

Alienating Behavior Within Divorced and Intact Families: Matched Parents' And Now-Young Adult Children's Reports

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Introduction

Current divorce literature acknowledges that especially traumatic effects may arise when the divorce pulls on the child's loyalty toward their parents (Amato, Loomis & Booth (1995); Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979; Pruett and Pruett, 1998). Children who are placed in a position of feeling disloyal to one parent when they continue a relationship with the other parent are commonly emotionally tormented (Emery, 1999).

Most often, loyalty conflicts are instigated by the parents themselves. Gardner (1985) coined the term "Parental Alienation Syndrome" (PAS) to describe the negative and harmful behaviors by an alienating parent toward the target parent and how this may manifest itself within the child. There is intense debate about PAS in the professional psychological, psychiatric and legal literature, with authors such as Rand (1997), Turket (1995), Warshak (2003), and Cartwright (1993) on the pro-PAS side and Emery (2005), Kelly and Johnston (2001), Bruch (2001), Dallam (1998) and Holden, Geffner and Jouriles (1998) on the other. The governor of the US state of Maine recently issued a proclamation declaring "Parental Alienation Awareness Day."

While the existence of a "syndrome" is hotly debated (and will be sidestepped here), few disagree that at least some divorcing parents at least sometimes engage in alienating behaviors, i.e., "any constellation of behaviors, whether conscious or unconscious, that could evoke a disturbance in the relationship between a child and the other parent" (Darnall, 1999). Missing, however, is almost any quantitative research directly addressing the issue of the degree of and impact of parental alienation (Johnston, 2003), despite substantial agreement that such research is urgently needed (Lund, 1995; Mason, 1999; Vestal, 1999; Warshak, 2001).

Here, we quantitatively explore parental alienating behaviors with a newly created 6-item parental alienating behaviors scale (PABS) with good psychometric properties. This scale was used to explore four research questions:

- 1) What is the reported prevalence of parental alienating behaviors by divorced mothers and fathers?
- 2) Does this reported prevalence differ depending on whether the child, the mother or the father is reporting it?
- 3) Does the report of children of divorce about prevalence of alienating behavior differ from that of children of still-intact families?
- 4) What is the impact of reported parental alienating behaviors on subsequent indices of child well-being and adjustment?

Method

Our data source is the families of college students, some of whom experienced a divorce during their childhood. Such young adults, emancipated and freed of their daily dependence on their parents, may have come to more mature and objective views of each their parents and their parents' strengths and weaknesses. The students were recruited from six Introductory Psychology class sections at Arizona State University, 29.3% of whom indicated that their parents were divorced.

87.8% of those who had indicated that their parents were divorced chose to participate in the study, took a questionnaire for themselves, and also indicated that their parents would be willing to respond to the questionnaire. Parent questionnaires were distributed by mail to all parents for whom students gave us valid addresses and permission

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to send the request. The letter we sent to parents explained that their child had an opportunity to earn extra course credit towards the student's final grade if the parent completed the questionnaire. Parents were also informed that their child would not be negatively affected if they chose not to participate. 142 mother (87.3% of participating students) and 100 father questionnaires (78.1% of those mailed) were returned. Primary analyses are restricted to those 86 families for whom complete data was obtained on mother, father, and child. Additionally, the scale was completed by 218 students who indicated that their parents were not divorced, as a comparison group.

College students were asked matched questions about their mother's and their father's alienating behaviors: examples are: "My mother [father] often spoke badly of my father [mother]" and "My mother [father] wanted me to identify more with her [him] than with my father [mother]". The parent questionnaire was reworded to ask the same questions from each of the parents' perspectives. Parents answered both about their own behaviors and those of their former spouse. Response choices were from 0 ("strongly disagree") to 8 ("strongly agree").

Results

Results on the PABS showed that there was substantial agreement (or corroboration) across reporters. For example, the amount of alienation behavior engaged in by the father as reported by the adult child is significantly correlated with the father report ($r = .26$) and the mother report ($r = .58$). There was also substantial mutuality or reciprocation of alienating behaviors by the two parents. That is, according to all three reporters, the mothers' and fathers' alienation tended to co-occur. The mother-father PABS score correlation was .35, .37, and .33 as reported by adult child, mother and father report, respectively.

Despite this agreement, in answer to research questions 1 and 2, there were also significant mean differences between the reporters. The student and his/her parents were matched as family units and a 3 X 2 (both) repeated measures factorial ANOVA was performed, with who reported the alienation as the 3 level factor and who was said to have engaged in the alienation behavior as the 2 level factor. The results demonstrated a significant ($p < .001$) interaction effect of who reported the alienation with who engaged in the behavior. The factorial was then analyzed for simple main effects. The mothers reported that fathers alienated significantly more (for mothers $M = 14.10$; for fathers $M = 17.63$), while the fathers reported that mothers alienated significantly more (for mothers $M = 18.28$; for fathers $M = 10.69$). The adult children however, did not report a significant difference (for mothers $M = 17.16$; for fathers $M = 14.96$) in alienation behavior between the mother and father. It is noteworthy that the mothers' and the fathers' reported means of their own alienation behavior is noticeably less than the adult child reports on both parents respectively, but lower than their report about the other parent.

In answer to research question 3, analyses also showed that alienating behavior in divorced families was almost 3 times the level of intact families, according to child's report. Finally, in answer to research question 4, we found only two significant correlations of PABS variables with adult student's current adjustment and well-being outcomes, both with only the fathers' reports of the mother's alienation: for GPA ($r = -.25$) and for substance use ($r = .21$).

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