

Powerless to parent; powerless to protect: The experiences of alienated parents in the UK

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Parental alienation is the unwarranted denigration or rejection of a parent where there was a previous loving relationship. Despite thirty years of study establishing its aetiology, prevalence, appropriate interventions and outcomes for children, parental alienation remains a highly contentious concept in the UK. Additionally, there has been minimal exploration of the experiences of alienated parents across the globe. A recent *Q analysis* uncovered the subjective and intersubjective experiences of British alienated parents. An unexpected consensus became apparent which merited further analysis of the data. Through this phenomenological exploration of the participants' narratives, a pervasive sense of "powerlessness" emerged. The source of this felt sense of powerlessness is considered and recommendations for policy and practice are suggested.

Key words: parental alienation, family conflict, psychological harm, family law, parent.

1. Introduction

Parental alienation (PA) is characterised by a child's strong alignment with one parent whilst rejecting a relationship with the other, despite a prior normal, loving, warm relationship. This rejection seems unwarranted based on a history of normal-range parenting, in the absence of abuse or violence, and is most usually a feature of high conflict relationship breakdown. Since the 1980s, the symptomatic behaviours and underlying psychological processes in an alienated child have been identified (Baker, 2005a; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Gardner, 1985; Johnston, Campbell, & Mayes, 1985; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Kopetski, 1998; Waldron & Joanis, 1996; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Key features are a child's irrational anxiety and refusal or resistance to contact with one parent, or contact which is characterised by extreme withdrawal, or gross hatred and animosity (Baker, 2014; Bernet, von Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Johnston, 2003). Research has identified increased clinical, emotional and behavioural problems in alienated children as well as risks to a child's psychological and emotional

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development and their ability to sustain effective, healthy relationships throughout their life-course (Baker, 2005b; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Bernet, Baker, & Verrocchio, 2015; Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016; Cartwright, 1993; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Verrocchio, Baker, & Bernet, 2016; Weigel & Donovan, 2006).

PA has been conceptualised as existing on a continuum from mild to severe, with therapeutic and legal interventions reflecting the severity and complexity (Burrill, 2006; Clarkson & Clarkson, 2007; Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2012; Rand, 1997a, 1997b; Rand, Rand, & Kopetski, 2005). The behavioural, contextual and psychological factors which perpetuate PA have been consistently identified. Opinions on aetiology range from the conscious or unconscious behaviours of one parent only to a complex interaction of factors including the behaviours of both parents, personality and individual differences, environmental and social factors (Baker, 2007; Fidler et al., 2012; Gordon, Stoffey, & Bottinelli, 2008; Harman, Biringer, Ratajack, Outland, & Kraus, 2016; Johnston, 2005; Lampel, 1996; Siegel & Langford, 1998; Stoltz & Ney, 2002). Determining whether a child's rejection of a parent is justified is a complex issue (Ellis, 2008; Fidler et al., 2012; Jaffe, Ashbourne, & Mamo, 2010; Weir, 2011) and allegations of violence or sexual abuse often feature strongly in these high conflict separation cases (Baker, 2005a; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Jaffe, Crooks, & Bala, 2009; Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, & Bala, 2008; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). In cases involving PA, these allegations are rarely found to be substantiated (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009). Alienation is often exacerbated in cases involving third parties, such as social care, therapists and the legal system where lack of knowledge can lead to collusion with the alienation process (Fidler et al., 2012; Garber, 2007; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Sullivan & Kelly, 2001).

1.1 Parental Alienation in the UK

Parental alienation has been a contentious concept in the UK for the majority of the last thirty years (Whitcombe, 2014) with Hobbs (2006) suggesting a range of perspectives from confusion to total denial of its existence. Psychiatrist Kirk Weir (Weir & Sturge, 2006) acknowledged the controversy over Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), though confirmed the presence of the characteristic eight behavioural signs in a child in "scores of cases" in which he conducted assessments for the Court. In discussing the apparent preference for the term "implacable hostility" to PAS in the UK, Weir proffered the preferred term "alienation". He proposed this term

in cases which demonstrated the cluster of psychological responses in a child without a presumption of a purposeful campaign of denigration by one parent. This approach is also favoured by Sturge and Glaser (2000), whose analysis lacked a full consideration of the body of global evidence around PA. They gave some minimal acknowledgement to «sexual abuse allegations emanating mainly from the resident carer» (p. 263) where there is hostility arising out of rejection.

Failure to adopt common terminology has led to obfuscation. *Cafcass* (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) have a remit to «safeguard and promote the welfare of children; give advice to the family courts; make provision for children to be represented and provide information, advice and support to children and their families» (Cafcass, 2016). Although the *Cafcass Operating Framework* makes reference to Parental Alienation (Cafcass, 2014), in response to a request on their position on “Parental Alienation”, they refer to “implacable hostility” in preference.

«Our practitioners are aware of the potential for children to be influenced by parental views and will remain live to this issue throughout the progress of a case» (Cafcass Governance Team, personal communication, 10 April 2015).

CAFCASS Cymru, a separate organization, have stated that «parental alienation is not recognised as a syndrome by UK medical, academic or legal sectors» (Stanley, CAFCASS Cymru, personal communication, 13 April 2015). They also acknowledge that some parents attempt to influence their children and alienate them from the other parent, and this can lead to emotional harm. *Resolution*, the association for family lawyers, referred to Parental Alienation Syndrome in its leaflet for parents in 2008 (Mcghee, 2008). By 2015, their updated leaflet referred to “Hostile Aggressive Parenting”, while referring to the ongoing debate «amongst the family law community and public organisations on how to label this destructive dynamic» (Mcghee, 2015, p. 25).

A detailed Ministry of Justice (MoJ) report into 308 case outcomes referred to those where there is implacable hostility on the part of the resident parent and cases where a child was resistant to contact (Hunt & Macleod, 2008). Some cases identified the hostility and resistance as justifiable, in others «the hostility reflects hurt and anger at the breakdown of the relationship, disputes over property and money or a desire to create a new family unit and cut out the biological parent» (p. 192). Children’s resistance was identified as arising most often from a sense of loyalty and a conscious or unconscious need to be seen as supportive of the resident parent, as op-

posed to the more rare occurrence of «deliberately poisoning a child's mind» (p. 198).

Identifying the reasons for resistance to or refusal of contact are usually progressed through additional investigations by Cafcass or CAF/CASS Cymru (Hunt & Macleod, 2008). The appointment of a Guardian (and independent legal representation for the child) is rare, less than 4% of cases before the Court. In many of these cases, litigation has been protracted, and such appointments only occur after more than a year in Court. At the time of the MoJ report, instruction of an expert such as a psychologist or psychiatrist occurred in 25% of cases. Subsequently, changes in Family Law increased the threshold for evidence from an Expert from "reasonably required" to "necessary."

With regards to judicial approaches in intransigent cases, there is a preference for "cajoling", "persuading" or "conciliatory" approaches (Hunt & Macleod, 2008, p. 194). Where this is ineffective, the case is escalated to a higher court and the threat of a transfer of residence may be made to a hostile parent. An overwhelming reluctance to enforce sanctions for failure to adhere to Court orders is evident. One judge stated «you know, or think you know, what is right for this child but you can't actually get the adults to do it. And we have no teeth, we have no sanctions. Well nothing that I think is realistic» (p. 195).

Despite a recent commitment to improving transparency, in the vast majority of family law cases in British courts, there is no published judgement (Jarrett, 2015). Parties to proceedings are not at liberty to discuss the case outside of the Court arena (Her Majesty's Court Service, 2009). Published judgements from the higher courts, most usually as a result of protracted litigation, have made reference to issues of implacable hostility, manipulation and alienating behaviours for a number of years (*Re S (Transfer of Residence)* [2010] 1 FLR 1785; *T (Children)* [2014] EWHC 2164 (Fam); *H (Children)* [2014] EWCA Civ 733). There is some evidence of an increasing willingness to intervene, particularly where there is clear evidence of deliberate behaviours on the part of a parent, such as when there are false allegations of domestic violence or child abuse *W (A Child)* [2014] EWCA Civ 772.

In relation to interventions for families experiencing alienation in the UK, there is very little provision, with none known to be provided by statutory services. Similarly, statutory or accredited training for practitioners around parental alienation has been minimal, although the British Psychological Society (BPS) delivered a continuing professional development workshop on this subject in October 2016.

1.2 Alienated Parents

For alienated parents the emotional distress in attempting to maintain their relationship with a child, or, in accepting that this is no longer possible, is significant. Distress arises from several factors – grief, hurt and shame of being abused by and losing a child; acknowledging personal responsibility for contributing to the alienation process; the lengthy adversarial litigation process (Baker & Fine, 2013; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Goldberg & Goldberg, 2013). Humiliation, shame or embarrassment arise from a fear that family, friends and colleagues will presume the rejection to be justified. For some, there is a belief that there is little or no hope of ever repairing the relationship (Darnall & Steinberg, 2008). Loss of a child in such a way, can overshadow all aspects of a parent's life and they may experience depression, anger, withdrawal, passivity, a sense of disbelief or bewilderment.

When considering litigation for contact, parents feel torn between balancing their concerns for their child's emotional well-being with a natural desire to maintain a meaningful relationship (Fidler et al., 2012). A lengthy court process puts undue strain on all involved, and can often spur an escalation of the alienating behaviours (Goldberg & Goldberg, 2013). Relationships with legal advisers often contribute to a negative experience for the parents involved (Baker, 2010). Many parents withdraw before this stage, reluctantly accepting the loss of their child in the face of emotional and financial burden, and dread of a lengthy court case, with the almost certain knowledge that matters will probably deteriorate (Hunt & Macleod, 2008; Lebow, 2013).

There is limited research into the lived experience of the alienated parent. Vassiliou and Cartwright's (2001) small scale research ($n = 6$) explored the thoughts and feelings of alienated parents. Findings included sabotaged relationships with children; loss of parental role and power; dissatisfaction with the legal support and mental health profession. Avitia's (2011) unpublished phenomenological doctoral research suggested themes of rejection, sabotaged contact, loss of parental role, denigration by their children, former partner's control, lack of support, damaged relationships, emotional distress and an unfair adversarial court system.

2. Method

Each parent's experience is unique, shaped by very specific, personal circumstances. Yet there is also a shared identity of an alienated parent.

The shared identity is constructed through engagement and interaction with others and systems. The full study into the experience of alienated parents in the UK employed a mixed methods approach. Demographic data was collected by means of a questionnaire (Table 1) and is analysed elsewhere (Whitcombe, 2016b). Secondly a *Q analysis* enabled a consideration of shared intersubjective experiences. In a *Q study*, participants are presented with a pre-defined set of statements (the *Q-set*) related to the study theme. Each participant sorts the *Q-set* statements along a continuum from disagree to agree, forcing their responses into a distribution grid. The level of constraint when statements that are felt to be of equal value must be differentiated to fit the given grid diminishes potential effects due to biased responses. Subsequent analysis ascertains patterns (factors) based on shared viewpoints and the intersubjective experiences of the participants (Watts & Stenner, 2012). A six factor *Q analysis* solution, representing 48% of the study variance is reported and discussed elsewhere (Whitcombe, 2016a).

Table 1 - Alienated Parents Questionnaire Data

<i>Participants</i>	<i>n=54</i>	<i>Male=47</i>	<i>Female=7</i>				
<i>Geographic location</i>	<i>England=42</i>	<i>Wales=5</i>	<i>Scotland=7</i>				
Parental responsibility	Yes = 44	No = 10					
False allegations of domestic violence	Yes = 36	No = 18					
False allegations of child abuse	Yes = 44	No = 10					
Legal proceedings	Yes = 51	No = 3					
Other party broke Court order repeatedly	Yes = 38	No/NA = 16					
Current direct contact with child	Yes = 12	No = 42					
Current indirect contact with child	Yes = 20	No = 34					
Child has any contact with participant's family	Yes = 15	No = 39					
<i>Time since last direct contact</i>							
< 1 month	1-3 months	3-6 months	6-12 months	1-2 years	2-3 years	3-5 years	5+ years
12	5	2	5	4	7	9	10
<i>Have you tried mediation?</i>							
Yes – it was beneficial		Yes – it was not beneficial		No – my ex-partner refused		No	
1		13		33		7	

An integral aspect of a Q study is interpretation of the emergent factors in light of the individual participant justifications for their choices (Watts & Stenner, 2012). In this study, participants completed a written account of their decision. In view of the limited previous research into the experience of alienated parents, the researcher wished to ensure an opportunity to capture any experience which participants did not feel was sufficiently surveyed in the demographic questionnaire and Q study. To this end, participants were offered a free text box to add further details about their experience of parental alienation.

2.1 Participants

A strategic approach to participant recruitment was employed to capture the range of experiences which may potentially exist in this heterogeneous population of parents. As the lack of a shared language and general awareness of parental alienation was evident from the literature search and the researcher's experience, examples of alienating behaviours were presented to potential participants as a reference point. The aim was to recruit parents who identified themselves as having been, or in the process of being, alienated from their child.

The sample size was determined by the Q study; 40-60 participants were required (Watts & Stenner, 2012). To be eligible for inclusion, participants were required to be parents, aged 18 years or older, resident in the UK and to consider themselves as having been subject to parental alienation. Participant recruitment was supported through three charitable organisations who work with separated parents. Participation from a broader and more geographically dispersed population of alienated parents was encouraged through the social media site, *Twitter*. Fifty four participants, 47 males and 7 females, completed the study. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Teesside University.

2.2 Data Analysis

An initial review of the study's raw data and the *Q analysis*, identified considerable consensus, suggesting a more homogenous population than had been anticipated, or significant key shared experiences. In considering this consensus, the researcher decided to conduct an exploratory supplementary analysis of the text data. All submitted texts and narratives provided by participants in the justification of their Q sort, together with any additional commentary, were included in the analysis. Of the 54 participants, 48

completed the justification of their Q sort and 47 took the opportunity to share their experience of parental alienation.

While the quantitative data and *Q analysis* evidenced many aspects of the participants' experiences, the unusually lengthy optional additional narrative contributed by the majority of participants suggested that the Q study may not have enabled participants to give a full account of their lived experience. The researcher felt a duty to the participants to fully engage with the supplementary data and additionally consider the lived experience possibly not fully captured in the *Q analysis*.

As a counselling psychologist, a reflective-scientist practitioner, the researcher had immersed herself in the raw data at the outset, to explore the sense the participants were making of their experience. In conducting the *Q analysis*, appropriate bracketing and distancing enabled a more objective interpretation of the factors in light of the entirety of the data – demographic, factor analysis, plus narrative. A return to immersion in the data was felt to be appropriate as the first step in a non-specific phenomenological analysis to elicit further experiences of the participant parents (von Eckartsberg, 1998; Wertz, 2005).

In immersion and “dwelling” with the data, and discussion with two qualified counselling psychologists, an overwhelming sense of “helplessness” or “powerlessness” was apparent. This was identified as a transference like response to the participants' experience as expressed through their own words.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 *Q Analysis*

The six emergent factors in the *Q analysis* portrayed pictures of alienated parents at various stages of their journey. These are fully explored elsewhere (Whitcombe, 2016a) but included in brief here to aid discussion. The factors are:

- Narrative A – *moving on, reluctantly accepting the loss of a child despite ongoing fears for their child's psychological well-being*
- Narrative B – *a confident, concerned parent, feeling powerless in a biased, abusive system*
- Narrative C – *psychological distress, guilt and an uncertain future*
- Narrative D – *a worried parent struggling to maintain a connection*

- Narrative E – *optimistic, despite emotional distress and their child's barriers*
- Narrative F – *measured, yet hopeful, acceptance based on an understanding of the process.*

A great deal of consensus between the 54 participants in the study was evident from the raw Q sort data; there was a dominance of five of the Q set statements in the extremes of the individual Q sorts.

- Statement 32: *the legal process or Cafcass further alienated or damaged my child* (agreed by 39 participants, 14 rating this response as +4 or +5)
- Statement 29: *I feel as though the authorities or legal system are fair, unbiased or supportive of me* (disagreed with by 48 participants, 25 rating this response as -4 or -5)
- Statement 34: *I found the expert witness, Cafcass or police to be biased by information given by my former partner* (agreed with by 39 participants, 12 rating this response as +4 or +5)
- Statement 80: *My ex-partner wants to delete me/my family from my child's life* (agreed with by 45 participants, 21 rating this response as +4 or +5)
- Statement 7: *I have no concerns about my child's mental/emotional/psychological health* (disagreed with by 46 participants, 32 rating this as -4 or -5).

3.2 *Powerless*

An underpinning pervasive sense of “powerlessness” emerged from the narrative data and supported the *Q analysis* solution from the primary data analysis. This is readily evident in the words of the participants.

«I'm fighting with both hands behind my back» [P10].

«I feel completely impotent about the matter» [P41].

«When you are at logger heads in a system that you cannot compete against, its [sic] like having a team of David Beckham [sic] when your team comprises of Roy Orbiston» [sic] [P18].

3.3 *Powerless in the legal and social care system*

In considering the source of this felt and expressed powerlessness, many comments referred to engagement with the Court, the court advisory and

support services and child safeguarding and welfare bodies. A majority of study participants (51 out of 54) had engaged in family law proceedings. Many expressed a view that the Court failed to ensure that its own orders were complied with, either in a timely manner or in some cases, at all. There was a sense of frustration, even anger, that the other parent seemed to be above the Law. There is an implied belief that the Court was complicit in maintaining a forced separation between parent and child.

«The court does not seem able to enforce contact and shared parenting order swiftly and decisively in my experience. My case was always handled politely by the District Judge but the mother consistently sabotaged any efforts to resolve the matter» [P41].

«Unless the alienating parent starts to cooperate (by choice or compulsion) there is nothing the alienated parent can do to break the alienation. Until the courts realise this, alienated parents are condemned to a life away from their child(ren) – and the children are denied one of their parents, effectively sanctioned by the court system» [P31].

«I believe the speed of the court process has made the situation worse. The actions of the court to not act on the repeated breach of court orders» [P49].

Thirty eight participants reported their ex-partner had repeatedly broken one or more of the Court orders in place (Table 1). In Avitia's (2011) study, four of her nine non-custodial parents perceived the judicial process to negate their continued involvement in their child's life, particularly evidenced by lack of enforcement when visitation was sabotaged. Harman (2016) and colleagues' study provides a useful perspective on 58 alienating behaviours as surveyed through 126 separated couples. While 31% of parents stated that their ex-partner had broken Court orders for contact, only 9.5% of parents admitted to doing so. The sample here was a general sample of separated parents.

As well as the breach of Court orders, there was frustration related to the raising of false allegations of child abuse. Participants suggested that allegations without basis served to interrupt or frustrate contact and cast them in a negative light. Frustration extended to the lack of consequences for the parent reporting false allegations.

«My ex persisted with false allegations which involved social services and police investigation. These findings, were, of course that there was no evidence. No action was taken against my ex wife» [P10].

« I am a childcare professional who was employed by social services – I was accused of emotionally damaging my children as I'm a 'control freak' according to my ex, she also accused me of being a child molester yet nobody has contacted the

police or my employer (I work with children) this was all to try stop contact with the kids» [P17].

Thirty six participants reported that they had been subject to false allegations of domestic violence and 44 reported false allegations of physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect against their child (Table 1). The presence of false allegations is a key feature in the literature (Baker, 2007; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Bow et al., 2009; Weir, 2011). In Harman and colleagues' study, 18.3% of parents reported being subject to false allegations of child abuse and 7.1% of parents admitted to making such false allegations (Harman et al., 2016).

In the UK, any allegations usually result in the immediate cessation of contact while safeguarding and fact finding are undertaken. Unable to see their child, parents experience a presumption of guilt and a need to prove their innocence. When investigations are completed, the absence of contact renders the resumption of meaningful relationships more difficult and unlikely; alienation is perpetuated and re-enforced (Clarkson & Clarkson, 2007; Fidler et al., 2012; Johnston, 2005). There is a sense of unjust power imbalance. Those that made unfounded allegations are rarely subject to any meaningful reprimand or repercussion (Avitia, 2011; Hunt & Macleod, 2008; Weir, 2011).

Powerlessness is evident in the dejection and erosion of hope as parents seek the assistance of the Court, only to be treated as a threat to their children. The literature suggests minimal recognition of the impact of such treatment of parents on their emotional well-being and functioning (Baker, 2010).

«The only glimmer of hope that you have is that the courts will help you. When in reality they do the opposite. You treated as a monster not a person, someone who hates and not loves, someone who harms and not nurtures, a taker not a provider, someone who is evil not kind, someone who is violent and not gentle, a potential threat instead of a human being» [P14].

«I have been viewed and treated like a bad person, feel as if I am on trial. I have known criminals be treated better. I served 13 years in the police service and I am appalled by the “system”» [P25].

In the face of treatment as a potential abuser by the Court and statutory agencies, frustration and helplessness exacerbates. These parents are informing the Court and statutory agencies that they are worried about their children, yet they feel their concerns are dismissed without appropriate investigation.

«My daughter is only 13 months old. CAFCASS initially said that she was too young to experience any emotional/psychological problems, including parental alienation, and contact with her father (me) was not important until the age of 4» [P34].

«Cafcass had the power to end my son's abuse but through lack of insight could not see what was happening» [P23].

Although it is not possible from this data to objectively assess these parents' concerns, the literature suggests that there is a likelihood that they will be well-founded. Retrospective studies with adults indicate long-term issues with mental health, substance misuse and relationship functioning (Baker & Verrocchio, 2016; Baker, 2005b, 2007; Bernet et al., 2015).

Not only do these parents feel unable to keep their child safe, they feel unable to parent their child in any sense, as though they have been denied a right to parent.

«I have been told by CAFCASS Guardian and also Contact Centre Manager "to forget my relationship and give up... walk away till the children are ready to see you, if they ever are"» [P3].

«[I] was stripped of my obligation to protect my child by the authorities, cafcass and judges baristers [sic] you name it I was stopped from carrying out my obligations as a mum» [P23].

This sense of removal of parental rights and responsibilities is evident in the studies into the experiences of alienated parents (Avitia, 2011; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001) and in practitioner accounts of working with alienated parents (Goldberg & Goldberg, 2013).

Finally, powerlessness related to the socio-legal arena arises from being silenced and a lack of transparency.

«The fact that you do not have a voice and the court has shown no regard to me is damning» [P25].

«Moreover, Cafcass does not disclose the process and therefore it is virtually impossible to contest their decision» [P54].

«It may be seen as wrong but due to Cafcass being at times more unreasonable and liars than my kids mother I have secretly recorded all my dealing with Cafcass. Anyone who listens to these will see how shocking and unfit these women are» [P46].

This finding was not evident in previous studies with alienated parents and it needs to be considered whether this is a particular feature of the British legal process. There are stringent rules regarding the disclosure of case details both during and after litigation (Her Majesty's Court Service, 2009). Ostensibly, the restriction has been imposed to protect children. However,

there are concerns that the lack of transparency and limited publication of anonymised judgements or case data raises issues around the audit and evaluation of services, and the fair and just application of the Law. These issues are currently being explored through the Transparency Project who believe that there is a need for good quality, publicly accessible information to enable informed public debate which is not currently supported by the media reporting of cases (Reed, 2016).

The aim of this study was not to determine an objective truth. The researcher wished to gain an understanding of the subjective experience of alienated parents in the UK. The participants' narratives are an account of their remembered experience, shaped by the passage of time, exposure to experiences, interactions and events, the re-telling of their story. Expressed and experienced feelings, thoughts and beliefs incorporate a host of psychological processes, including psychological defence mechanisms. It is likely, at least for some of the participants, that these defence mechanisms include denial, projection and displacement.

An unconscious need to project blame elsewhere, such as onto the socio-legal process, its practitioners and personnel, might be expected. Given the demographics of the study population an urge to project blame is understandable. However, the similarity of experience identified in the *Q analysis* and the narrative accounts above, proffers some support for the active role of the socio-legal process in instilling some sense of powerlessness in these parents.

These findings substantiate those in the literature. Baker's (2010) survey of 74 alienated parents suggested dissatisfaction with legal representatives, driven by lack of understanding about PA and any understanding of the psychological distress brought about by their fractured relationship with their child and the on-going court battles.

3.4 Powerless to Parent; Powerless to Protect

The felt sense of powerless experienced by parents extended beyond the socio-legal system. Parents expressed their helplessness in protecting their children from immediate and enduring mental ill health and difficulties with social relationships and functioning.

«I fear terribly for the psychological consequences to him – when he does realise what has actually happened here. – I am very worried that his personal relationships will suffer because he's been taught to hate women» [P1].

«I am so fearful of the long term mental health damage my children will have due to one moment they had a loving father, the next they are told he is a danger and they should hate him as their mother does» [P8].

Beyond the external situating of blame, guilt and self-blame feature in some parents' narratives.

«Knowing your own children have been so deeply emotionally abused and there is nothing you can do about it is extremely painful to live with» [P39].

«I blame myself for not being strong minded enough. I badly want to provide for him, be there for him, show him life skills, show him love of a Father and create happiness for him» [P36].

Externalising blame extends beyond the Court and social care systems. Blame and disbelief is directed at the other parent accompanied by a feeling of helplessness and inability to address and overcome their ex-partner's behaviours.

«Their mother feels it is in their best interest not to see me as it disrupts their almost perfect lifestyle. I was treated badly and hardly acknowledged by my ex partner and the children were made to walk away from me» [P7].

«My ex husband has made it his sole purpose to exclude me and my family from my children's lives. My children are brainwashed to believe that they are better off having no contact with me or their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins and that we are all bad people who want to destroy their lives» [13].

These aspects of parents' experiences support findings in previous studies (Avitia, 2011; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). In more moderate and severe cases of alienation, the desire to remove an absent parent from a child's life features more prominently (Fidler et al., 2012) and a recent study suggests that this may also be a more generalised feature of relationship breakdown (Harman et al., 2016).

3.5 *Parallel powerlessness*

Although this study elicited experiences from alienated parents, there is a sense that the emergent powerlessness is matched by a parallel powerlessness experienced by the social-legal services and practitioners. This manifests itself in a reluctance to enforce Court orders, or to impose sanctions when they are broken (Hunt & Macleod, 2008). It needs to be considered whether a lack of understanding about alienation results in inappropriate interventions, or failure to intervene as is identified in the literature (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Ellis, 2008; Fidler et al., 2012; Weir & Sturge, 2006). Without a good knowledge of appropriate assessment procedures

and the availability of suitable interventions, the path of least resistance is often the one followed – no intervention – with little cognisance of the potential lifelong ramifications for the child.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This phenomenological analysis paints a picture of an alienated parent who has serious concerns about their child's welfare, is unable to carry out their parental responsibility or share in their child's life. They have sought to address their concerns through the avenues available, in which they feel unheard, disbelieved and powerless. British parents, and by extension their children, seem disadvantaged by a lack of understanding and awareness of parental alienation in the country. Whilst some parents are beginning to make sense of their experience as an alienated parent, the failure to adopt the common terminology "parental alienation" negates a full understanding of the dynamic by legal, social care and mental health professionals. There is little or no recognition of the complexity of alienation and its differentiation derived from issues of interpersonal and systemic dynamics, developmental processes, personality traits, individual characteristics and contextual and environmental factors. This poor understanding likely leads to some collusion with alienation and a failure to provide appropriate interventions, including early interventions. On an individual and social justice level, this poor understanding may lead to unsafe legal judgements which remain obscured by the lack of transparency in family court proceedings.

There is a need in the UK to open up discussion and consideration of these issues. The sense of power to be gained from a co-constructed understanding and meaning of a concept is not to be underestimated. For parents, the assignation of a label to their experience, can facilitate empowerment. Acknowledgement and validation enables them to research, to better understand, to seek help and cease to be alone. A more informed, shared understanding of parental alienation amongst practitioners, professionals and on an organisational level, has the potential to improve outcomes for children and families and reduce the longer term burdens on the socio-legal and health services. Further British research would enable a strengthened evidence base on effective, appropriate post-separation interventions in these complex cases better informed policy and practice, both on an organisational and national level.

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