

## **The Long-Term Correlates of Childhood Exposure to Parental Alienation on Adult Self-Sufficiency and Well-Being**

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*In this retrospective study, we examined several long-term psychological correlates of experiencing parental alienation (PA) as a child, defined as reporting that one parent tried to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent. Differences between those who did and did not endorse having this experience were measured on self-sufficiency and four aspects of well-being: alcohol abuse, depression, attachment, and self-esteem. Results indicated significant associations between perceived exposure to parental alienation as a child and lower self-sufficiency, higher rates of major depressive disorder, lower self-esteem, and insecure attachment styles as adults. This research suggests that there are significant long-term psychological associations in the lives of adults who experienced parental alienation as children, which created observable vulnerabilities that differ from normative divorce situations.*

The degree of conflict between parents during and after separation has been identified as the single best predictor of outcomes for children after divorce (Pruett, Williams, Isabella, & Little, 2003; Schick, 2002). One distinct form of parental conflict that can sometimes emerge under high conflict situations has been termed parental alienation (PA). This refers to the persistent, unwarranted denigration of one parent by the other, in an attempt to alienate the child from the other parent (Gardner, 1998). Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) refers to one possible outcome of experiencing PA, and refers

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to a condition in which a child has been successfully indoctrinated and controlled by an alienating parent (AP), resulting in unwarranted fear, hatred, and rejection of the targeted parent (TP).

The proposed psychological underpinnings for this family dynamic and the consequences of exposure to PA have been drawn from theory and clinical experience. As PA is still a relatively new construct, scientific investigations into this phenomenon have been somewhat limited (Warshak, 2001). However, parental conflict has long been established as an important determinant of the long-term adjustment of children of divorce (Amato, 1994), and findings confirm that it is not simply the extent of the conflict that affects children detrimentally, but rather, the degree to which children are drawn into the parental conflict, (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Children caught in the middle of parental disputes post-divorce have more problems adjusting than children of divorce who are not thus involved (Kelly, 2000; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992).

In the only empirical examination looking explicitly at the outcomes of exposure to PA and resulting PAS, Baker (2005; 2007), using a qualitative design, analyzed interviews of 40 self-identified adults victims of PAS (that is, they believed that they had been exposed to parental alienation strategies and as a result became alienated from one parent by the other parent). Baker (2007) reported that the subjects identified being affected by the experience of alienation in the following areas: (1) low self-esteem/self-hatred, (2) depression, (3) drugs/alcohol abuse, (4) lack of trust, (5) alienation from own children, (6) divorce, and (7) other (e.g. identity difficulties, low achievement, anger). These effects were identified by the subjects as associated with the emotional abuse and trauma involved with exposure to PA and the resulting PAS.

Following the direction pointed out by Baker's (2007) work, the current study set out to explore the long-term correlates of the perception of having experienced PA by one parent against the other, over the lifetime of adult children of divorce on five relevant psychological domains.

## SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Autonomy, a sense of individuation and the development of psychological self-reliance (Ammaniti & Trentini, 2009; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975) are important achievements for an individual's sense of competence (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989) and intrinsic motivation (Joussemet, Landry & Koestner, 2008). Kohut's (1971) concept of mirroring describes the child's need for admiration, celebration of accomplishments, and encouragement of progress from his or her caregiver. It is this experience of being valued and supported by a caregiver that allows children to depend progressively less on others as they internalize a sense of agency and develop meaning and goals for themselves.

When the acquisition of positive self-regard is reinforced, caregivers help a child to actualize his or her sense of agency and potential (Kohut, 1971).

On the other hand, psychological control on the part of the parent undermines autonomous development of the child by mitigating intrinsic motivation and constricting self-determining behavior, (Jousemet et al., 2008). Psychological control has been defined as parental pressure on the child to think and behave in certain ways to please the parent, regardless of the meaning or impact on the child (Buehler, Krishnakumer, Stone, Anthony, Pemberton, Gerard, & Barber, 1998). Studies in this area suggest that parental psychological control is intrusive and inhibits the development of autonomy (Ojanen & Perry, 2007; Ryan, 1982) and can interfere with developing an intrinsic source of motivation.

Children inducted into PA dynamics are not allowed the freedom to develop an autonomous emotional life. The AP demands obedience, interfering with the child's ability to make independent decisions and have psychological freedom. Diminishing the child's autonomous thinking skills is crucial for a successful alienating agenda, which aims to increase the child's acquiescence to the AP's demands and adoption of the AP's false belief systems. Thus, it was hypothesized in this study that children exposed to parental alienation would have diminished self-sufficiency.

## WELL-BEING

Four aspects of adult well-being were measured in this study, based on theory and research conducted by Baker (2007): alcohol abuse, depression, attachment, and self-esteem.

### Alcohol Abuse

The self-medication model of addiction proposes that substance abusers utilize drugs or alcohol as a method of coping with painful affective states (Khantzian, 1985). Substance use can compensate for poor emotional regulation and can alleviate or soothe negative affect. Parental discord has been hypothesized as having an independent association with substance use, as one of several possible adverse childhood events (Anda et al., 2002; Tschann et al., 2002). Parental loss due to separation is also an independent predictor of alcoholism, (Hope, Power, & Rodgers, 1998; Kendler et al., 1996). Findings from the Baker (2007) study of adult children of PAS suggest that the self-medication model may be highly applicable for individuals who as children had one parent turn them against the other parent. In order to cope with the difficult and confusing family dynamic, the adult children turned to substances to modulate their pain.

## Depression

One of the ways in which parents try to turn a child against the other parent is to denigrate the other parent to the child in order to convince the child that the other parent does not love the child and is not worthy of the child's love. This message, if internalized, can lead to depression as the child struggles with the perception of parental rejection. Furthermore, the child must cope alone and privately with this perceived rejection because the alienating parent has conveyed to the child that it is not permissible to value that other parent. Theories about the effect of interpersonal loss have proposed that the loss and the perception of rejection from a parent may be associated with depression (Bowlby, 1982). Additionally, perceived parental rejection has been found to be associated with depressive symptoms in adolescence (MacPhee & Andrews, 2006). Baker (2007) notes that such vulnerability may be even more pervasive in individuals exposed to PA than other populations, as their grief related to the perception of rejection and loss must be denied, suppressed, or hidden in order to please the AP. If parental alienation is successful in turning the child against the other parent, then the relationship is actually lost to the child, also a significant risk factor for subsequent depression (Bowlby, 1982).

## Attachment

Early relational patterns create the blueprint for later styles of interpersonal interactions (Ainsworth, 1982). Parental relationships transform into belief systems about the worthiness of the self and hence strongly influence the nature of subsequent attachment relationships. A caregiver's ability to provide contingent and sensitive responses to the child's needs creates a secure attachment in the child, whereas inconsistent, harsh, or emotionally negligent parenting can result in insecure attachments (Bowlby, 1982). Attachment representations are ultimately thought to be transferred from early caregivers to the relationships established during adulthood through the individual's internal representational model of interpersonal behavior (Shulman, Scharf, Lumer, & Maurer, 2001).

Divorce is a stressful family event that often causes changes in family dynamics, as new demands, and emotional stresses alter parenting behavior (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Parental conflict in particular is predictive of less warmth, sensitivity and involvement in parents' interactions with their children (Owen & Cox, 1997), which can increase insecure attachments in children and cause difficulties for children of divorce in their adult relationships (Emery, 1982). While children of divorce in general may be vulnerable to relationship difficulties (Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009; Sager, 2009), children of PA are likely at particular risk. Because alienating parents

are more concerned with their own needs than effectively meeting the emotional needs of the child, they cultivate relationships that involve dependency and are imbued with psychological control and manipulation. Thus, they are more likely to form insecure attachments with their children, resulting in relationship difficulties for these children throughout the lifetime (Baker, 2005). Further, exposure to parental alienation is also proposed to interfere with the child's attachment relationship with the targeted parent. Thus, parental alienation may be related to adult attachment via relationships with both the alienating and the targeted parent.

### Self-Esteem

Self-critical attitudes and low self-esteem are thought to stem in part from problematic parental relationships (Blatt & Homann, 1992) and lack of a secure attachment (McCormick & Kennedy, 1994). Insecure attachments can create uncertainty about how an individual will be responded to (McCormick & Kennedy, 1994) and foster doubts about one's own lovability and worth (Mikulincer, Shaver, Bar-On, & Ein-Dor, 2010). Parental psychological control, another salient experience for children of PA, has been identified as an important component of the development of low self-esteem in children (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Bean, Bush, McKenry, & Wilson, 2003; Caron, Weiss, & Harris, 2003). Soenens, Vansteenkiste, Luyten, Duriez, and Goossens (2005) suggest that higher levels of psychological control creates a critical self-representation due to the parents' tendency to disregard the child's perspective and act in guilt-inducing ways, causing negative self-evaluations and doubts in the child. In particular, adolescents who feel weak or helpless during their interactions with a parent who exhibits psychological control have been found to be particularly vulnerable to reduced self-esteem (Ojanen & Perry, 2007). This line of thinking helps explicate observations that adult children of PAS, who felt powerless in the face of the AP, tended to report low self-esteem as adults (Baker, 2005). Children inducted into a PA dynamic can come to know themselves as someone who is expected to act and feel in ways that are based on the needs of another, (Baker, 2005), not as a worthy and autonomous individual. Through repetition over time, this can manifest as doubts about one's ability and worth, and hence, lowered self-esteem.

## THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study was designed to empirically and quantitatively document the long-term correlates of PA by examining the differences between adult children of divorce who were exposed to parental alienation (the PA group)

and adult children of divorce who were not exposed to parental alienation (the No-PA group) on the psychological domains noted above (self-sufficiency, life time prevalence of major depressive disorder, alcohol abuse, attachment style, and self-esteem). It was hypothesized that subjects in the PA group would have more impaired functioning than the No-PA group in all of these areas.

## METHODS

### Participants and Procedures

Between September and December of 2009, a flyer was posted on approximately 30 social networking web-sites and Listerv groups that were explicitly devoted to adult children of divorce and/or PA support groups as well as distributed to friends and colleagues who were encouraged to forward it to others. The flyer stated that a doctoral student was “Seeking adults whose parents divorced before they were 15 years old.” Interested individuals were directed to a secure website. Participants were not asked any identifying information to ensure confidentiality and all subjects were provided with emergency resources in the event of emotional distress as a result of participation. The Albert Einstein College of Medicine Committee on Clinical Investigations approved all study procedures.

### Sample

One hundred and fifty five individuals responded to the survey, 118 of whom completed it sufficiently to be included in the data analysis. Table 1 presents sample characteristics for the full sample of 118, and by group (PA or No-PA). As can be seen, the sample was two thirds females, primarily Caucasian, and ranged in age from 18 to 66 years. Analyses conducted to compare the sample who completed the survey with those who did not complete did not result in any statistically significant group effects for age, gender, marital status, educational attainment, having children, and age at parental separation.

**TABLE 1** Sample Characteristics

	Full Sample	No-PA	PA	$X^2/T$	Sig
Mean Age	30.3 (8.9)	30.0 (7.6)	30.4 (9.7)	.81	.41
% Females	66.9	59.2	72.5	2.3	.17
% Caucasian	84.7	85.7	89.1	1.3	.85
% Ever Married	57.6	44.9	40.6	.21	.39
% Physically Abused	16.9	10.2	21.7	2.7	.08
% Sexually Abused	11.0%	6.1	14.5	2.0	.13

## Measures

The web survey consisted of demographic questions, two open-ended questions, and a series of standardized measures.

### GROUP DESIGNATION

Subjects designated to the No-PA group were those who positively endorsed the following question, "Neither parent undermined my relationship with my other parent and I maintained a relationship with both of my parents." Those designated to the PA group were subjects who positively endorsed that "One or both of my parents interfered or undermined my relationship with the other parent." While it would have been ideal to break the PA group into sub groups based on the success of the PA to result in PAS in the child, study data suggested that this was not possible. Within the sample of 118 participants, 49 (41.5%) subjects were in the No-PA group and 69 (59.5%) subjects were designated to be in the PA group. The two groups were compared on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and history of physical or sexual abuse. As shown in Table 1, no group differences were statistically significant.

### SELF-SUFFICIENCY

Self-sufficiency was assessed with a 15-item scale in which respondents reported on the extent to which they generally performed daily living tasks such as food shopping, paying bills, and doing laundry on a five-point Likert-scale from Never (0) to Regularly (4). Internal consistency was .85. Due to skewness of the summary scores, a dichotomous variable was created to reflect placement in the bottom third of the sample (score of 0) or placement in the top two thirds of the sample (score of 1).

Educational attainment was assessed and coded as achieved four-year college degree (score of 1) or not (score of 0), five subjects were excluded because they were under the age of 22 and were still were in school.

Information regarding current educational and employment position was recoded as a dichotomous variable of not currently working and not currently in school (score of 0) or currently working and/or in school (score of 1).

### ALCOHOL ABUSE

To assess alcohol abuse, the CAGE questionnaire was administered (Ewing, 1984), a four-item self-report questionnaire in which each item is rated present or absent. Endorsement of two or more items is considered indicative of alcohol dependence (Poulin, Webster, & Single, 1997). A dichotomous variable was created to reflect alcohol abuse (score of 1) or not (score of 0) based on this cut-off.

#### DEPRESSION

To assess major depressive disorder, 22-item The Inventory to Diagnose Depression, Lifetime Version (IDDL) was administered. Following Zimmerman and Coryell's (1987) coding formula, each respondent was diagnosed as meeting the DSM diagnostic criteria (score of 1) or not (score of 0).

#### ATTACHMENT

Attachment style was assessed with the Relationship Questionnaire, RQ, (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which is comprised of a single item presenting four short paragraphs describing prototypical adult attachment patterns, from which the respondent selects the one that best describes his or her interpersonal relationships. Each of the paragraphs represents one of the following four styles: secure, preoccupied, fearful, or dismissing. Responses were recoded as secure (score of 1) or not secure (score of 0).

#### SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem was assessed with the 10-item self-report Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, RSE, (Rosenberg, 1965), in which each item is rated on a four-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4). Total scores are created by summing the 10 items after reverse coding. In this study the summary score ranged from 15.56 to 40.00 and had an internal consistency coefficient of .91.

## RESULTS

In order to assess differences between the PA and No-PA groups on all dichotomous outcomes (educational attainment, in school/working, daily living score, alcohol abuse, depression, and attachment style) cross-tabulations were computed and chi-square analyses were calculated. For the single continuous measure (self esteem) an independent t-test was conducted. All results are presented in Table 2.

Results revealed that the PA group—as compared to the No-PA group—was statistically significantly less likely to have completed four years of college ( $p < .04$ ), less likely to currently be working and/or in school ( $p < .02$ ), more likely to have scores in the bottom third of the self-sufficiency scale ( $p < .02$ ), more likely to meet the DSM criteria for lifetime major depression ( $p < .03$ ), less likely to have a secure attachment style ( $p < .02$ ), and had lower self-esteem ( $p < .03$ ).



**TABLE 2** Differences Between No-PA (n = 69) and PA (n = 49) Groups on Outcomes

Variable	No-PA (n = 49)	PA (n = 69)	X <sup>2</sup>	sig.
Self Sufficiency				
% 4 years of college	85.7%	69.5%	4.0	.04
% School/work	93.9%	78.3%	5.4	.02
% Self-suff. score over 50	81.6%	62.3%	5.1	.02
Well-Being				
% Above CAGE cut-off	40.8%	27.3%	2.3	.16
% Meet DSM Criteria	64.6%	82.4%	4.7	.03
% Secure Style	51.0%	29.4%	5.6	.02
Mean RSE Score	32.3(5.9)	29.8(6.1)	<i>t</i> = 2.2	.03

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the functioning and well-being of adult children of divorce in the five domains which were previously determined as primary areas impacted by the experience of parental alienation (Baker, 2007). We examined differences between adult children of divorce who reported that one parent tried to undermine their relationship with the other parent (the PA group) and those who reported that neither parent tried to undermine their relationship with the other parent (the No-PA group) and found strong empirical support for the qualitative findings from Baker's (2007) study.

In particular, the individuals in the PA group were more likely to have lower self-sufficiency, according to the definition established in this study, including a greater chance that they had not completed a 4-year college, were not currently enrolled in school or working, and may not effectively care for themselves in basic ways (such as depositing money into a savings account and budgeting spending money). Based on related literature, it appears that the controlling nature of PA strategies and the lack of responsiveness to the child's needs may compromise autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). One participant articulated this idea during an open-ended comment, "*My mother made it very hard for me to formulate my own opinions . . . I have had to learn how to differ from my mother's opinion (even now at age 39) on all matters because it was so painful for her to see me form my own opinion of my father.*"

Major Depressive Disorder was also associated with the experience of PA in this study. While no inquiries were directly made about the causal relationship, during an open ended section of the questionnaire, participants implicitly addressed this issue. For instance, one subject stated, "*The fact that I have felt no security or safety as a child and feel all these stresses and emotions have affected my relationship and my mental health.*" Another participant reported, "*My mom's hatred for my dad made me constantly have to be the "middle man". It made me and my emotions feel invisible and*

*less important than hers.*” These and other comments reveal possible causal pathways from parental alienation to lifetime depressive disorder.

Subjects exposed to PA had lower self-esteem and were less likely to be securely attached in their adult relationships. Baker’s (2005) research suggests that the subjects’ belief that the parts of themselves which were associated with the hated TP were also viewed by themselves as bad and hated. In addition, this finding is likely rooted in the messages delivered to the subjects that they were unloved by the TP, as well as related to the guilt experienced after rejecting the TP in cases where the PA was successful. One subject explained the relationship between PA and insecure attachment by reporting, *“The experience of alienation] has infected my own ability to have authentic intimate relationships. I am constantly approval-seeking, merely transferring my need to keep my mother happy onto intimate partners.”* Another stated, *“[My parents] had a bad attitude toward each other, and made me very untrusting and suspect of people.”*

Thus, the belief that one parent attempted to turn the individual against the other parent was statistically associated with lower self-sufficiency (less likely to complete four years of college, less likely to be working or going to school, and lower scores on a daily living skills measure), lower self-esteem, less likely to have secure attachments, and more likely to meet the DSM criteria for lifetime depression. The one area that was not borne out in the analyses pertained to alcohol abuse, which was not found to be more likely in the PA group. In all, the striking differences between the groups of individuals who were differentiated based on a single item on the survey regarding whether one parent tried to undermine their relationship with the other parent, were remarkably consistent with those of Baker (2007). Thus, the data convergently support the theory that parental attempts (and/or success) at interfering in a child’s relationship with the other parent can be damaging to an individual throughout his or her life in key areas of functioning and well-being.

### Clinical Implications

Looking at the phenomenon of parental alienation prospectively as it unfolds in real time in a divorcing family, what is possible to detect is parental attempts to undermine a child’s relationship with the other parent. Whether it develops into the child’s rejection of that parent (PAS) can only be known over time and by then it is, in some respects, too late, the damage to the relationship has been done. Ideally, the trajectory can be interrupted successfully to allow children to maintain healthy relationships with both parents, to be loved by them and loving with them. The data presented in this study can be used to help achieve that goal, by focusing attention on parental behaviors (i.e., efforts to interfere with and undermine the child’s relationship

with the other parent) as opposed to the resulting response in the child of being turned against the other parent. In order to build on these findings to achieve the goal of preserving the child's relationship with both parents, the data presented here could be made available to divorcing parents and the legal and mental health professionals working with them. Parents who might otherwise try to interfere in the child's relationship with the other parent should be educated to refrain from doing so and strongly, consistently, and swiftly sanctioned by the courts for doing so. Parents who experience the other parent as trying to interfere in their relationship with their child should be alerted to the potential of this behavior to harm their relationship and damage the child. Rather than taking a wait and see attitude, these parents should be encouraged to proactively address these behaviors both with the child and with the other parent. For example, if the other parent is naively engaged in these PA behaviors, a heartfelt plea to cease may be sufficient. On the other hand, if the parent is engaged in these efforts in an active and or obsessed manner (to use the terminology proposed by Darnall in 1998), then more forceful and directed efforts to have them stop may be warranted. In either case, documentation of exactly how the parent is interfering would probably be useful, along the lines suggested by Baker and Fine (2008). Working with the child to develop skills to resist the pressure to be turned against one parent by the other parent is also an appropriate avenue to explore for parents involved in parental conflicts that involve the children in this manner, an approach strongly endorsed by Fidler and Bala (2010). Gardner's (1985) book for children as well as the more recent "I don't want to choose" book and workbook (Andre & Baker, 2009) offer useful resources for working with children. The effectiveness of various psycho-educational prevention approaches should be empirically investigated in order to provide parents and professionals with as many helpful resources as possible. And, finally, therapists working with children and parents affected by parental alienation should be educated about state of the art research and strategies for supporting families and helping prevent alienation whenever possible and intervene to correct it whenever necessary.

Therapists working with adults who had this experience as children (when it is no longer possible to prevent or intervene in the child's family), should be mindful of these findings, especially with respect to adult self-sufficiency. As noted by Baker (2007), adult children of parental alienation may need professional therapeutic assistance and support in order to be able to understand the alienation dynamics that they had been subjected to and will certainly need encouragement to look more realistically at their parents in order to begin to dismantle some of the false beliefs about the individual's worth and abilities that are probably interfering in adaptation to a successful independent adult life. Examination of the shame, guilt, sadness, and loss that can accompany exposure to parental alienation could also be helpful in releasing the individual from the emotional burdens that

constrain adult functioning and prevent successful self-sufficiency. Exposure to parental alienation strategies constitutes a form of emotional abuse of children. The results from this study add to the knowledge base about the ways in which this form of childhood maltreatment has negative outcomes that extend into adulthood.

### Limitations

When interpreting these results it is important to consider several factors. Little is known about the participants' family circumstances or family dynamics, which contextualize the experience of PA for the participants in this study. Further information on the characteristics related to the circumstances and time frame of the alienation agenda, would provide a fuller understanding of the mechanisms involved in PA and should be assessed in future research. We were not able to differentiate those in the PA group who also experienced PAS (i.e., were in fact turned against one parent by the other parent) and those who did not experience PAS (i.e., were not turned against one parent by the other parent). It is possible that all of the negative outcomes found in the PA group are attributable to the subgroup who experienced PAS and it is really *that* experience that is the causal agent associated with poor outcomes as opposed to exposure to PA itself. This is an important area for future research to address, teasing apart the independent effects of PA from PAS. Third, all data are retrospective self-report and hence are subjected to measurement error associated with that methodology, especially the problems of directionality in which it is possible that individuals with poorer functioning at the time of the study (i.e., were depressed and had low-self esteem, for example) had a more negative view of their childhood and were more likely to report that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent (Hardt & Rutter, 2004). Because of focused recruitment, this study primarily relied on a convenience sample of individuals who had self-selected involvement in support groups related to parental divorce. As such, the results may represent the experience of this particular subset of the population of adult children of divorce. Each of these issues provides fertile ground for future research, which is necessary for continuing to understand the impact of parental divorce on children over the course of their life-span.

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