Parental Alienation as a Form of Emotional Child Abuse: Current State of Knowledge and Future Directions for Research

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the current state of research on parental alienation, which reveals that alienation is far more common and debilitating for children and parents than was previously believed. In extreme cases, one can make the argument that parental alienation is a serious form of emotional child abuse. Careful scrutiny of key elements of parental alienation in the research literature consistently identifies two core elements of child abuse: parental alienation as a *significant form of harm* to children that is *attributable to human action*. As a form of *individual* child abuse, parental alienation calls for a child protection response. As a form of *collective* abuse, parental alienation warrants fundamental reform of the family law system in the direction of shared parenting as the foundation of family law. There is an emerging scientific consensus on prevalence, effects, and professional recognition of parental alienation as a form of child abuse. In response, the authors discuss the need for research on effectiveness of parental alienation interventions, particularly in more extreme cases. This paper argues for more quantitative and qualitative research focused on four pillars of intervention at micro and macro levels, with specific recommendations for further study of child protection responses, reunification programs, and other therapeutic approaches.

Keywords: parental alienation, child abuse, family intervention.

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Introduction

Parental alienation, which most commonly occurs in the context of child custody disputes during and after parental separation, involves the "programming" of a child by one parent to denigrate the other "target" parent, in an effort to harm, damage, and destroy the relationship between a child and the target parent, whereby the target parent is demonized and undermined as a parent worthy of the child's love and attention (Harman, Kruk, & Hines, In Press). Such denigration results in the child's emotional rejection of the target parent and the loss of a capable, loving parent from the child's life. Parental alienation is manifested through a child's reluctance or refusal to have a relationship with a parent for illogical, untrue, or exaggerated reasons. Parental alienation is distinct from parental estrangement, which encompasses behaviors through which a parent damages her or his relationship with a child, typically because of the parent's own shortcomings (Drozd & Olsen, 2004).

Parental alienating behaviors lie on a continuum, ranging from mild, subtle forms of badmouthing to more severe forms of aggression and coercive control that result in the child's complete rejection and refusal of contact with the target parent. Such behaviors also span the range from isolated events to an ongoing pattern of abuse aimed at the target parent. There are no gender differences in regard to who is the perpetrator and who is the target of parental alienation. Custodial status, however, is a strong predictor of who is likely to alienate a child from a parent (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Harman, Kruk & Hines, In Press).

The arena of parental alienation is fraught with controversy, particularly regarding the question of whether parental alienation is a form of child abuse and family violence. Problems related to distinguishing among abuse, estrangement, and alienation, and to legal reforms and therapeutic interventions needed to address alienation, pose considerable challenges for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers (Drozd & Oleson, 2004).

There are also widely differing views toward the current state of research on the alienation phenomenon. According to Emery (2014), *no* high quality studies of parental alienation have been published to date. The idea that parental disparagement equals alienation, he writes, is an hypothesis that needs testing, not an established fact. Similarly, in their chapter on empirical studies of alienation, Saini et al. (2016) similarly maintain that parental alienation remains a hypothesis needing further empirical testing, even though their literature review included only a fragment of the existing research, totaling 45 papers and 13 doctoral dissertations. By contrast, parental alienation researchers point to more than *one thousand* existing studies on the phenomenon (Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 2017). Although most studies of alienation use qualitative and mixed research methods, some argue that the depth of the parental alienation experience can be captured only by qualitative research (Balmer, Matthewson, & Haines, 2018; Kruk, 2010).

Analysis of parental alienation research over the past decade reveals that parental alienation is more common and debilitating for children and parents than was previously believed. Despite the views of those who doubt the concept itself, an emergent scientific consensus on the definition and prevalence of parental alienation and its effects on parents and children is emerging. For example, parental alienation is recognized as a manifestation of three disorders identified in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013): "Parent-Child Relational Problem," "Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress," and "Child Psychological Abuse." Parental alienation is related to two symptom clusters identified in the DSM: "impaired functioning in behavioral, cognitive, or affective domains" and "negative attributions of the other's intentions, hostility toward or scapegoating of the other, and unwarranted feelings of estrangement" on the child's part of the child. The current draft of the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Diseases* also contains a specific definition of parental alienation (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016).

Moreover, research evidence of the many facets of parental alienation is much more robust than is often assumed. The most recent quantitative research raises some serious alarms. Harman (2017) found a staggering 13.4% of U.S. parents reporting they had been victimized by parental alienation at some point in their lives. The large body of research by Baker and colleagues (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Bernet & Baker, 2013), which focused on perspectives of now-young adult child victims of alienation and of targeted parents, details strategies of alienating parents and short- and long-term consequences of alienation. There is also concordance in the clinical and research literature in regard to core components of alienation (Clemente & Padilla-Racero, 2015). Slowly but surely, the misunderstanding and denial surrounding parental alienation is being washed away. A survey conducted at the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts 2014 conference reported 98% agreement in support of the basic tenet of parental alienation: children can be manipulated by one parent to reject the other parent, who does not deserve to be rejected (Warshak, 2015b).

At the same time, however, it is clear that significant research gaps in the field of parental alienation persist (Saini et al., 2016). The need for research on the effectiveness of different approaches to parental alienation intervention at macro and micro levels (Kruk, 2013; Kruk, 2016) is pressing. Therefore, the first part of this article reports results of research on the effects of parental alienation on fathers and mothers, along with parental perceptions of the effects of alienation on children, the perspective of those most negatively affected by parental alienation. This includes a review of recent research on parents' experiences of severe alienation, situations where parents and children have had no contact with each other for a prolonged period. The case will be made that in such extreme cases, parental alienation is indeed a serious form of emotional child abuse. The second part of the paper focuses on the need for research on the utility and effectiveness of existing and emergent approaches to intervention in the alienation arena.

Current State of Knowledge: Emergent Scientific Consensus on Parental Alienation as a Form of Emotional Child Abuse

The current state of knowledge reflects emerging scientific consensus on the definition, prevalence, and effects of parental alienation. Saini et al. (2016) acknowledge there is basic agreement that parental alienation commonly refers to the experience of a child who has been influenced to reject and hate one parent by the other parent, and to parental behaviors that poison the child's relationship with the other parent. Parental alienation is characterized as a form of "programming" of the child: an unjustified campaign of denigration against a parent resulting in the child's own unjustified rejection of that parent (Bernet & Baker, 2013). In situations of parental alienation, children's views of the targeted parent are almost exclusively negative, to the point that the parent is demonized and seen as evil or, in extreme cases, forgotten about altogether. For the child, parental alienation is a serious mental condition based on a false belief that the alienated parent is unworthy to be a parent (ibid.).

Citing earlier work by Drozd and Oleson (2004), Saini et al. (2016) declare there are no reliable instruments to distinguish parental alienation from justified estrangement, i.e. cases where a child or parent has been victimized by child abuse or family violence, and the child fears and rejects the parent as a result. They argue that this leads to a major flaw in most parental alienation research. However, there is a vast body of child abuse research demonstrating that even the most physically abused children rarely reject an abusive parent with the vehemence that alienated children display (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013). Gottlieb (2012, p. 52) summarizes the clinical perspective of the child protection field:

> Despite the abuse and neglect suffered by the three thousand foster care children who had been under my care, it was extremely uncommon for those children to refuse contact with a parent—even with an overtly abusive parent. Rather, abused children tend to protect and cling to the abusive parent. Moreover, in the rare cases in which that did appear to happen, there was always some evidence of indoctrination or programming (typically by foster parents who had the surreptitious goal of adopting the child). Thus, it is counter-instinctual for a child to reject a parent—even an abusive parent. When a professional observes a child strongly reject a parent in the absence of verified abuse, neglect or markedly deficient parenting skills—which should never be assumed based on the child's self-reporting—one of the first thoughts should be that the other parent is an alienator. Moreover, one should never assume that, because a child has rejected a parent, the parent must have done something to warrant it. Having observed thousands of genuinely-abused children during a period of twenty four years, I have concluded that a child's innate desire to have a relationship with his or her parents is one of the most powerful of human instincts, surpassed only by the instinct for survival and the instinct to protect one's young; among normal children, in the absence of an alienating influence, that instinct is seldom suppressed because a parent exhibits relatively minor flaws, deficiencies, or idiosyncrasies.

Children's identification with and protection of an abusive parent is evident in parental alienation situations. The child will align with rather than reject the alienating/abusive parent (Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013).

The emergent state of knowledge about parental alienation indicates that parental alienation may well be a serious form of emotional child abuse connected to both physical abuse and child neglect. From a definitional perspective, the two core elements of parental alienation (for the child, a serious mental condition resulting from a series of alienating strategies of alienating parents) correspond to the two core components of child abuse. First, child abuse and parental alienation represent a significant form of harm and pose a serious threat to the well-being of a child. Second, the source of the abuse is attributable to human agency; it is the result of human action. This may be at the hands of an individual parent or a caregiver, and/or a form of collective action. For example, there can be social, legal, political, and economic factors that compromise children's well-being. As the result of a parent's individual action, parental alienation is a form of individual child abuse. Insofar as adversarial legal systems routinely remove a parent from the daily routines of parenting, parental alienation may also be considered to be a form of collective abuse (Giancarlo & Rottman, 2015).

Two Core Elements of Parental Alienation as a Form of Child Abuse (Cooper, 1993; Finkelhor & Corbin, 1988)

- Parental alienation involves a set of *abusive strategies* on the part of a parent to foster the child's rejection of the other parent, whereby children are manipulated by one parent to reject the other.

- Parental alienation is the child's unjustified campaign of denigration against a parent, in which children's views of the targeted parent are almost exclusively negative, to the point that the parent is demonized. For the child, parental alienation is a *significant mental disturbance*, based on a false belief that the alienated parent is a dangerous and unworthy parent.

Abusive Strategies

The first defining feature of parental alienation as a form of emotional child abuse centers on behavior of the alienator. This involves implementation of a set of abusive strategies on the part of the alienating parent to foster the child's rejection of the other parent. Children are manipulated to reject the other parent in an effort to undermine and interfere with the child's relationship with that parent. Such strategies include (a) bad-mouthing, (b) limiting contact, erasing the other parent from the child's life and mind, (c) forcing the child to reject the other parent, (d) creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous, (e) forcing the child to choose between the parents by threatening withdrawal of affection, and (f) belittling and limiting contact with the extended family of the targeted parent (Baker & Darnell, 2006; Viljoen & van Rensberg, 2014). A recent study of 126 targeted parents by Poustie, Matthewson, and Balmer

(2018) identified tactics of (a) emotional manipulation, (b) encouraging defiance and alliance, (c) disrupting time between targeted parent and child, (e) withholding information, (f) defamation of the targeted parent, and (g) erasure. Such denigration leads to the child's emotional rejection of the targeted parent and the loss of a capable and loving parent from the child's life. Tactics of alienating parents are tantamount to extreme psychological maltreatment of very young and of older children. These include spurning, terrorizing, isolating, corrupting or exploiting, and denying emotional responsiveness (Baker & Darnell, 2006).

Seventeen Strategies of Alienating Parents (Baker and Darnell, 2006)

1. Badmouthing: The target parent is portrayed as unloving, unsafe, and unavailable. Flaws are exaggerated or manufactured. Such statements are made frequently, intensely, and with great sincerity.

2. Limiting contact: The target parent has few opportunities to counter the badmouthing message.

3. Interfering with communication: Phones are not answered, e-mail messages are blocked, and messages are not forwarded.

4. Interfering with symbolic communication: Thinking about, talking about, and looking at pictures of a parent are prohibited. The alienating parent creates an environment in which the child does not feel free to engage in these activities. The child's mind and heart are preoccupied with the alienating parent and there is no room left for the child's thoughts and feelings about the target parent.

5. Withdrawal of love: What angers the alienating parent most is the child's love and affection for the target parent. Thus, the child must relinquish the love of the other. The child lives in fear of losing the alienating parent's love and approval.

6. Telling the child that the target parent is dangerous: Stories might be told about ways in which the target parent has tried to harm the child.

7. Forcing child to choose: The alienating parent will compel the child away from the target parent by scheduling competing activities and promising valued items and privileges.

8. Telling the child that the target parent does not love him or her: The alienating parent will foster the belief in the child that she is being rejected by the target parent and distort every situation to make it appear as if that is the case.

9. Confiding in the child: The alienating parent will involve the child in discussions about legal matters and share with the child personal and private information about the target parent. The alienating parent will portray him/herself as the victim of the target parent, inducing the child to feel pity for and protective of the alienating parent, and anger and hurt toward the target parent. The confidences are shared in such a way as to flatter the child and appeal to his/her desire to be trusted and involved in adult matters.

10. Forcing child to reject the target parent: Alienating parents create situations in which the child actively rejects the target parent, such as calling the target parent to cancel upcoming parenting time or request that the target parent not attend an important school or athletic event. Further, once children have hurt a parent, the alienation will become entrenched as the child justifies his/her behaviour by devaluing the target parent.

11. Asking the child to spy on the target parent: Once children betray a parent by spying on them, they will likely feel guilty and uncomfortable being around that parent, thus furthering the alienation.

12. Asking the child to keep secrets from the target parent: The alienating parent will ask or hint that certain information should be withheld from the target parent in order to protect the child's interests. Like spying, keeping secrets creates psychological distance between the target parent and the child.

13. Referring to the target parent by first name: Rather than saying "Mummy/Daddy" or "Your mummy/Your daddy" the alienating parent will use the first name of the target parent when talking about that parent to the child. This may result in the child referring to the target parent by first name as well. The message to the child is that the target parent is no longer someone whom the alienating parent respects as an authority figure for the child and no longer someone who has a special bond with the child. By referring to the target parent by first name, the alienating parent is demoting that parent to the level of a peer or neighbour.

14. Referring to a step-parent as "Mum" or "Dad" and encouraging child to do the same: The alienating parent will refer to that parent as the mother/father to the child and create the expectation that the child will do so as well.

15. Withholding medical, academic, and other important information from target parent/keeping target parent's name off medical, academic, and other relevant documents: The target parent will be at a decided disadvantage in terms of accessing information, forging relationships, being contacted in emergencies, being invited to participate, being provided with changes in schedules/locations, and so forth. This marginalizes the target parent in the eyes of the child and important adults in his/her life. They also make it considerably more difficult for the target parent to be an active and involved parent.

16. Changing child's name to remove association with target parent: The target parent may feel that the name change represents a rejection of him/her and will experience hurt, sadness, and frustration.

17. Cultivating dependency/undermining the authority of the target parent: Alienating parents develop dependency in their children rather than help their children develop self-sufficiency, critical thinking, autonomy, and independence. At the same time, they will undermine the authority of the target parent in order to ensure that the child is loyal to only one parent.

According to Baker and Darnell (2006), each of the 17 strategies serves a number of functions: (a) to further the child's cohesion and alignment with the alienating parent, (b) to create psychological distance between the child and the targeted parent, (c) to intensify the targeted parent's anger and hurt over the child's behavior, and (d) to incite conflict between the child and the targeted parent should the targeted parent challenge or react to the child's behavior.

Parental alienation exists on a continuum from mild to extremely severe and can be reciprocal and non-reciprocal. In some cases children and parents reunite; in others, they do not. As a group that is perhaps the most negatively affected by parental alienation, completely estranged parents have been the focus of recent research (Kruk, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2018). In three separate studies of such parents (i.e., 78 fathers and mothers who had no contact with their children for at least one year), narrative inquiry and grounded theory analysis uncovered the following as the most common indicators of severe parental alienation and as characteristics of alienation perpetrators. These constitute more serious forms of abuse when compared with less severe alienation. Less common and recognizable than the behaviors that Baker and Darnell identified, these reflect a much greater degree of pathology on the part of the alienating parent.

Indicators of Extreme Parental Alienation as Child Abuse: Characteristics of the Alienating Parent (Kruk, 2018)

1. Seizing the child by force.

2. A belief in one’s entitlement as the primary or sole parental figure in the child’s life, and lack of validation or recognition of the salience of the other parent as a parent.

3. Insensitivity to and disregard for the impact of one’s behavior on children; lack of regard for and attunement to children’s needs. Willingness to engage in conflict in front of the children. Lack of emotional depth and emotional responsiveness in relationship with one’s child. Parentification of the child.

4. Overt or covert obsession with the other parent, and with hurting the other parent, to the extent that the obsession prevails over one's parental responsibilities.

5. Willingness and enthusiasm to engage in adversarial combat, and skill in the adversarial arena.

6. Refusal to communicate, or engage in a negotiation process.

7. Refusal to accept responsibility for one's own contribution to the problem situation or conflict.

8. Readiness to accuse the other party of wrongdoing.

9. Lack of guilt or remorse for one's behavior.

10. Exaggeration and dishonesty; an attitude of, "the end justifies the means."

11. Badmouthing of the other parent in front of the child, or avoiding any mention of the other parent in an attempt to erase that parent from the child's memory.

12. Monitoring and questioning the child in regard to the child's relationship with the other parent.

First and foremost, according to targeted parents, seizing the child by force includes contact denial and misuse of the legal system to undermine the other parent's participation in the child's life, aimed at removing the parent from the child's life entirely. Essentially, severely alienated parents define parental alienation as forced physical separation of parent and child: the idea of "by their actions you shall know them." Identifying alienation is simple and straightforward: an alienator is a parent who removes a parent from the life of a child. Second, belief in one's entitlement as the primary or sole parental figure in the child's life, and lack of validation or recognition of the salience of the other parent as a parent, is a feature of alienating parents' behavior. Third is a lack of understanding, attunement, and empathy to children's needs and perceptions: insensitivity to and disregard for the impact of one's behavior on children. This is evident in (a) the parent's willingness to engage in conflict in front of the children; (b) lack of emotional depth and emotional responsiveness in relationship with one's child; (c) parentification of the child, where a child is made to feel responsible for his or her parent's well-being. Fourth is overt or covert obsession with the other parent, and with hurting the other parent to the extent that the obsession dominates one's parental responsibilities. An alienating parent's need to hurt and seek revenge prevails over the child's need for the other parent's love and nurturing. The parent's hatred of the other parent essentially overrides their love for their child. Fifth is willingness and enthusiasm to engage in adversarial combat, and skill and use of power over tactics in the adversarial arena: readiness to engage in and risk a "winner take all" process. Sixth, simple refusal to communicate or engage in a negotiation process, either directly or with

third party intervention such as family mediation, is often present among alienating parents. Lack of good faith in any involvement in such processes is a common problem. Seventh is refusal to accept responsibility for one's own contribution to the problem situation or conflict: an insistence on being "right" in all matters or disagreements with the former spouse. Lack of accountability in regard to the problem situation or conflict is also evident. Eighth is readiness to accuse the other party of wrongdoing; alienating parents are quick to blame and place responsibility for the problem situation or conflict onto the other parent.

Remaining strategies include lack of guilt or remorse for one's behavior, or regret over one's actions; exaggeration, dishonesty, and an attitude of, "the end justifies the means;" badmouthing of the other parent in front of the child or avoiding any mention of the other parent in an attempt to erase that parent from the child's memory; and, monitoring and questioning the child in regard to the child's relationship with the other parent. These last strategies correspond to experiences of less severely alienated parents.

Effects on Child

Thus the first element of the definition of parental alienation as a form of child abuse relates to the abusive behavior of the alienating parent. The second constituent of the definition focuses on profoundly harmful effects on the child. In the most severe cases, these effects are profound (Balmer, Matthewson & Haines, 2018; Mone & Biringen, 2012; Mone, MacPhee, Anderson, & Banning, 2011). First, teaching hatred of the other parent is tantamount to instilling self-hatred in the child. Self-hatred is a particularly disturbing feature among alienated children, and one of the more serious and common effects of parental alienation. Children internalize hatred aimed at the alienated parent, are led to believe the alienated parent did not love or want them, and experience severe guilt related to betraying the alienated parent. Their self-hatred (and depression) is rooted in feelings of being unloved by one parent and in separation from that parent while being denied the opportunity to mourn the loss of the parent, or even to talk about the parent (Warshak, 2015b). Hatred of a parent is not an emotion that comes naturally to a child. In parental alienation situations, such hatred is taught on a continual basis. With hatred of the parent comes self-hatred, which makes children feel worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, and only of value in meeting another person's needs (Baker, 2005, 2010).

Second, numerous studies show that alienated children exhibit severe psychosocial disturbances. These include disrupted social-emotional development, lack of trust in relationships, social anxiety, and social isolation (Baker, 2005, 2010; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Godbout & Parent, 2008). Such children have poor relationships with both parents. As adults, they tend to enter partnerships earlier, are more likely to divorce or dissolve their cohabiting unions, more likely to have children outside any partnership, and more likely to become alienated from their own children (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

Low self-sufficiency, lack of autonomy, and lingering dependence on the alienating parent are a third characteristic of alienated children. Garber (2011) found this manifested in three ways: adultification (the alienating parent treating the child as an adult); parentification (the child taking responsibility for the parent, in a role reversal); and infantilization (the *folie a deux* relationship that develops renders the child incompetent and incapable of the life tasks of adulthood).

Alienated children are more likely to play truant from school and leave school at an early age. They are less likely to attain academic and professional qualifications in adulthood. They tend to experience unemployment, have low incomes, and remain on social assistance. They often seem to drift aimlessly through life. Alienated children experience difficulties controlling their impulses, struggling with mental health, addiction, and self-harm (Otowa, York, Gardner, Kendle, and Hettema, 2014). They are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and abuse drugs, often succumb to behavioral addictions, and tend to be promiscuous, foregoing contraception and becoming teenage parents (ibid.).

Indicators of Parental Alienation as Child Abuse: Characteristics of the Alienated Child

1. Poor self-esteem, depression and self-hatred
2. Disrupted social-emotional development: withdrawal, isolation, social anxiety
3. Low self-sufficiency; lack of autonomy; dependence on parent
4. Poor academic achievement
5. Poor impulse control; struggles with mental health, addiction and self-harm

Of the four types of child abuse, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect, parental alienation is usually considered a form of emotional or psychological abuse (Bernet et al, 2016, Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Von Boch-Galhau & Kodjoe, 2006). However, parental alienation often co-occurs with the three other types of child abuse. First, there is neglect, because alienating parents' hatred of the targeted parent is stronger than their love from their child (they are less attuned to and thus neglect the needs of the child). There is also physical and sexual abuse, because children in situations where one parent is absent from their lives are at significantly greater risk than are children who have meaningful relationships with both parents. Therefore, alienated children (a) are five times more likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment (Cawson, 2002); (b) are exposed to one hundred times higher risks of fatal abuse (Daly & Wilson, 1988); (c) have higher risks of physical health problems, psychosomatic health symptoms, and illnesses such as acute and chronic pain, diabetes, asthma, headaches, stomach aches, and feeling sick (Dawson, 1991; Lundbert, 1993; O'Neill, 2002); (d) run greater mortality and morbidity risks; (e) are more likely to die as

children (Lundbert, 1993); (f) live an average of four years less over their life span (Ringbäck Weitoft, Hjern, Haglund, & Rosén, 2003); (g) are more likely to experience sexual health problems (Ellis, 2003; O'Neill 2002; Wellings, Nanchanahal, & MacDowall, 2001) and to contract sexually transmitted infections (Wellings et al., 2001).

Research on the impact of father absence is extremely robust, to the point where causal effects of father absence have been identified (McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). These include youth crime (85% of youth in prison have an absent father), poor academic performance (71% of high school dropouts have an absent father), and homelessness (90% of runaways have absent fathers). Fatherless children have higher levels of depression and suicide, delinquency and promiscuity, behavior problems, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy (Stein, Milburn, Zane, & Rotheram-Borus, 2009).

In addition, parental alienation is also becoming recognized as a form of domestic violence (Harman & Biringen, 2015; Kruk, 2013). Children witnessing this form of violence against a parent is itself a form of child abuse. There is considerable research on the devastating effects of alienation on targeted parents. The highest levels of depression occur among adults who have children under age eighteen with whom they are not living or actively involved (Evenson & Simon, 2005). The most salient loss for non-resident parents is that of their children and their parental identity (Kruk, 2011). Such parents routinely report increasing isolation, loss of employment, and inability to form or sustain new relationships. These impacts are connected to more disturbed patterns of thinking and feeling including shame, stigma and self-blame, and learned helplessness and hopelessness (Kruk, 2010a; Kruk, 2010b). A "suicide epidemic" has been identified among divorced fathers without their children in their lives (Kposowa, 2010: 993; Sher, 2015).

Future Directions for Research

There is an emergent scientific consensus on the reality, definition, prevalence and effects of parental alienation. Given the expanded knowledge base on this phenomenon, the need for effective intervention is pressing. The biggest gap in parental alienation research and the priority for future research is evaluation of existing and emergent intervention methods, models, and policies in regard to understanding and addressing parental alienation as a form of emotional child abuse.

Concerning intervention at individual, family, group (micro), community, and social policy (macro) levels, there are four basic pillars of intervention, all seen as necessary and fundamental to combating parental alienation (Kruk, 2018). These pillars fall under the headings of individual harm reduction, prevention, treatment and enforcement.

Priorities for Future Parental Alienation Research: Four Pillars of Intervention

1. Harm Reduction: Research on effective approaches in addressing parental alienation as a form of individual child abuse, and as a child protection matter.

2. Prevention: Research on addressing parental alienation as a form of collective child abuse: the impact of a rebuttable legal presumption of shared parenting on parental alienation.

3. Treatment: Reunification programs and therapeutic services for alienated parents and children: best practices and effectiveness of treatment approaches.

4. Enforcement: Addressing parental alienation as a form of domestic violence, and as a criminal matter: best practices and effectiveness of policies and practices.

First is the level of individual harm reduction. Some suggest that alienated children are no less damaged than are other child victims of extreme conflict, such as child soldiers and other abducted children who identify with their tormentors to avoid pain and maintain relationships with them, however abusive such relationships may be (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). Parental alienation as a serious form of emotional child abuse, which is linked to child neglect and physical and sexual abuse, clearly makes it, a child protection concern (ibid) above all else. At the same time, targeted parents routinely encounter professional misunderstanding of and indifference from professional service providers, especially child protection authorities, to alienation reports (Poustie, Matthewson and Balmer, 2018). First and foremost, we must recognize parental alienation as a form of individual child abuse requiring a child protection response. Research on effective child protection responses to parental alienation as a form of individual child abuse is a first priority. This includes effectiveness of family support/preservation programs and child removal interventions on the part of child welfare authorities.

Parental alienation as a form of child abuse is not only the result of the individual actions of a parent. It also stems from social, legal, political, and economic policies (Giancarlo & Rottman, 2015). There is strong association between legal child custody determination processes and emergence of parental alienation, since parental alienation flourishes in situations where one parent has exclusive care and control of children after parental separation (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2016), and where primary residence of children is often granted to parents with serious psychological problems who make the stronger case in the adversarial arena (Kruk, 2013; McMurray & Blackmore, 1992). Legal systems that remove a parent from a child's life by means of sole custody or primary residence orders are not only contributing to parental alienation; they may also be engaging in a form of alienation (ibid.). Parental alienation thrives in an adversarial "winner-take-all" legal system where parents must denigrate the other parents as much as possible to prove they are the superior parents and more worthy of receiving sole custody or primary caregiver status. Parents seek to win their cases by disparaging the other parent as a

parent, in effect engaging in alienating behaviors. The system thereby encourages and produces alienating behavior (Kruk, 2013; Giancarlo & Rottman, 2015).

Whether parental alienation is in fact more likely to occur in jurisdictions where child residence is granted to one parent only, and less likely to occur in jurisdictions which have legislated a presumption of shared parenting, is an important question for further research. According to parents themselves, shared parenting law, a legal sanctioning of the fact that children have two primary parents, is a bulwark against parental alienation (Kruk, 2011; Kruk, 2013). The need for more robust longitudinal research is pressing in this regard.

Thus, the second pillar is that of prevention: preventing parental alienation as a form of collective child abuse through fundamental reform of the family law system. Specifically, a rebuttable legal presumption of shared parenting is needed to prevent parental alienation from occurring in the first place. Shared parenting as a legal presumption, rebuttable in situations of family violence, is strongly associated with both parents' active involvement in the day-to-day parenting of children. This, in turn, is associated with children's well-being, emotional security and positive adjustment to the consequences of divorce (Baude, Pearson & Drapeau, 2016; Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz & Braver, 2013; Kruk, 2013). At the same time, shared parenting is associated with reduction of conflict between parents and prevention of first-time family violence during the divorce transition (Bauserman, 2012; Kruk, 2013; Nielsen, 2018). Therefore, a second focus for research is effectiveness of shared parenting legislation as a means to preventing parental alienation.

The third pillar is that of treatment. It is widely recognized that research on the effectiveness of therapeutic programs, including reunification programs along with therapeutic programs for children as victims of child abuse and alienated parents as victims of domestic violence, are very much in their infancy (Balmer, Matthewson, & Haines, 2018).

The core elements and working methods of effective reunification programs have yet to be determined. However, existing programs emphasize the clinical significance of children coming to regard their parents as equally valued and important in their lives, while at the same time helping enmeshed children relinquish their protective roles toward their alienating parents (Smith, 2016). The research makes it clear that reunification efforts should be pursued in cooperation with service providers who have specialized expertise in parental alienation reunification (Darnell, 2011). Several models of intervention have been developed. The best known is Warshak's (2010) Family Bridges Program, an educative and experiential program focused on allowing the child to have a healthy relationship with both parents, removing the child from the parental conflict, and encouraging child autonomy, multiple perspective-taking, and critical thinking. Sullivan's Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (Sullivan, Ward & Deutsch, 2010), which combines psycho-educational and clinical intervention in an environment of milieu therapy, is aimed at development of agreement regarding the sharing of parenting time, and a written aftercare plan. Friedlander and Walters' (2010) Multimodal Family Intervention provides differential interventions for situations of parental alignment, alienation, enmeshment, and estrangement. When applied to reunification, family therapy and other practice theories such as

parallel group therapy and exposure-based cognitive behavioral treatment (Garber, 2011; Reay, 2015; Toren, Bregman, Zohar-Reich, Ben-Amitay, Wolmer, & Laor, 2013) use various treatment methods and report preliminary results of treatment effectiveness. More research is needed, however, before we can make significant headway in development of best practice: the core components of effective reunification programs in cases of parental alienation.

Child and family practitioners in mental health and legal fields encounter fathers and mothers, along with extended family members, who are routinely affected by parental alienation. The clinical literature in the field emphasizes the importance of validating alienated parents' identity as parents, and of encouraging them to persist and never give up in their quest to reestablish relationships with their children. In the face of hostility and rejection from their children, parents are advised to respond with loving compassion, emotional availability, and absolute safety. Patience and hope, unconditional love, and being there for one's child, are suggested as the best means to respond to children, even in the face of the sad truth that this may not be enough to bring those children back into the parents' lives. Warshak (2015b) suggests that wherever possible, alienated parents should try exposing their children to people who regard them, as parents, with honor and respect, to let children see that their negative opinion, and the opinion of the alienating parent, is not shared by the rest of the world. This type of experience will leave stronger impressions than anything the alienated parent can say on his or her own behalf. Alienated children benefit from education about dynamics of parental alienation (ibid). These are all important precepts, but there needs to be much more research on effective treatment methods, interventions and strategies at the individual, family and group levels with children and their parents.

Enforcement, the final pillar, is perhaps the most contentious area of intervention as divergent legal and criminal justice responses have been advanced, ranging from incarceration and custody reversal to family therapy and leaving the situation alone. There is little or no research on methods of dealing with parents who continue to alienate children despite court orders to the contrary. Some commentators (Lowenstein, 2015) argue that continued exposure to the alienating parent will be counterproductive to reunification methods. Others (Kruk, 2010) suggest that using alienation from a parent to punish or deter alienation seems counter-intuitive, and that shared parenting benefits children in high conflict families (but not in situations of domestic violence). However, the most current research indicates that therapeutic interventions are most effective when there are strong legal sanctions for non-compliance with shared parenting orders (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2016). There is considerable discussion on awarding primary parental responsibility to the targeted parent when parental alienation is severe as an important step in ameliorating parental alienation (ibid.). However, there is little conclusive research evidence on effective means of enforcement.

According to Poustie, Matthewson and Balmer (2018), current findings indicate that with regard to family violence, it may be helpful to consider alienating behaviors as a form of crime on par with physical abuse. Indeed, countries such as Brazil have already criminalized parental alienation. Research suggests that court judgments that are swift, clear, and forceful are likely to have the best chance at curbing alienation.

Conclusion

When it comes to the empirical study of parental alienation, the state of knowledge has advanced considerably. There has been an explosion of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research on parental alienation over the past decade, generating more than one thousand research and clinical studies reported in scientific and professional journals, books, and book chapters (Bernet et al., 2016; Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 2017). The research may be considered robust in regard to definition and characteristics of parental alienation, incidence and prevalence rates, and most importantly, effects of parental alienation on children and parents (Templer et al., 2016). Abundant research suggests that parental alienation is a serious form of both emotional child abuse and domestic violence (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Bernet & Baker, 2013; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Gottlieb, 2012).

Given the social science consensus on the reality of parental alienation (Warshak, 2015a; Harman & Biringen, 2016), the need for research on the effectiveness of different approaches to intervention is urgent. This includes research on the four pillars of parental alienation intervention: (a) addressing parental alienation by means of a child protection response (the harm reduction pillar); (b) effectiveness of family law reform in the direction of shared parenting as preventive of parental alienation (the prevention pillar); (c) treatment and reunification programs, which are rapidly being developed in response to increased professional recognition of parental alienation and its effects (the treatment pillar), and (c) the enforcement pillar, different approaches to dealing with parental alienation as a breach of the law. Given the strong foundation of research on the existence, prevalence, and effects of parental alienation, along with continued controversy surrounding directions for child and family policy and practice, and best practices in legal and therapeutic fields, the road to future parental alienation research is clear.

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