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Parental alienation: Targeted parent perspective

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Abstract

Objectives: The aims of the study were to determine targeted parent experiences of parental alienation post-separation from the alienating parent, and to investigate common targeted parent characteristics. **Method:** A total of 225 targeted parents completed an online survey. **Results:** Targeted parents reported experiencing high severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics. Targeted parent sex and targeted child age significantly predicted variance in exposure to parental alienation. Targeted mothers experienced significantly higher severity of exposure to parental alienation than targeted fathers. Severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics significantly predicted increases in the appraisal of the parental alienation situation as threatening. **Conclusions:** The findings offered new insights into targeted parent appraisals of their parental alienation experience. The results signified the seriousness of the impact of exposure to parental alienation for targeted parents, and highlighted a need for empirical research into the effectiveness of interventions and support services to assist targeted parents.

Key words: alienated parent, parental alienation, targeted parent

What is already known about the topic?

1. Parental alienation is a legitimate and serious problem that affects the child, their parents, and the family system.
2. Alienating parents use a number of tactics to damage the relationship between the child and targeted parent.
3. There is currently no agreed upon definitive set of behaviours that constitute parental alienation.

Parental alienation is a process by which one parent (alienating parent) negatively influences a child's perception of the other parent (targeted parent). This results in the child irrationally denigrating the alienated parent while expressing strong allegiance to the alienating parent. Ultimately, this can result in the alienating parent eradicating the relationship between the child and the targeted parent (Bernet, Von Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010; Garber, 2011). There is currently no agreed upon definitive set of behaviours that constitute parental alienation, however, parental

What this topic adds?

1. Targeted parents are mothers and fathers who experience psychological distress as a result of being alienated from their children.
2. Support services are needed to assist targeted parents with their distress.
3. Psychologists need to be aware of the presence and severity of parental alienation when working with families who may be experiencing parental alienation.

alienation is understood to involve a number of tactics used by the alienating parent in an attempt to program the targeted child to reject the targeted parent (Bond, 2008; Gardner, 2002; Hands & Warshak, 2011).

Much of the past literature has focused on the characteristics of the alienating parent and the targeted child. Alienating parents have been described as narcissistic, paranoid, and cognitively disturbed individuals who have difficult relationships with their family of origin (e.g., Baker, 2005a, 2006; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Kopetski, 1998a, 1998b; Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013; Rand, 1997a, 1997b). It has been suggested that most alienating parents are mothers (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Gardner, 2002; Johnston, 2003; Meier, 2009; Nichols, 2013; Rand, 1997a, 1997b; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Additionally, alienating mothers and alienating fathers engage in differing alienating tactics.

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For example, alienating fathers are more likely to encourage the child to be defiant towards the mother, whereas alienating mothers are more likely to denigrate the father in front of the child (López, Iglesias, & García, 2014).

A number of commonly witnessed characteristics of targeted children have been outlined in the literature, including: (1) having an unhealthy and age-inappropriate dependence on the alienating parent; (2) female children are slightly more likely to be targeted; and (3) children around 10–14 years of age are more commonly alienated (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Bow et al., 2009; Ellis & Boyan, 2010). Targeted children have been observed to exhibit psychosocial disturbances due to exposure to parental alienation. These disturbances include disrupted social-emotional development, lack of trust in relationships, depression, anxiety, difficulties controlling their impulses, social isolation, and low self-sufficiency (Baker, 2005b, 2010b; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, 2005; Kopetski, 1998b).

Despite the body of literature describing the targeted child and alienating parent the perspective of the targeted parent remains under-researched. Nevertheless, some studies have identified common emotions experienced by targeted parents. These include frustration, stress, fear, loss, powerlessness, helplessness, and anger as a result of the constant interference by the alienating parent (Baker, 2010a; Baker & Andre, 2008; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Throughout the process of alienation, the targeted parent can endure personal costs that leave them emotionally and financially exhausted (Walsh & Bone, 1997).

Currently, the majority of descriptions of targeted parent characteristics and experiences are drawn from research with small sample sizes (e.g., $N < 50$) or from reports of the targeted parents' experiences from legal and mental health professionals who have worked with the targeted parent or targeted child, or from targeted children when interviewed in adulthood. Additionally, information about the targeted parent experience largely has relied on American samples. No study to date has employed an international sample (Baker, 2006, 2010a; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Johnston, 2003; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Throughout this literature, targeted parents have been described as rigid and unskilled in their parenting style, emotionally detached and having difficulty managing their emotions. Further research is needed examining the impact of parental alienation on the targeted parents' psychological wellbeing and perception of parenting capacity from the targeted parent perspective.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The aim of this study is to investigate the experience of parental alienation from the perspective of both male and female targeted parents. This study aims to examine if there are sex differences in the experience of parental alienation. The study also examines if parental alienation severity predicts changes in the targeted parents' psychological wellbeing, threat appraisal, and perception of parental competence.

Based on previous research, it is predicted that fathers will report greater severity of parental alienation than will mothers. Parental alienation severity will be higher when the targeted child is older and female. It is also predicted that an increase in parental alienation severity will be associated with poorer psychological wellbeing, greater threat appraisal, and a reduction in targeted parents' perception of their parental competence.

METHOD

Procedure

Following approval from the University of Tasmania's Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee, the researchers approached support groups, private practices, and non-government organisations providing assistance for parents experiencing parental alienation to advertise the research on the researchers' behalf. In order to obtain an international sample, the study was also advertised via an international online support group's Facebook page. Interested targeted parents were able to access the survey online via Limesurvey (Schmitz, 2015). The survey took approximately 1 hr to complete.

Materials

An online survey was developed specifically for the present study. The survey utilised a combination of researcher developed measures and published measures. Socio-demographic information was collected via 13 questions developed by the researcher, to give a clearer context in which parental alienation occurs, as well as to determine common characteristics among targeted parents.

The targeted parents' recall of exposure to parental alienation tactics was measured by 13 items developed by the researchers. An example item includes, "*In the last month, has the alienating parent attempted to remove your child from your life completely?*", rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *never* to 4 = *always*). Internal consistencies were calculated using Cronbach's alpha for the severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics, and were considered acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

The stress appraisal measure (SAM: Peacock & Wong, 1990), consisting of 28 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .67$), was utilised to measure cognitive appraisals that result in stress.

Measured on a 5-point Likert scale, the SAM consists of seven subscales: threat, challenge, centrality, controllable-by-self, controllable-by-others, uncontrollable, and stressfulness.

The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), consisting of 21 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$), was utilised to measure depression, anxiety, and stress measured on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = *never* to 3 = *almost always*).

The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSCS; Johnston & Mash, 1989) was utilised to evaluate competence on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 6 = *strongly disagree*). This measure consists of 16 items, divided into two subscales: satisfaction subscale with nine items (Cronbach's α Pre/Post = .75/.74); and efficacy subscale with seven items (Cronbach's α Pre/Post = .76/.75; Johnston & Mash, 1989). An example item is, "I honestly believe I have all the skills necessary to be a good parent to my child".

The Parent-Child Relationship Inventory (PCRI; Gerard, 1994) was utilised to examine parental competence on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree* and 4 = *strongly disagree*). An additional response item (0 = *Don't Know/Not Applicable*) was added to account for the fact that the current sample may not have contact nor have had a relationship with the target child, in order to enable them to answer such questions. This measure consisted of 78 items with 7 content scale, including: parent support, satisfaction with parenting, involvement, communication, limit setting, autonomy, and role orientation (Cronbach's $\alpha = .12-.76$). The PCRI was used in this study because it provides a comprehensive measure of the parent-child relationship in the absence of a measure of the parent-child relationship within the context of parental alienation.

Participants

A priori power analysis using G*Power (version 3.1.9.2; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) was conducted. A sample size of 179 would be required to achieve power of .80 and a medium effect size (.25) at an alpha level of .05. A total of 225 participants who self-identified as targeted parents completed the survey. Each parent participated voluntarily. The inclusion criterion for the study was being a biological parent of a child (under the age of 18 years) who they were alienated from at the time of the study. Of this sample, 105 were men ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.86$ years, $SD = 8.42$) and 120 were women ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.73$ years, $SD = 7.05$).

Analysis

To estimate the proportion of variance in severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics that can be accounted for by targeted parent sex, targeted child sex, and targeted child age, a standard regression analysis was performed. A one-

way between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to further investigate the differential severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics for mothers and fathers. Additionally, a series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to investigate any sex differences in targeted parents' psychological wellbeing as measured by the DASS (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), threat appraisal as measured by the SAM (Peacock & Wong, 1990), and perception of parental competence as measured by the PSCS (Johnston & Mash, 1989) and the PCRI (Gerard, 1994). To estimate the proportion of variance in parental competence, stress appraisal, and psychological well-being that can be accounted for by the severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics, a series of standard multiple regression analyses were performed.

RESULTS

Sample characteristics

Close to half of the participants (48%) were living in the United States of America, with 36.4% living in Australia (see Table 1 for a summary of the characteristics of the sample).

Sex differences in targeted parent experiences of parental alienation

In combination, targeted parent sex, targeted child sex, and targeted child age accounted for a significant 7.8% of the variability in severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics, $R^2 = .078$, adjusted $R^2 = .065$, $F(3, 220) = 6.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .078$. This demonstrated significant positive correlation between severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics and targeted parent sex, as well as targeted child age. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of targeted parent sex on the severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics, $F(1, 222) = 11.54$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .049$, in which mothers ($M = 42.01$, $SD = 8.45$) experienced a significantly higher severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics than fathers ($M = 38.00$, $SD = 9.21$). Furthermore, a series of one-way ANOVAs demonstrated a significant main effect of targeted parent sex on the severity of exposure to the alienating parent: interrogating the targeted child; speaking badly about the targeted parent in front of the targeted child; withdrawing love from the targeted child when they express support for the targeted parent; demanding targeted child be loyal only to them; inappropriately disclosing information about the targeted parent to targeted child; encouraging an unhealthy alliance with targeted child; and encouraging the targeted child to be defiant while spending time with the targeted parent. Planned contrasts indicated that mothers experienced significantly higher severity of exposure to each of the tactics compared to fathers (see Table 2).

Table 1 Socio-demographic variables of the current study sample

Socio-demographic	Variables	Number (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Socio-demographic	Variables	Number (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Sample		225 (100)	—	Age of TC	1–18 years	—	11.32 (4.74)
Age	18–60 years	—	40.79 (7.70)	Gender of TC	Male	102 (45.3)	—
Sex of parent	Female	120 (53.3)	—		Female	123 (54.7)	—
	Male	105 (46.7)	—	No. children shared with AP	1	92 (40.9)	—
Country of residence	USA	108 (48)	—		2	74 (32.9)	—
	Australia	82 (36.4)	—		3	29 (12.9)	—
	Canada	17 (7.6)	—		4	7 (3.1)	—
	United Kingdom	10 (4.4)	—		5	3 (1.3)	—
	New Zealand	5 (2.2)	—		6	1 (.4)	—
	Ireland	2 (.9)	—	No. children alienated from	1	116 (51.6)	—
	India	1 (.4)	—		2	80 (35.6)	—
Language	English	220 (97.8)	—		3	17 (7.6)	—
Relationship status	Divorced/separated	102 (45.3)	—		4	7 (3.1)	—
	Married/defacto	78 (34.7)	—		5	2 (.9)	—
	Single	29 (12.9)	—		6	1 (.4)	—
	Never married	16 (7.1)	—	Current custody status	No custody	61 (27.1)	—
Employment	Full-time	131 (58.2)	—		Non-custodial with visitation	51 (22.7)	—
	Part-time	32 (14.2)	—		Primary custodial parent	19 (8.4)	—
	Unemployed	44 (19.6)	—		Joint custody	39 (17.3)	—
	Part-/full-time student	18 (8)	—	Custody arrangement	No custody	6 (2.7)	—
TC resides with TP	Yes	18 (8)	—		Non-custodial with visitation	59 (26.2)	—
	No	207 (92)	—		Primary custodial parent	37 (16.4)	—
Children with someone other than the AP	Yes	83 (36.9)	—		Joint custody	84 (37.3)	—
	No	142 (63.1)	—				

Note. AP = alienating parent; *M* = estimated mean; *SD* = standard deviation; TC = targeted child; TP = targeted parent.

A series of one-way ANOVAs revealed significant main effects of targeted parent sex on satisfaction with parenting, parental involvement, and parental role orientation were found. Planned contrasts demonstrated that mothers reported significantly higher reflections of satisfaction with parenting compared to fathers whereas fathers reported significantly higher propensity to seek out their child and show interest in being involved with their life activities compared to mothers, as well as significantly higher attitudes consistent with the sharing of parental responsibility compared to mothers (see Table 3).

Impact of parental alienation on targeted parents' psychological wellbeing, threat appraisal, and parental competence

The severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics accounted for a significant 3.8% of the variance in appraisal of the threatening nature of the parental alienation

situation. This demonstrated a significant positive correlation between severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics and stress appraisal of the potential harm or loss that may come in the future due to the parental alienation experience. The severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics did not account for significant variances for any of the remaining outcome variables (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to investigate the experience of parental alienation from the perspective of male and female targeted parents. Specifically, this study aimed to examine if there are sex differences in the experience of parental alienation. The study also examined if parental alienation severity predicted changes in the targeted parents' psychological wellbeing, threat appraisal, and perception of parental competence.

Table 2 Means and standard deviations for the differential severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics between males and females

	Males		Females		<i>F</i> (<i>df</i>)	η^2	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	(Two-tailed)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
AP interfering with time spent with TC	3.11 [2.89, 3.34]	1.16	3.29 [3.09, 3.50]	1.14	1.34 (1, 223)	.006	-1.16 (223)	.248	-.155
AP implications of TP being dangerous	2.95 [2.71, 3.20]	1.27	3.06 [2.83, 3.29]	1.28	.39 (1, 223)	.002	-0.62 (223)	.535	-.083
AP interrogating the TC after time spent	2.91 [2.65, 3.17]	1.35	3.41 [3.23, 3.59]	1.00	9.92 (1, 223)	.043	-3.15 (223)	.002	-.422
AP speaking badly about the TP in front of the TC	3.15 [2.94, 3.36]	1.08	3.55 [3.41, 3.69]	0.75	10.43 (1, 223)	.045	-3.23 (223)	.001	-.433
AP attempts to damage loving connection	3.59 [3.45, 3.73]	0.73	3.72 [3.61, 3.83]	0.61	1.99 (1, 223)	.009	-1.41 (223)	.159	-.189
AP withdrawing love from TC when they express support for the TP	2.40 [2.15, 2.65]	0.12	2.78 [2.54, 3.02]	1.33	4.84 (1, 223)	.021	-2.20 (223)	.029	-.295
AP demanding TC to be loyal only to them (AP)	2.75 [2.51, 3.00]	1.25	3.14 [2.94, 3.35]	1.13	5.99 (1, 223)	.026	-2.45 (223)	.015	-.328
AP inappropriately disclosing information about TP to TC	2.88 [2.63, 3.12]	1.28	3.32 [3.12, 3.51]	1.07	7.95 (1, 223)	.035	-2.80 (222)	.005	-.376
AP attempts to completely remove TC from TP's life	3.39 [3.20, 3.58]	0.99	3.58 [3.41, 3.74]	0.90	2.14 (1, 223)	.010	-1.46 (223)	.145	-.196
AP cut TP off from receiving information about TC	3.68 [3.55, 3.80]	0.64	3.59 [3.44, 3.74]	0.84	.71 (1, 223)	.003	0.84 (223)	.401	.113
AP encouraging unhealthy TC and AP alliance	2.44 [2.17, 2.77]	1.40	2.95 [2.72, 3.18]	1.27	8.27 (1, 223)	.036	-2.88 (223)	.004	-.386
TC being defiant during time spent with TP	1.78 [1.51, 2.05]	1.38	2.61 [2.34, 2.88]	1.48	18.64 (1, 223)	.077	-4.32 (223)	<.001	-.579
AP utilising outside forces against TP	2.90 [2.62, 3.17]	1.41	2.99 [2.75, 3.24]	1.36	.27 (1, 223)	.001	-0.52 (223)	.602	-.070

Note. Bolded values indicate statistical significance. AP = alienating parent; *F* = analysis of variance statistic; *d* = Cohen's *d* effect size; *df* = degrees of freedom; *M* = estimated mean; η^2 = eta-squared effect size; *p* = significance statistic; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = correlational statistic; TC = targeted child; TP = targeted parent.

Sex differences in targeted parent experiences of parental alienation

The present study showed that, in combination, targeted parent sex, targeted child sex, and targeted child age, significantly predicted changes in the severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics. As targeted child age increased, the severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics also increased for the targeted parent. This finding supports the hypotheses and is consistent with previous research.

Targeted parent sex was also found to significantly predict changes in the severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics. Mothers experienced significantly greater severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics than fathers. This finding did not support the hypothesis and previous research. Previous studies have suggested that mothers are most commonly found to be the alienating parents and, thus, fathers experience a higher frequency and severity of

exposure to parental alienation tactics (Bow et al., 2009; Ellis & Boyan, 2010; Gardner, 2002; Johnston, 2003; Meier, 2009; Nichols, 2013; Rand, 1997a, 1997b; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). This difference may be accounted for by the larger sample size and a higher proportion of targeted mothers than previous studies.

In the present study, targeted mothers reported experiencing significantly higher severity of exposure to alienating parents' denigration tactics than did fathers, which is inconsistent with López et al. (2014). This finding suggests that alienating fathers may be more aggressive in their approach to weakening the targeted mother's authority over their children than first thought.

The present findings do offer some empirical support for the suggestion that alienating mothers and alienating fathers appear to engage in differing tactics against the targeted parent (López et al., 2014; Lorandos et al., 2013). The current

Table 3 Differential ratings of stress appraisal and affect between males and females

	Males		Females		<i>F</i> (<i>df</i>)	η^2	<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	(Two-tailed)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Parental responsibility	37.34 [34.77, 39.91]	10.37	40.16 [36.87, 43.45]	13.71	1.79 (1, 132)	<.001	-1.34 (132)	.184	.006
Parental satisfaction	36.08 [34.35, 37.72]	6.80	37.22 [35.63, 38.81]	6.81	1.04 (1, 137)	.011	-1.02 (137)	.309	.209
Parenting efficacy	21.31 [19.89, 22.73]	5.73	21.04 [19.75, 22.33]	5.57	.08 (1, 137)	.024	.28 (137)	.781	-.311
Parental support	48.73 [46.49, 50.98]	10.16	51.34 [49.20, 53.48]	9.93	2.13 (1, 170)	.009	-1.46 (170)	.146	.189
Satisfaction with parenting	48.36 [46.20, 50.52]	9.78	51.94 [49.83, 54.04]	9.76	5.61 (1, 166)	.033	-2.37 (166)	.019	-.387
Parental involvement	51.74 [49.47, 54.01]	10.25	48.44 [46.37, 50.52]	9.62	4.83 (1, 166)	.028	2.20 (166)	.029	.342
Parental communication	49.32 [47.14, 51.49]	9.83	50.61 [48.43, 52.80]	10.13	.99 (1, 167)	.016	-1.00 (167)	.321	.255
Parent limit setting	50.94 [48.76, 53.13]	9.87	49.38 [47.26, 51.50]	9.85	1.40 (1, 165)	<.001	1.19 (165)	.238	.004
Parent role orientation	51.94 [49.91, 53.97]	9.18	48.32 [46.08, 50.57]	10.41	4.98 (1, 165)	.029	2.23 (165)	.027	.347
Parental autonomy	49.62 [47.51, 51.74]	9.58	50.64 [48.41, 52.87]	10.34	.53 (1, 166)	.004	-.73 (166)	.468	-.125
Situational controllability-by-self	12.55 [11.49, 13.61]	4.18	11.72 [10.68, 12.77]	4.36	1.22 (1, 129)	.006	1.10 (129)	.272	-.151
Situational threat	16.18 [15.39, 16.96]	3.10	16.51 [15.75, 17.27]	3.61	.36 (1, 129)	.039	-.60 (129)	.548	.398
Situational centrality	18.05 [17.49, 18.61]	2.20	18.19 [17.61, 18.77]	2.42	.12 (1, 129)	.013	-.34 (129)	.731	.225
Situational uncontrollability	13.27 [12.32, 14.22]	3.74	13.03 [11.97, 14.09]	4.40	.12 (1, 129)	.009	.34 (129)	.733	.195
Situational controllability-by-others	7.66 [6.74, 8.58]	3.63	7.54 [6.69, 8.38]	3.52	.04 (1, 129)	<.001	.20 (129)	.842	-.076
Situational challenge	12.47 [11.61, 13.33]	3.38	12.30 [11.51, 13.09]	3.29	.08 (1, 129)	<.001	.28 (129)	.780	-.034
Situational stressfulness	16.61 [15.92, 17.31]	2.74	17.22 [16.61, 17.83]	2.54	1.71 (1, 129)	.001	-1.31 (129)	.193	.077
Stress	8.97 [7.80, 10.14]	4.57	9.61 [8.34, 10.89]	5.23	.55 (1, 126)	.001	-.74 (126)	.461	.073
Anxiety	5.75 [4.50, 7.01]	4.89	7.49 [6.05, 8.93]	5.91	3.25 (1, 126)	.024	-1.80 (126)	.074	.313
Depression	9.87 [8.32, 11.42]	6.05	9.21 [7.70, 10.72]	6.19	.37 (1, 126)	<.001	.61 (126)	.544	.057

Note. Bolded values indicate statistical significance. AP = alienating parent; *F* = analysis of variance statistic; *d* = Cohen's *d* effect size; *df* = degrees of freedom; *M* = estimated mean; η^2 = eta-squared effect size; *p* = significance statistic; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = correlational statistic; TC = targeted child; TP = targeted parent.

study's findings showed that, compared to targeted fathers, targeted mothers reported significantly greater severity of exposure to numerous parental alienation tactics.

Impact of parental alienation on targeted parents' psychological wellbeing, threat appraisal, and parental competence

One of the most important findings of the present study was that the targeted parents' perceptions of situational threat to current and/or future wellbeing could be significantly predicted by increases in the severity of exposure to parental alienation tactics. The finding that parental alienation is perceived to represent a risk of harm is important because this perception may be a function of escalating conflict as well as a contributing factor in the conflict. This is because decision-making and emotional wellbeing can be negatively influenced when an individual feels threatened. Therefore, it would be important for clinicians working with targeted parents to take into account the level of actual and perceived threat experienced by the targeted parent.

Additionally, the respondents appraised their current situation of parental alienation as highly stressful and threatening to their current and/or future wellbeing, as well as an important determinant for their current and/or future wellbeing. Furthermore, the sample indicated that they perceived their situation to be moderately controllable by themselves and moderately challenging to manage, yet

unlikely to be controllable by anyone else. Considering the targeted parents' appraisal of the controllability of the parental alienation process, it would be conceivable that engaging in interventions might be difficult for targeted parents. Similarly, if targeted parents appraise the situation as unlikely to be controllable by anyone, they may be unlikely to think that external help will be beneficial. This may have been a consequence of having sought external legal or psychological help previously which was unsuccessful (Baker, 2010a; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Further investigation of this issue may be beneficial, with an aim to increase the effectiveness of support services provided to targeted parents.

The findings of the current study also indicated that the sample was experiencing moderate levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Although this finding may appear obvious based on the highly stressful nature of the parental alienation process, there is limited evidence of targeted parents experiencing negative affect, such as depression and anxiety (Baker, 2010a). However, one study conducted by Baker (2010a), examining the targeted parent experience of the child custody dispute process, determined that all of the participants reported experiencing anxiety and depression (~80% rated high levels). Baker (2010a) also suggested that high levels of depression and anxiety are counterproductive in parental alienation, because it limits an individual's ability to interact with others effectively, including professionals

Table 4 Predicting stress appraisal, affect, and parental competence from severity of exposure to parental alienating behaviours

	<i>n</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	<i>B</i> [95% CI]	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Parental responsibility	134	.000	-.01	0.001	-.004 [-.255, .246]	.127	-.003	-0.03	.973
Parental satisfaction	139	.011	.004	1.49	.084 [-.052, .220]	.069	.104	1.22	.224
Parenting efficacy	139	.024	.02	3.31	-.102 [-.214, .009]	.056	-.153	-1.82	.071
Parental support	166	.009	.003	1.53	.108 [-.064, .280]	.087	.094	1.24	.219
Satisfaction with parenting	168	.002	-.005	0.25	-.044 [-.218, .130]	.088	-.039	-0.500	.618
Parental involvement	168	.007	.001	1.13	-.093 [-.267, .080]	.088	-.082	-1.06	.290
Parental communication	169	.016	.010	2.71	-.144 [-.316, .029]	.087	-.126	-1.65	.102
Parent limit setting	167	.000	-.006	0.001	.002 [-.172, .177]	.088	.002	.026	.980
Parent role orientation	167	.006	.000	0.93	-.085 [-.260, .089]	.088	-.075	-.963	.337
Parental autonomy	168	.004	-.002	0.65	-.071 [-.245, .103]	.088	-.062	-.807	.421
Situational controllability-by-self	131	.006	-.002	0.73	-.039 [-.128, .051]	.045	-.075	-0.86	.393
Situational threat	131	.038	.03	5.11	0.073 [.009, .137]	.032	.195	2.26	.026
Situational centrality	131	.013	.01	1.64	.031 [-.017, .079]	.024	.112	1.28	.203
Situational uncontrollability	131	.009	.002	1.23	.048 [-.037, .133]	.043	.097	1.11	.270
Situational controllability-by-others	131	.001	-.01	0.19	-.016 [-.091, .058]	.038	-.038	-0.43	.668
Situational challenge	131	.000	-.01	0.04	-.007 [-.076, .063]	.025	-.017	-0.19	.848
Situational stressfulness	131	.001	-.01	0.19	.012 [-.043, .068]	.028	.038	0.44	.663
Stress	128	.001	-.01	-0.17	.022 [-.083, .126]	.053	.037	0.41	.682
Anxiety	128	.024	.02	3.08	.102 [-.013, .217]	.058	.154	1.75	.082
Depression	128	.001	-.01	0.10	.021 [-.108, .150]	.065	.029	0.32	.748

Note. Bolded values indicate statistical significance. Adjusted *R*² = adjusted estimate of fit to model; β = beta standardised coefficient; *B* = unstandardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval; *F* = *F* statistic; *n* = sample size; *p* = significance statistic; *R*² = estimate of fit to model; *SE* = standard error; *t* = correlational statistic.

and other support persons. In particular, the preparation, energy, and motivation needed in custody disputes are considerable and may be reduced by depression and anxiety (Baker, 2010a).

Impacts on the targeted parent competence

The present study's findings showed that, overall, targeted parents indicated high levels of satisfaction with parenting and support as a parent. They also reported high propensities to be involved in their targeted child's life, high confidence in their ability to discipline and set boundaries for the targeted child, high levels of encouragement of their targeted child's autonomy, a good awareness of their ability to communicate with the targeted child, and an attitude consistent with the sharing of parental responsibilities. This finding highlights that, despite the various difficulties targeted parents have in attempting to maintain a relationship with the targeted child, they appear to have the desire to continue to seek out involvement in their child's life. It is possible that this desire for ongoing involvement both fuels the parental conflict, because it is inconsistent with the desires of the alienating parent, and contributes to the targeted parent's feelings of uncontrollability and psychological maladjustment.

The current findings are in contrast to previous descriptions of targeted parents as being rigid, controlling, distant, unskilled, passive, and emotionally detached (Baker & Andre, 2008; Drodz & Olesen, 2004; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Gottlieb, 2012; Johnston, 2003; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Rand, 1997a, 1997b). For

example, previous literature has described targeted parents as ambivalent about wanting a relationship with their child (Baker & Andre, 2008; Friedlander & Walters, 2010). However, the targeted parents in the present study demonstrated a strong desire to continue to seek out involvement in their targeted child's life. The current sample may better reflect the actual experience of targeted parents. This is because the current study's findings are based on the reports of targeted parents themselves, whereas previous research has relied on the reports of other informants.

Clinical implications

The finding that targeted parents feel their wellbeing is significantly threatened by their exposure to the parental alienation tactics signifies a need for greater support services for targeted parents. This need is highlighted by the finding that the sample, overall, was experiencing moderate levels of anxiety and depression. Such symptoms have potential to interfere with the targeted parent's motivation to seek out support services, particularly as the present sample also appraised their current experience as a moderately uncontrollable situation. Thus, mental health and legal professionals might do well to identify the presence of negative affect and review the individual's cognitive appraisal of the situation, to ensure that they are able to tailor the support to the individual.

As the current findings contradict depictions of targeted parents in previous literature, professionals should not make assumptions about targeted parents predominantly being fathers. Also, professionals need to be aware of the

presence and severity of parental alienation tactics because the more severe the exposure to the tactics, the greater the impact on the mental health of the targeted parent. This could then determine how the provision of support is tailored to best suit the needs of the targeted parent.

Limitations and direction for future research

There are some limitations of the present study that are important to note. Firstly, the current study is cross-sectional. A longitudinal study would assist to better understand the development of the parental alienation process, as well as associations between the targeted parent characteristics and the severity of exposure to parent alienation tactics over time. Additionally, a qualitative analysis of common targeted parent characteristics and experiences would provide useful insights into the lived experience of parental alienation from the targeted parent perspective.

Methodologically, the second set of regression analyses in the study might be underpowered, as based on a power analysis 179 participants would have been required to detect moderate effect sizes, but only 169 participants completed the full survey. However, the small effect sizes suggest that a larger sample size would have been unlikely to affect the results.

This is the first study to attempt to include an international sample of targeted parents. The present study provides useful information about the impact of parental alienation on targeted parents in English speaking countries, however, further research is needed to understand the impact of parental alienation cross-culturally. In the absence of such research, conclusions cannot be made about the representativeness of the current sample. Additionally, further research is also needed to understand how parental alienation presents in different family structures such as in blended families, families with children of LGBT parents, and families with adopted children.

Finally, in order to better understand the parental alienation process, it would be important to examine how it can be successfully resolved. Therefore, examining the effectiveness of interventions for parental alienation is important. This is necessary to establish some evidence-based approaches to support targeted parents and targeted children experiencing parental alienation.

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