and seeing life through the Filter of Divorce,  $r(169) = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ . Father denigration of mother scores were positively correlated with the Paternal Blame,  $r(169) = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ , Loss and Abandonment,  $r(169) = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ , and seeing life through the Filter of Divorce,  $r(169) = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ , subscales. In addition to more frequent denigration being associated with higher levels of emotional pain, it is noteworthy that denigration by either mothers or fathers is associated with higher blame of only that parent. That is, children blamed the divorce more on the parent

Table 4. Intercorrelations for Psychological Well-Being, Conflict, and Denigration Scores by Marital Status

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Denigration by mother	—	.26	.03	-.27	.50	.49
2. Depressive symptoms (on CESD)	.29	—	.11	-.63	.31	.31
3. Anxiety symptoms (on STAI)	.09	.17	—	.05	.03	.04
4. Satisfaction with life (on SWL)	-.28	-.60	.11	—	-.32	-.31
5. Parental conflict	.65	.28	.01	-.32	—	.65
6. Denigration by father	.73	.30	.08	-.27	.61	—

Note. Intercorrelations for divorced families ( $n=326$ ) are presented above the diagonal, and intercorrelations for married families ( $n=668$ ) are presented below the diagonal. Child reporters from university students, MTurk, and twin samples. CESD=Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale; STAI=State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; SWL = Satisfaction With Life Scale.

$p < .05$  where  $|.11| \leq r \leq |.17|$ .  $p < .001$  where  $r \geq |.29|$ .

who did the denigrating; they did not blame the parent who was the object of the denigration (see Table 5).

Cross-sibling correlations were again computed, this time between denigration and measures of individual well-being, to avoid inflating correlations by relying on a single informant (see Tables 6 and 7). Older siblings' reports of denigration of fathers by mothers were negatively correlated with younger siblings' reports of satisfaction with life and were positively correlated with younger siblings' reports of depressive symptoms, although these associations were not statistically significant. Older siblings' reports of denigration of mothers by fathers were negatively (but not statistically) correlated with younger siblings' reports of satisfaction with life,  $r(54) = -.27, p = .075$ , and they were positively correlated with younger siblings' reports of depressive symptoms in divorced families,  $r(54) = .37, p = .006$ . Older siblings' denigration scores were also positively correlated with younger siblings' reports of conflict,  $r(103) = .47, p < .001$ , although this association was only statistically significant in married families.

Younger siblings' denigration scores were negatively correlated with older siblings' reports of satisfaction with life across marital status, although these associations were only statistically significant in married families,  $r(103) = -.31, p = .001$ , mother denigration;  $r(103) = -.19, p = .052$ , father denigration (see Tables 6 and 7). Younger siblings' denigration scores were also positively correlated with older siblings' reports of depressive symptoms, although these associations were only statistically significant for mother denigration,  $r(103) = .25, p = .010$ , married;  $r(54) = .26, p = .054$ , divorced. The statistical correlations between one sibling's report of denigration and the other sibling's reports of well-being provides support for the validity of the relationships between variables, given that data are from multiple informants.

#### DISCUSSION

The alienation and conflict hypotheses make opposite predictions about (a) whether denigration is one-sided (alienation) or reciprocal (conflict) and (b) whether denigration distances children from the parent who is denigrated (alienation) or from both parents (conflict). To test these opposing predictions, we developed a structured measure of parental denigration and, in the present research, sought to (a) replicate its internal consistency, (b) conduct a test-retest reliability assessment, and (c) use young adult siblings' reports to assess interrater reliability/concurrent validity.

The PDS was found to be a reliable measure in multiple ways. The factor structure and internal consistency of the measure was replicated in a large sample of young adults. The assessment of denigration showed a high level of test-retest reliability over a period of 1 month. Most important, the reports of young adult siblings were highly correlated, supporting the measure's interrater reliability or concurrent validity (depending on how the method is construed).

In contrast to the alienation perspective, but consistent with the conflict perspective, denigration was found to be largely reciprocal and to be associated with children feeling less close to the parent who does the more frequent denigrating rather than the parent who is more frequently denigrated. Importantly, the critical, latter result held consistently for mothers'

Table 5. *Comprehensive Intercorrelations Among Pain Subscales, Denigration, and Attachment for Divorced Families (n = 171)*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Denigration by mother	—									
2. Denigration by father		—								
3. Paternal blame (on PFAD)	.11	.37	—							
4. Loss (on PFAD)	.28	.31	.52	—						
5. Divorce filter (on PFAD)	.25	.28	.43	.57	—					
6. Maternal blame (on PFAD)	.35	.08	-.12	.19	.31	—				
7. Self-blame (on PFAD)	-.02	.11	.23	.29	.45	.30	—			
8. Acceptance (on PFAD)	.07	.11	.09	-.06	-.09	.05	-.03	—		
9. Attachment (IPPA) to mother	-.49	-.17	.16	-.26	-.12	-.52	-.12	.02	—	
10. Attachment (IPPA) to father	-.10	-.42	-.57	-.44	-.17	.22	-.12	-.05	.07	—

Note. Child reporters from the sample of university students. IPPA, Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment; PFAD = Painful Feelings About Divorce Scale.  $p < .05$  where  $|.16| \leq r \leq .21$ .  $p < .001$  where  $r \geq .28$ .

Table 6. *Intercorrelations Table for Sibling Reports of Denigration, Conflict, and Psychological Well-Being for Siblings With Married Parents (n = 54)*

Younger siblings	Older siblings					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Denigration by mother	.53	.2	-.01	-.31	.47	.44
2. Depressive symptoms (on CESD)	-.05	-.02	.03	-.02	-.07	-.04
3. Anxiety symptoms (on STAI)	-.00	-.03	.10	.11	-.03	.10
4. Satisfaction with life (on SWL)	-.17	-.16	.08	.26	-.11	-.11
5. Parental conflict	.47	.17	-.01	-.29	.66	.52
6. Denigration by father	.20	.11	-.08	-.19	.37	.37

Note. Reporters are from the sample of nontwin university students and siblings. CESD = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale; STAI = State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; SWL = Satisfaction With Life Scale.  $p < .05$  where  $|.19| \leq r \leq .24$ .  $p < .001$  where  $r \geq .31$ .

Table 7. *Intercorrelations Table for Sibling Reports of Denigration, Conflict, and Psychological Well-Being for Siblings With Divorced Parents (n = 103)*

Younger siblings	Older siblings					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Denigration by mother	.57	.26	.10	-.23	.34	.32
2. Depressive symptoms (on CESD)	.13	.09	.07	-.27	.27	.37
3. Anxiety symptoms (on STAI)	.04	.16	.23	-.18	-.01	.07
4. Satisfaction with life (on SWL)	-.13	-.07	.03	.24	-.22	-.24
5. Parental conflict	.19	.21	.06	-.29	.50	.50
6. Denigration by father	.17	.24	.17	-.19	.41	.70

Note. Reporters are from the sample of nontwin university students and siblings. CESD = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale; STAI = State-Trait Anxiety Inventory; SWL = Satisfaction With Life Scale.  $p < .05$  where  $|.26| \leq r \leq .32$ .  $p < .001$  where  $r \geq .49$ .

denigration of fathers, fathers' denigration of mothers, in married families, in divorced families, in self-reports, and in cross-sibling reports. Additionally, in a multivariate analysis, fathers' denigration of mothers was related to more negative father-child relationships and more positive mother-child relationships. That is, the more fathers said negative things about

mothers, the closer children felt to their mothers and the more distant they felt from their fathers. In a parallel multivariate analysis, mothers' denigration of fathers was related to more negative mother-child relationships but was not associated in either direction with closeness in father-child relationships. That is, the more mothers said negative things about fathers, the

more distant children felt from their mothers, whereas their closeness to their fathers was unaffected.

Together with the results from a previous study of another large sample (Rowen & Emery, 2014), the present findings indicate that when one parent puts down the other to his or her children, the overwhelming effect at the group level is for children to feel more distant from the parent who makes disparaging comments. In short, denigration has a boomerang effect. In direct contrast to the alienation hypothesis, putting down a coparent is likely to hurt one's own relationship with children more than to negatively influence a coparent's relationship with the children.

Individual cases of alienation may result from parental denigration, albeit as the exception rather than the rule. For this reason, all individual cases also were also examined, and one-sided denigration was identified in 1% of this sample (10 cases). In short, although alienation may occur, there was no evidence, even in individual cases, to support claims associated with the parental alienation hypothesis. Indeed, denigration was found to have a boomerang effect at both the group and the individual level.

Parental denigration was reported across married and divorced families, with greater frequency in divorced families. Mothers were reported to denigrate more frequently than fathers across marital status. In addition, there was an interaction between parent gender and marital status, as divorced mothers had particularly high denigration scores. Finally, denigration was moderately correlated with young adult children's ratings of conflict, suggesting that these are related but distinct constructs. Overall, these findings are consistent with previous work (Rowen & Emery, 2014) and suggest that denigration occurs across marital status and is important to assess in work with families, especially in the case of divorce.

Young adults who reported more frequent parental denigration also reported higher levels of depressive symptoms and less satisfaction with life. Further, children from divorced families reported experiencing painful feelings about divorce, including feelings of loss and abandonment and an increased propensity to see life through the filter of divorce. Importantly, reported mother denigration of fathers was related to maternal blame for the divorce, but not paternal blame; similarly, father denigration

of mothers was related to paternal blame for the divorce, but not maternal blame. This provides further evidence contrary to the predictions of the alienation hypothesis.

The overall pattern of relationships was similar across, as well as within, sibling reports. In particular, one sibling's report of denigration was correlated with the other sibling's report of emotional struggles. This important finding indicates that the relationship between denigration and individual well-being is substantive and not due to some form of self-report bias.

### *Implications for Practice and Research*

The present results hold several important implications for practice and research. Perhaps most importantly, no support was found for the alienation hypothesis among mothers or fathers, married or divorced families, in self- or cross-sibling reports, or in group or individual level analyses. Results pointed in the opposite direction of alienation predictions. In what appears to be a boomerang effect, denigration clearly is more strongly related to emotional distance in children's relationship with the parent who does the more frequent denigrating than to the parent who is more frequently the target of denigration. This holds important implications for parents and practitioners who work with them by providing empirical evidence that putting down a coparent hurts one's own parent-child relationship, not the coparent's.

Another important implication is that although alienation may occur, the burden of scientific proof is on proponents of alienation. If an expert wishes to claim that an individual case is an exception to the boomerang rule, that expert needs to demonstrate how and why an exception to the rule has occurred. More basically, it is clear that alienation is not occurring at the frequency some proponents claim, so judges and legal professionals are encouraged to examine alienation testimony with renewed caution.

Another major implication is that the present findings show that parental denigration is an important form of conflict that needs further study. Empirically, we envision research on children of different ages, parents involved in litigation and other conflict-ridden circumstances, and various efforts to operationalize denigration in addition to the PDS. Conceptually, the present findings on the relationship between parental denigration and both parent-child closeness and

individual well-being seem generally consistent with Cummings' emotional security hypothesis (Cummings & Davies, 2011), which states that "maintaining a sense of protection, safety, and security is a central goal for children in family settings, including contexts of marital conflict" (p. 30).

A final implication is that children do not have to directly observe parental disputes to be affected by them. Broader, family systems concepts are needed to understand more completely how children are affected by parental disputes (Emery, 2012). Children feel angry, torn, and confused when their parents are in dispute. The reasons for this are not easily explained by modeling, inconsistent discipline, or even by the emotional insecurity. These all may be important contributors, but conflict is also distressing because children love both their parents. It is painful for children to hear negative things about either parent, and the implicit push to align with one or the other parent disrupts the homeostatic balance in children's family relationships. The resulting confusion and pain can lead children to withdraw from one or both parents, particularly the parent who is trying to undermine family relationships. Thinking of parental denigration and parental conflict more systemically should aid future research and help mediators, parent educators, and therapists to intervene more effectively.

#### *Limitations and Strengths*

Certain limitations of the present investigation should be noted. The convenience methods used to recruit participants may have resulted in a biased sample in ways that could not be detected, despite efforts to ensure data integrity. In addition, the ethnic diversity of the sample was limited. Although a large sample was intentionally recruited from the general population, alienation may be more prone to occur in certain subsamples of the population (e.g., among parents contesting custody, among controlling or abusive partners, or where one or both parents suffer from personality disorders), and the dynamics of alienation may be different in those subsamples than in the general population. Finally, although our recruitment of siblings was innovative, the 54 sibling pairs for divorced families had limited statistical power.

The use of young adults' retrospective reports is both a limitation and strength. Retrospective

reports may be flawed as a result of gaps or biases in memory (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993). However, the ultimate goal is to assess how children perceive their parents, and young adults' reflections are of considerable interest in this regard. Young adults are not too far removed from their childhood, but they live apart from their parents and should be in a better position than younger children to reflect on and report troubling childhood experiences (such as hearing their parents denigrating one another). Still, studies of younger children and other efforts to assess parental denigration can be foreseen and are needed.

The present study also had a number of strengths, including a large sample, a standardized measure of denigration, a variety of measures of parent-child relationship quality and individual well-being, a test-retest subgroup, and importantly, the inclusion of sibling dyads. Strong support was found for the reliability of the PDS, initial support for its validity, and clear support for predictions based on the parental conflict literature over those stemming from the alienation hypothesis. The present findings indicate that parents who put down their coparent appear to negatively affect their own relationship with their children, not alienate children from their coparent.

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