

Patterns of Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Qualitative Study of Adults Who were Alienated from a Parent as a Child

AMY J. L. BAKER¹

Teaneck, New Jersey, USA

A qualitative retrospective study was conducted on 40 adults who experienced parental alienation as a child. Individuals participated in one-hour, semi-structured interviews. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and submitted to a content analysis for primary themes and patterns. Findings pertaining to the process of alienation from the targeted parent were analyzed for this article. Results revealed three distinct patterns of alienation (1) narcissistic alienating mothers in divorced families, (2) narcissistic alienating mothers in intact families, and (3) abusive/rejecting alienating mothers and fathers. Each of these patterns is described in detail along with five additional notable findings: (1) Alcoholism, maltreatment, and personality disorders co-occurred in most of the alienating families, (2) parental alienation occurred in intact families, (3) parental occurred in non-litigious divorced families, (4) some of the targeted parents appeared to play a role in their own alienation, and (5) the alienation was not always completely internalized. The clinical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Gardner (1992) coined the term parental alienation syndrome (PAS) to describe the result of custody disputes in which one parent deliberately turns a child against the other parent. Although few disagree that high-conflict divorces are associated with negative outcomes for children (e.g., Amato, 1994; Johnston, 1994; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996), the legal and helping professional communities are still debating the validity of parental alienation syndrome as a construct (e.g., Johnston & Kelly, 2004; Warshak, 2001). This

¹Dr. Baker also conducts research at the New York Foundling Hospital.

Address correspondence to Amy J. L. Baker, New York Foundling, 590 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10011. E-mail: amyb@nyfoundling.org

is at least in part because little empirical investigation has been conducted on this topic. In fact, the field is in its relative infancy (Turkat, 2002). To date most professional treatise on parental alienation are descriptive or proscriptive (e.g., Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 1988; Rand, 1997a, 1997b, 2005; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996; Warshak, 2001).

This study was designed to begin to examine empirically—albeit qualitatively—the phenomenon of parental alienation syndrome. The first question addressed was whether there is an existing population of people who identify themselves as having been alienated from a parent due to the actions and attitudes of the other parent when they were children. A negative response to this question would not necessarily mean that PAS does not exist (because some people have syndromes that they are not aware of, such as Alzheimer's); but an affirmative response to this question would lend face validity to the construct. That is, if people do identify themselves as having had this experience, then confidence in its existence is gained. The second question addressed in this study was, are there distinct patterns of parental alienation syndrome or does every case follow the same general outline. In particular, the personality of the alienating parent, the status of custody, and the role of the targeted parent were examined as sources of variation across cases.

METHODS

A qualitative retrospective study was conducted in the fall of 2004. Guidelines for conducting qualitative research developed by Berg (1998) were utilized throughout the study. Subjects were recruited from word of mouth and from postings on the internet. People who responded were asked to briefly describe their situation in order to ensure that the alienation was at least in part due to the behaviors and attitudes of the other parent as opposed to realistic estrangement (Cartwright, 1993; Kelly & Johnson, 2001). Appointments were made with people who met this criterion. At the beginning of each appointment it was explained that the interview was voluntary, for research purposes, and could be stopped at any time. It was also explained that the interviewer was a psychologist, but not a clinician and, therefore, would not be able to provide counseling. Informed consent was obtained and the audiotape was turned on. Only one person declined to participate after the study was explained.

The Sample

Forty-two adults participated in the interview process (2 were subsequently removed from data analysis because of faulty tapes). Thus, data for 40 participants are presented. Participants were between 19 and 67 years of age ($M = 40.5$, $SD = 11.5$); 15 were male and 25 were female. For three fourths

($n = 29$) the parents divorced during the participant's childhood and in all but six cases the alienating parent was the mother. Basic information about the 40 participants is provided in Table 1.

The Interview Schedule

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol which ensured that the same information was obtained from all participants while allowing each person

TABLE 1 Sample Description

ID	Gender	Age at interview	Age at separation	Custodial parent	Alienating parent
1	Female	40	3	Mother	Mother
2	Female	47	NA	Both	Mother
3	Female	35	12	Mother	Mother
4	Female	44	NA	Both	Mother
5	Female	30	13	Mother	Mother
6	Female	30	Birth	Mother	Mother
7	Male	40	9	Mother	Mother
8	Female	33	3	Mother	Mother
9	Male	48	5	Mother	Mother
10	Female	32	2	Father	Father
11	Male	43	NA	Both	Mother
12	Female	50	NA	Both	Mother
13	Female	33	NA	Both	Mother
14	Female	36	2	Mother	Mother
15	Male	67	NA	Both	Father
16	Male	43	5	Mother	Mother
17	Male	28	11	Father	Father
18	Female	26	2	Mother	Mother
19	Female	51	NA	Both	Mother
20	Male	48	NA	Both	Father
21	Female	44	12	Mother	Mother
22	Male	39	NA	Both	Mother
23	Female	28	3	Mother	Mother
24	Male	32	Birth	Mother	Mother
25	Female	43	12	Mother	Mother
26	Male	57	2	Mother	Mother
27	Female	19	8	Mother	Mother
28	Female	32	NA	Both	Father
29	Male	63	NA	Both	Mother
30	Male	39	2	Mother	Mother
31	Female	60	2	Mother	Mother
32	Female	50	11	Mother	Mother
33	Female	21	2	Mother	Mother
34	Male	39	4	Mother	Mother
35	Female	19	1	Mother	Father
36	Female	41	3	Mother	Mother
37	Male	52	8	Mother	Mother
38	Male	46	2	Mother	Mother
39	Female	37	Birth	Mother	Mother
40	Female	50	5	Mother	Mother

to “tell their story” in full. The interview schedule was developed in order to capture the 12 aspects of the qualitative research interview outlined by Kvale (1996). That is, the interview aimed to understand in a *focused* way the *subject’s every day life world* as it related to parental alienation and the meaning of the alienation for them, in a *qualitative* rather than quantitative form, with an emphasis on *description of specific* experiences. This information was obtained through a *sensitively* conducted *interpersonal* exchange that because of the *deliberate naiveté* of the interviewer allowed the subject to express *ambiguous* statements and come to new and/or *changed understandings*. The interview was conducted in such a manner as to produce a *positive experience* for the participant.

The interview had five major sections. The first section of the interview obtained basic demographic information including age, gender, place of birth, and so forth. Section two focused on memories of the marriage, the participant’s relationship to each parent until the time of the separation/divorce, how the participant was told about the separation, who moved out of the house and a description of the custody/visitation schedule through age 18.¹ The third section of the interview focused on the alienation, beginning with which parent was the alienating parent and which was the targeted parent. Participants were asked to list all of the different strategies used by the alienating parent and to provide examples of each. The participant was asked to describe his/her relationship to the targeted parent and how that changed over time, as well as the participant’s relationship to the alienating parent during this period. This section ended with a discussion of how the targeted parent tried to counter the alienation, whether the participant knew about these attempts at the time, and the perceived motivation of the alienating parent. In the fourth section of the interview, the participants were asked about when his or her thinking eventually changed about the targeted parent. They were queried about when they began to realize that their feelings and thoughts about the targeted parent were induced by the alienating parent rather than based wholly in reality. Whether the alienating parent was ever confronted, whether the targeted parent was told about the realization, and what, if anything, could the targeted parent have done to mitigate the alienation were discussed. Any reunification with the targeted parent was described in full including who initiated it and what happened. The final section of the interview entailed a conversation about the person’s life at the present, including what kind of relationship he or she had with each parent and what the impact of the alienation has been. At the end of the interview a checklist was reviewed in order to ensure consistency of data across participants.

¹ This section was eliminated for the participants whose parents never separated/divorced.

Analysis

Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then submitted to a content analysis in which each unique unit of thought was separated from the transcript and taped onto an index card. Content analysis was guided by an inductive grounded theory approach outlined by Berg (1998) and Straus (1987) in which the texts were read in order to identify the major themes. Cards were then coded according to its essential idea (i.e., relationship with targeted parent prior to the alienation, strategies utilized by the alienating parent, impact of the alienation). There were 11 major categories including a category on the experience of alienation. These “alienation” cards were further coded into sub-categories that produced the major findings presented in the current article.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first goal of this study was to determine whether there were people who identified themselves as having been alienated from one parent due to the other parent’s actions and attitudes. Within a two-month period over 40 people responded to the internet postings, coming forward and identifying themselves as child victims of parental alienation syndrome. This suggests that the concept of being turned against a parent due to the behavior and attitudes of the parent resonated with people’s actual experience. Although these data do not provide any benchmark for determining the actual prevalence of the phenomenon in the general population, they do provide evidence that there are people who believe that they have had this experience.

The second goal of the study was to determine whether there were different types of parental alienation experiences or whether they all followed the same general outline. In order to answer this question, each of the cases was summarized on a note card and then sorted. This resulted in the identification of three distinct patterns that described all but three of the participants. These three patterns are presented followed by a discussion of additional findings of note.

Patterns of Alienation

PATTERN 1: NARCISSISTIC MOTHER IN DIVORCED FAMILY

This pattern described 14 of the cases. In these families the parents were divorced; the mother was the custodial alienating parent and the father was the non-custodial targeted parent. The most distinguishing feature of these families was that the alienating mothers appeared—based on the descriptions provided by the participants—to have a narcissistic personality. As described by one participant, “She was definitely totally conceited. She thought

of herself as always wanting the best in things. She was very insistent about her skills and so forth and if somebody didn't recognize that, that was their problem not hers. Her actions were self-centered. She really did see herself as the center of the universe." Another said, "She was the center and everything revolved around her;" and another participant said, "Mainly I think she always wants to be your everything. She wants to be your center of attention." Not all of these participants used the term narcissism to describe their mothers, but they all portrayed their mother as self-centered, demanding a high degree of attention and admiration, and not able to see them as separate individuals. These descriptions conveyed the very essence of narcissism. According to Masterson (1981) the main clinical characteristics of the narcissistic personality are, "grandiosity, extreme self-involvement, and lack of interest in and empathy for others, in spite of the pursuit of others to obtain admiration and approval." (p. 7). The picture portrayed of the alienating mothers in these families was of a woman who was charming, dynamic, and preoccupied with having her own needs met rather than meeting the needs of her children. Based on the responses to the interviews, it can be surmised that these narcissistic mothers cultivated an emotionally enmeshed relationship with the participants when they were young children that appeared to serve their own need for love and admiration rather than to promote the emotional health and growth of the participants. They were able to instill in the participants a sense of awe and admiration. The following comments were made: "I was in thrall to my mother," "I was in my mom's world not my own," and "We were really good friends. It was brilliant. I used to be called her shadow because we'd do everything together."

Maternal narcissism appeared to fuel the alienation in at least three ways. First, despite the powerful personality presented to the world, narcissists tend to feel empty inside and easily become enraged at the first sign of humiliation or abandonment (Masterson, 1981). Therefore, it is quite likely that the end of the marriage triggered in these women feelings of shame and rage that became directed towards the husband. As Masterson (1981) noted, once a person with narcissistic personality feels belittled or psychologically abandoned they, "avoid, deny, and/or devalue the offending stimulus or perception, thereby restoring the balance of his narcissistic equilibrium." (p. 16). Thus, once the father had left the marriage he became an object of intense devaluation and hatred. This is certainly consistent with the fact that the participants recalled a steady stream of badmouthing about the absent father following the divorce. These men were referred to as cheaters, gamblers, rapists, alcoholics, and abusers in front of the participants. One participant recalled, "She never said anything good about him. She said he was worthless. He was an alcoholic." Another reported, "She said all these terrible things about him my whole life." Thus, the alienation may have been partly motivated by revenge, as if the mothers were saying, "If you don't want me you can't have the children." Further, for the father to want an

ongoing relationship with the children (i.e., they did not reject the children) was also experienced as a narcissistic injury. The feeling came across in the interviews that the mothers wished that if the fathers left them that they should leave the children too. Statements such as "Daddy doesn't love us anymore," which conflated the rejection of the mother with the rejection of the children, might be seen as a wish rather than a statement of fact. Many participants recalled that such comments were made throughout their childhoods.

A second underlying motivation of the alienation fueled by the mothers' narcissism appears to be anger towards the children that they wanted to have a relationship with the father even though he had rejected the mother. This too might have triggered a feeling of abandonment and rejection in these mothers that was too much to bear. They seemed to feel that because they were hurt and angry with the father, the children should be as well. This is consistent with the fact that narcissists generally have a hard time understanding that others (including if not especially their children) have separate feelings and experiences of the world (Kernberg, 1976). For the narcissist, if she is angry with someone, the children should be as well. Thus, the participants wanting to have a relationship with the father following the divorce was experienced as a betrayal and contributed to the mother's desire to alienate them from their fathers.

Third, the narcissistic mothers might have felt especially alone and fragile following the divorce and might have relied more on their children for comfort, companionship, and reassurance than before. Seen in this light, the time the children spent with the father under these circumstances would have been experienced as a profound loss. To be alone in the house while the children visited the father might have been unbearably lonely and threatening. As one participant explained, "She would ask us where we'd been and she would say, 'Oh I was left on my own and nobody really thinks of me.'" Many narcissists do not know how to be alone, as they need an audience to make them feel real and to reassure them of their grandiosity (Golumb, 1992). So the children visiting the father may have activated the mothers' feelings of loss and anger, which might have been an underlying motivation to alienate the children from their fathers.

For all these reasons, the relationship between the participants and their fathers following the divorce would have been experienced as abandonment, a loss, and a humiliation to the mothers. To ward off these threatening and unpleasant feelings (and perhaps to punish the divorced ex-husband) the mother created a loyalty conflict and forced the child to choose between the two parents. "We were made to chose. My mother would say, 'To go over there is to go to people who don't like me. I'm your mother. Don't you want to like me?'" "She impressed upon me that my real ties were with her." In having the child choose them over the father, their emotional needs for revenge, for comfort, and for reassurance were satisfied.

Thus, the narcissistic mothers convinced their children to reject the other parent. In Baker (in press), the full range of strategies that the alienating parents used is described. Particularly relevant for the discussion of narcissistic mothers are two strategies, described briefly below: cultivation of dependency/threat of rejection and a creation of a sense of obligation/guilt.

First, as noted above the mothers were able to cultivate in their children an unhealthy reliance on their acceptance and approval, much the way cult leaders encourage people to become dependent on them (Baker, 2005). The participants explained that to be out of their mother's favor represented an unimaginable loss, something to be avoided at all costs. Typical of narcissists, the closeness these mothers cultivated with their children was sustained only as long as the participants were gratifying their needs. The moment the mothers felt wounded or were displeased, the children were devalued and emotionally cut off. Withdrawal of love and rejection was particularly noticeable following visitation with the father. "It would make her angry if I was close with him," said one participant. Another recalled, "She would shut me out. It would be just silence." Statements such as, "Oh it was very cold. She would give me the cold shoulder," "When I did see him she was horrible to me. When I came back from visits she wouldn't talk to me," or "My mother would get really angry if for example my brother or I displayed any affection for my father" were common throughout the interviews. These mothers appeared to alternate between enveloping their children in a safe and loving world in which they basked in the warm glow of maternal love and approval and exiling their children to a world of coldness and maternal rejection. This vacillation was described by one participant in the following statement, "She kind of went through periods of ups and downs. There were times whether she was drinking or sober she would tell me how much she loved me. How great I was, how smart I was. I was there to help her. It would make me want to try harder to please her. I learned how to be amusing at a very young age. During good periods I felt like if I could just be funny enough or cute enough, sweet enough, good enough whatever then she'll stay happy but for whatever reasons she would go back down into anger and sadness and then it was over."

Further, the participants saw first-hand what happened when someone crossed their mothers, having witnessed the rage directed toward the father. To avoid a similar fate, the participants placed the mothers first in their emotional lives. Because they were never sure of where they stood and because they believed that they needed their mother's approval for their very survival they would have done almost anything to please them, including rejecting the father. As Golumb has noted, "Longing for parental love creates an invisible force" (p. 49) and it was this longing for the mother's love that was the force that drove the alienation of the father.

Second, the mothers also appeared to the participants as fragile and in need of their loyalty and emotional support. They believed that not only

were they needed by their mothers but that they somehow owed it to their mothers to take care of them. “I didn’t bring any friends home. I felt like I was supposed to be there for my mom all the time. I felt like if I associated with anyone other than her I was betraying her.” This aided in the alienation because the participants felt that rejecting the father was what was required to heal the mother or at least limit further damage and suffering. Thus, these mothers were able to make their feelings and needs more real and compelling to the participants than not only the father’s needs but even their own. “I would see her cry a lot so she appeared very fragile to me so that she made me feel more responsible to be there for her.”

PATTERN 2: NARCISSISTIC MOTHER IN NON DIVORCED FAMILY

This pattern describes eight cases and represents a variation of pattern 1. As with pattern 1, the mother was the alienating parent and the father was the target of the alienation. Also like pattern 1, the distinguishing feature of these families is that the alienating mothers appeared—based on the descriptions provided by the participants—to have a narcissistic personality. The primary difference is that in pattern 2 families the alienation did not occur within the context of post divorce custodial conflict. That is, in all eight cases the parents remained married and living together for the participant’s entire childhood.

The style of alienation, therefore, in pattern 2 families was somewhat different. The primary technique entailed confiding in the child about the inadequacies and failings of the father. The alienating parents drew the participants into their confidence in such a way as to solidify their relationship at the expense of the relationship with the targeted parent. The participants knew things about the targeted parent that the targeted parent did not know the participants knew and therefore, had no idea that it would be helpful to correct the impression or tell the other side of the story. The participants were left with a biased understanding of the adult relationship, which was designed to make the targeted parent look bad in their eyes. In addition, these confidences served to enhance the intimacy between the alienating parent and the participants and further bind them to that parent. Further, these confidences often led the participants to feel sorry for the alienating parent and anger toward the targeted parent for being so hurtful. “She made several announcements to me that she was going to be seeking a divorce and she told me how marvelous life would be once the divorce went through. I was so happy about that. I suppose I felt as though she saw me as a friend and I hoped I was worthy of her liking me.” Another said, “She felt insecure regarding other women and I had knowledge of so many things and that was something I was really too young to know about.” “My mother would get into more of her personal life with my father which was really not any of our business as children and in some way it had a negative effect.” One young man recalled that when he was five years old his mother told him she

couldn't cope with the demands of raising the family and she was considering taking him and running away. "She was upset and she was sharing that with me. The predominant impression was incredible intensity and excitement and horror." Much of what was shared with the participants about the father was designed to make them feel anger or resentment toward him and protective of the mother, furthering the alienation.

Thus, the alienating mother was able—through the force of her narcissistic personality—to cultivate an emotional alliance at the expense of the child's relationship with the father, despite the fact that the father was living in the same household. In all cases the mother confided in the participant about her discontent with the father and drew the child into her perspective that the father was inadequate and in fact responsible for whatever ailed the mother or went wrong in the family. The following description by one participant captured this dynamic, "She'd always made both my brother and me feel that our father was somehow to blame for everything. Every day there'd be some attempt by her, some tale she'd tell me, to turn me against my father—so many incidents it's simply impossible to list them all. Just about all aspects of the alienation worked, as far as I recall. I became my mother's puppet, her ally against my father. I grew to detest him, with a truly visceral hate. I couldn't stand to be in the same room with him, or to even talk to him or have him talk to me."

Because the alienation did not occur in the context of a divorce, the motivation was probably somewhat different than for pattern 1 mothers, in which hurt and anger at the spouse's rejection and abandonment seemed to be the likely precipitating cause. In those cases, the alienation served to both punish the father whom the mother was angry with and generate emotional satisfaction for the mother through the alliance with the child. In pattern 2, in the absence of divorce, the underlying motivation appeared to have been different, although it is possible that even in the marriage, the mother felt rejected or frustrated by the father and retaliated through the alliance with the child. It is also possible that the mother was not able to maintain an adult relationship in which emotional honesty and compromise would be necessary. Perhaps these mothers turned to their children because having the unquestioning adoration of a child was more satisfying and less demanding than a mature relationship with another adult.

What links the two patterns is that the child had a close emotional bond with the mother, which the mother exploited to her advantage to meet her own needs. The child chose the mother over the father—when forced to choose—in order to preserve the perceived closeness with the mother.

PATTERN 3: COLD, REJECTING OR ABUSIVE ALIENATING PARENT

The third pattern represents a dramatic departure from the first two. The most striking difference is the tone and quality of the relationship with the

alienating parent. Rather than a “fabulously close” or “excellent” relationship, as the participants in pattern 1 and 2 described having with their mothers, the participants in pattern 3 families were physically, verbally, and/or sexually abused by the alienating parent. Sixteen cases fit this pattern, three in intact families and 13 in divorced families. In half the families the alienating parent was alcoholic in addition to being physically, emotionally, sexually, and/or verbally abusive and in five cases the father was the alienating parent. The alienation occurred not through the alienating parent winning the child over through charm and persuasion, but through a campaign of fear, pain, and denigration of the targeted parent.

Two extended quotes are presented as a way to convey the tone and style of these pattern 3 cases. As one participant explained, “My father was a very strong patriarch. He ran the place. He was a nasty person when he drank and he drank most of the time and he pretty much ruled the roost as the saying goes. When he spoke everyone else had to shut up and listen and he ruled with occasional unexpected violence. Mother was cowed . . . there was very little she could do. She had her hands full dealing with him. He would belittle her. He had a whole bag of tricks to control and one was the constant belittling of people, of me and of my sister, mocking and belittling my mother, and it was very effective because there was no escaping it. You couldn’t talk back or you would be physically admonished or you would be mocked even stronger. I was never close to my mother. I didn’t want to spend any time with her because I bought into some of his stuff that she was silly and mawkish or overly sentimental and unreliable or whatever the sum total of the impressions that he tried to convey about her.”

Another participant told of allying himself with his brutal and domineering father against his mother and siblings, “He ended up getting joint custody and I was supposed to be in my father’s house four days of each week and with my mother the other three days. I believed that everyone else was wrong and that my father was right and that he was the one that actually cared about me and everyone else just wanted to do me harm. I was probably going to my mother’s for a while but my father had pretty much a system set up and basically what he would do was kind of manipulate everything where I didn’t want to be there since I would rather be with him because of what he had told me and how he made it seem like everyone was bad so he basically would tell me how to act and behave while I was there and be mean to them and I was very verbally and physically abusive to my other family members at the direction of my father because I was blaming them for me not being with him.” Eventually this participant cut off all contact with his mother for several years.

One way to understand why the participants in these pattern 3 families aligned themselves with their violent parents is within the framework of identification with the aggressor (Freud, 1966). According to Freud, identification with the aggressor is a psychological defense mechanism whereby

individuals (often children) cope with the anxiety associated with feeling and/or being powerless by taking on the characteristics of the more powerful person—even if that person is aggressive and/or abusive toward them. In that way, the child feels less overwhelmed and out of control. This defense mechanism has been used to describe why children defend their abusive parents as well as why individuals who feel anxious and alone may join a cult and form an identification with its leader (Goldberg, 2003). In the context of these pattern 3 families, the alienating parent was experienced as so powerful (through violence and force of personality) that the child felt safer allying with him/her than with the rejected targeted parent. In this way, the goal of the alienation from the child's perspective was avoidance of pain and powerlessness rather than the maintenance of a close emotional—albeit enmeshed—bond with the alienating narcissistic mother (as in patterns 1 and 2). Although the outcome was essentially the same—the child sided with the alienating parent against the targeted parent—the strategies the alienating parent used and the motivations for the child's choosing the alienator were different than in pattern 1 and 2 families.

Thus, parental alienation syndrome can take different forms. The underlying motivation may be different, the strategies the alienator uses may differ, and the motivations of the child for siding with the alienating parent may also vary. Three distinct patterns emerged in this sample of 40 cases. It is possible that additional patterns would have emerged with a larger sample. For example, one of the participants who did not fall into the three patterns reported that the alienating parent was the non-custodial father. Although this was uncommon in this sample, it is possible that in the general population there is an entire sub-sample of people who had this experience. The practical implication of this finding is that clinical and legal interventions may need to be tailored to a more refined and nuanced understanding of the type of parental alienation experienced. Narcissistic mothers as alienators may present different clinical opportunities than alcoholic physically abusive fathers. The first scenario is the one commonly envisioned and described when parental alienation syndrome is discussed (Gardner, 1992). However the field needs to recognize that there is more than one type of parental alienation syndrome.

Notable Themes and Findings

Five notable findings emerged from an examination of these 40 cases. The first is that, alcoholism, maltreatment, and personality disorders co-occurred in most of the cases included in this study. Although the proportion may not be as high in the general population of parental alienation cases (due to sampling bias in which perhaps the worst cases were most likely to want to participate in the research) the findings still suggest that this occurs in at least some portion of the cases. Future research should aim to determine

in a random and representative sample the actual proportions. However, in the meantime, these data suggest that when cases of parental alienation are brought to the attention of the mental health and legal professions, assessments of these factors should be part of the basic intake protocol. Implications for interventions are many. For example, if an alienating parent also has an alcohol problem, part of any intervention protocol should include participation in abstinence programs and drug and alcohol testing. Second, determination of personality disorders should be taken into account when devising methods for overseeing visitation schedules since such individuals are not likely to comply with court orders. People with narcissistic personality disorders tend to be arrogant and, therefore, are likely to devalue authority figures and emphasize their own ability to make judgments and decisions (e.g., Golumb, 1992; Hotchkiss, 2002). Without real teeth in a visitation or shared parenting order, it is not likely that such a person will comply. The legal system has developed measures for tracking and enforcing payment of child support; it is now time for methods of ensuring compliance with visitation to be developed as well.

A second notable finding from this study is that parental alienation can occur in intact families. The majority of the attention to parental alienation syndrome has emerged from the legal system in response to problems dealing with high conflict divorces, custody disputes, and false and real allegations of parental alienation (Darnall, 1998; Warshak, 2001). To date, there has been minimal if any attention to the fact that parental alienation can occur outside of the legal system. The strategies that the alienating parents used were the same as strategies that parents in post-divorce cases used. The experience of the alienation was quite similar as well. Despite the fact that the targeted parent lived in the same household, the participants rejected them, avoided them, denigrated them (in their hearts and mind) and essentially lost out on the experience of having a healthy rewarding relationship with that other parent. One implication of this finding is that those who come in contact with parents and children should be familiar with the concept of parental alienation syndrome and not assume that it could not apply to a particular situation simply because the parents are not divorced.

Third, alienation occurred in some of these families that were not involved in post-divorce litigation. Again, the typical parental alienation scenario discussed in the field is that of a family involved in intense and chronic legal conflicts around custody and visitation (Gardner, 1998). This was not always the case. In some of the families the targeted parent did not seek remedy in the court, either because they did not have the financial resources to do so or because they did not know they could or did not believe that they would win. Combined with the finding above (that alienation can occur in non-divorced families) it appears that it may be time to broaden our understanding of parental alienation syndrome. Parents who feel that they are being targeted for alienation by the other parent of their child (ren) should

take this seriously and not assume because they are in an intact marriage or because they are not in divorce litigation that they are not experiencing parental alienation. These parents should become familiar with the concept and the best thinking about how to intervene and prevent it from becoming entrenched. Likewise, teachers, social workers and other mental health professionals who come into contact with parents and children should become versed in the patterns of parental alienation syndrome and the strategies parents use so that they can identify them when they are present. Only then can the targeted parent rethink their current parenting style and relationship with their child. Without knowing what they are dealing with, they may assume that there is nothing unusual about their situation and that there is nothing to be done to improve it.

Fourth, the parents who were the target of the alienation appeared to play a role in their own alienation. In some cases these parents were passive and uninvolved (even when living in the same household) and did not work particularly diligently to establish and or maintain a positive and meaningful relationship with their own children. Many did not write letters or make phone calls to their children during periods of non-visitation, they did not attend school events and sporting competitions, they did not follow through on planned visitations, and in some respects appeared to be casual about their relationships with their children. Of course, it must be noted that these reports were made by the adult children, and because they were children at the time of the alienation, they may not know everything that the targeted parents did or tried to do for them. Some might have written letters that were thrown out or made phone calls that were intercepted. However, some of the targeted parents seemed to do less than everything possible. In fact some actively removed themselves from the situation—apparently out of defeat or anger—conveying the message to the participants that they were not worth fighting for.

Although criticizing the targeted parents for the alienation may appear to be a case of blaming the victim, it is not intended as such. Unless the targeted parent understands what role, if any, s/he plays in the alienation, s/he is doing less than everything possible to ameliorate the situation. Hearing the stories of the participants, it is easy to imagine how shaming and frustrating being the target of parental alienation can be. Although the rage rightly belongs directed at the message (the alienating parent) it is also easy to see how it could be directed at the messenger (the child). As Gardner (1992) has noted when he coined the term Independent Thinker syndrome, the children affected by parental alienation are very convincing in their presentation of disaffection for the targeted parent. Thus, these parents may very well be tempted to respond to the messenger and say “If you don’t want to have a relationship with me, fine. I will remove myself from the picture and spare you all of the unpleasantness.” However, such abandonment is the very fuel that the alienating parents used to convince the participants that the targeted

parent did not love them. These alienating parents were very quick to point out to the participants any lapses in the targeted parent's parenting, sowing the seed of doubt in their minds about their relationship with the targeted parent. As one young woman explained, "She'd bring up the lack of him writing me. She'd bring that up a lot. She's say every once in a while, 'You were so misbehaved, such a bad child, look he doesn't even want to be around you. Look he doesn't write you.' That had some type of proof to it."

The final finding that emerged from a review of these cases is that the alienation was not always completely internalized. That is, despite the unambivalent protestation of hatred toward the targeted parent, many of the participants reporting holding on to good feelings about that parent somewhere deep inside them. That is, there was variation among the participants in the extent to which they believed what they said. This was probably unknown to the targeted parent who only saw the rejection and hatred directed toward them. For example, one participant recalled being made to call his father on the phone and spout vile curses at him. "She would be telling us what to say and I remember repeating it. For the most part it was cursing. Sometimes she would make me say that he was a womanizer." He really had no understanding of what he was saying and shared that at the time he was saying these things he had been secretly hoping that his father knew that he didn't mean it. "I don't know whether he believed we really felt that way or not because we were saying these things to him. I am hoping in my heart he knew but it must have hurt anyway." This is yet another reason why targeted parents should not assume that what they are hearing is the complete truth about how their child feels about them. This should help them "hang in there" despite the intense negativity being directed toward them and should provide them with a motivation for continuing to show their love and commitment to the child, who is after all the victim.

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