

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

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Post-Divorce Interparental Conflict

- ▶ A very common consequence of divorce
- ▶ Can have very deleterious effects on children
- ▶ Divorce can pull on the child's loyalty toward their parents
- ▶ Loyalty conflicts instigated by the parents themselves

Parental Alienation

- ▶ Gardner (1985) coined the term "Parental Alienation Syndrome" (PAS)
- ▶ Negative and harmful behaviors by an alienating parent toward the target parent manifesting itself within the child
- ▶ Intense debate about PAS in the professional psychological, psychiatric and legal literature

Literature Debate About PAS

- ▶ Rand (1997), Turket (1995), Warshak (2003), Cartwright (1993) et al. on the pro-PAS side
- ▶ Emery (2005), Kelly and Johnston (2001), Bruch (2001), Dallam (1998) and Holden, Geffner and Jouriles (1998) et al. on the other.
- ▶ The governor of the US State of Maine recently issued a proclamation declaring "Parental Alienation Awareness Day."

...But Consensus on (just) PARENTAL ALIENATION

- ▶ Near universal agreement that at least some divorcing parents at least sometimes engage in alienating behaviors
- ▶ "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).
- ▶ Consensus exists despite virtually complete dearth of quantitative research addressing the degree of and impact of parental alienation
 - (Johnston, 2003 ... and here at ICCD!)
- ▶ Substantial agreement that such research is urgently needed (Lund, 1995; Mason, 1999; Vestal, 1999; Warshak, 2001)
- ▶ Current study a beginning step

Is Parental Alienation a New Problem?

- ▶ Or one confined to less-than-smart families?
- ▶ New trove of letters written by Albert Einstein in 1915 (Newsweek, July 17, 2006)
- ▶ The year he struggled with and developed and published his General Theory of Relativity
- ▶ "Probably the greatest scientific discovery ever made", Paul Dirac, Nobel Laureate

He Was Also Struggling With Family Problems

- ▶ “My dear friend Zangger,
My fine boy has been alienated from me for a few years already by my wife, who has a vengeful disposition...”
“The boy’s soul is being systematically poisoned to make sure he doesn’t trust me...”
- ▶ Later he felt his wife (a physicist) relented and he wrote her this letter
“My dear Elsa,
I am thankful you have not alienated me from the children [anymore]...They came to meet me spontaneously and sweetly”

The Dénouement...

- ▶ In order to dissolve his marriage to Elsa, he offered her a deal:
- ▶ If she agreed to give him a divorce, he would give her the money from the Nobel Prize he fully expected to win someday.
- ▶ She took the bet and was later able to buy three apartment buildings with the money.
- ▶ His oldest son was at his bedside when Albert died, 40 years later
- ▶ His youngest son eventually succumbed to mental illness and was confined to an asylum for the rest of his life.

But back to our work,...

We Developed the Parental Alienating Behavior Scale (PABS)

- ▶ 6 item scale
 1. My mother [father] often spoke badly to me of my father [mother].
 2. My mother [father] wanted me to respect and admire my father [mother]. (reversed)
 3. My mother [father] wanted me to identify more with her [him] than I did with my father [mother].
 4. My mother [father] tried to diminish my loyalty or attachment to my father [mother].
 5. My mom [dad] somehow made me feel that if I loved her [him], I couldn't really love and/or respect my father [mother].
 6. My mother [father] really wanted me to be close to my father [mother]. (reversed)
- ▶ Response range: “Not at all” to “Extremely” on 0-8 scale
- ▶ Good alphas (.70-.93)

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?

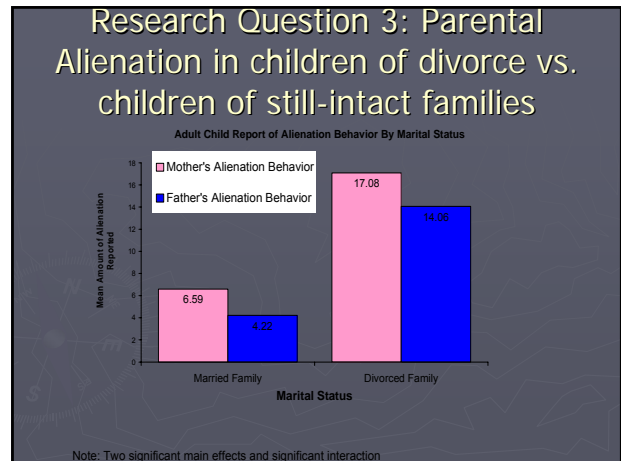
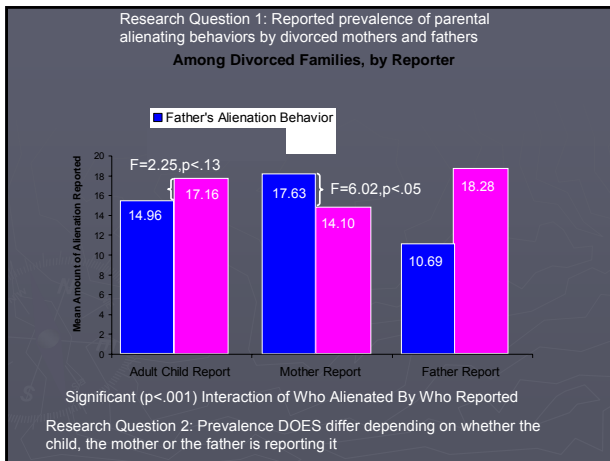
Data Source

- ▶ The families of college students, some of whom experienced a divorce during their childhood
- ▶ Such young adults, now emancipated and freed of their daily dependence on their parents, may have more mature and objective views of each of their parents’ strengths and weaknesses
- ▶ The students were recruited from six Introductory Psychology class sections at Arizona State University
- ▶ 29.3% indicated that their parents were divorced
- ▶ Matching responses from each of their parents
- ▶ Very good response rate
- ▶ Most analyses limited to “complete cases”
- ▶ 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

Results: Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Adult child report on Mother					
2 Adult child report on Father					
3 Mother report on Mother		.11			
4 Mother report on Father	.42**				
5 Father report on Mother		.23*		.43**	
6 Father report on Father	.20		.22*		

- Substantial agreement (or corroboration) across reporters.
- There was also substantial mutuality or reciprocation of alienating behaviors by the two parents (in intact .67)



Research Question 4: Impact of reported parental alienation on subsequent child well-being and adjustment?

Adjustment Measures	Mother's Alienation Behavior			Father's Alienation Behavior		
	Child Report	Mother Report	Father Report	Child Report	Mother Report	Father Report
Average GPA						
SACQ - academic adjustment						
SACQ - social adjustment						
SACQ - personal-emotional adjustment						
SACQ - attachment to school						
SACQ - full scale						
Substance use						
Platonic relationship choices						
Romantic relationship choices						

*Significantly correlated at $p < .05$

Conclusions

- ▶ There is a moderate degree of corroboration among reporters regarding parental alienating behaviors
- ▶ The more one parent engages in alienation, the more the other parent is likely to do so, as well (mutuality)
- ▶ There were substantial amounts of alienating behaviors found, even for this relatively well adjusted sample; about three times as much as in intact families

Conclusions (Con'd)

- ▶ There is substantial disagreement among reporters about which parent alienated more:
 - Fathers say mothers alienate more
 - Mothers say fathers alienate more
 - Now-Young-Adult-Children report mothers do SLIGHTLY more than fathers, more than mothers say they do, less than fathers say mothers do
 - Children's reports about fathers are also intermediate between mothers' and fathers'
- ▶ SOME (but few) lingering negative effects of alienation when children grow up

Concluding Comments

- ▶ PABS Scale appears worthy of further use
- ▶ Some advantages to this kind of sample
 - Relatively easy to obtain
 - Can obtain and compare matched reports
 - Children at this age may be more objective
- ▶ Obvious Limitations of this sample as well
 - Retrospective report, many years earlier
 - Biased sample of relatively unscathed youngsters
 - Not longitudinal; causal interpretations difficult
- ▶ Can information about findings be used as an INTERVENTION technique??