

# **Powerless: the lived experience of alienated parents in the UK**

This is a summary of the findings of a research study conducted as an Advanced Independent Work in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology awarded by Teesside University. It was successfully defended in a viva-voce examination on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2014.

Several papers drawing on the findings of the Advanced Independent Work are in the process of being prepared for submission to appropriate peer-reviewed journals in the fields of psychology, family law and research methodology. Queries relating to this summary of the findings or the full study can be addressed to the researcher (details below).

These findings will be presented at the British Psychological Society Division of Counselling Psychology Conference on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2014 in a Pecha Kucha presentation entitled:

**Giving voice to the silenced narratives of alienated parents**

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## Abstract

Parental alienation is a phrase often used in the context of high conflict relationship breakdown. A key feature of parental alienation is 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 in the absence of any abuse or violence. Whilst there is recognition of the long term psychological impact on the child, there is little research into the sense alienated parents make of their lives when rejected. Furthermore, in the UK there is little open recognition or apparent understanding of parental alienation by those with whom families engage in the course of their relationship breakdown. This research seeks to explore the experiences of alienated parents in the UK.

Using a Q methodology approach, the subjective and intersubjective experiences of 54 British alienated parents emerge in 6 narratives, enriched by personal quotes and supporting demographic information. In addition to the concrete, explicit findings, a pervasive sense of powerlessness emerges through the subtext. This powerlessness resonates with the lack of power that children engaged in an alienation dynamic also feel. Moreover, powerlessness derived from insufficient knowledge and understanding by those engaged in private family law cases could perpetuate the alienation process as experienced by these parents.

Although this research does not seek to generalise, the findings paint a picture of the alienated parent in this study. This parent has serious concerns about their child's welfare, wishes to be able to carry out their parental responsibility and share in their child's life. They have pursued their concerns through the avenues available yet feel unheard, disbelieved, unfairly treated and powerless in their dealings with the family justice system.

*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].*

## **Study aims**

The aim of this study was to explore the subjective and intersubjective experiences of alienated parents in the UK. Whilst not seeking an absolute, substantive truth, it hoped to enable an understanding of how parents who had been subjected to unjustified rejection or denigration by their child managed and made sense of their lives. All aspects of life were included in the research study – work, relationships, mental health, interaction with the socio-legal system, personal thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

## **Parental alienation in the UK**

Here in the UK, the issue of parental alienation is contentious, despite a current consensus elsewhere (Rueda, 2004) where there is a continuum of views about the causes and driving factors (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Delage, 2010; Gardner, 1998; Johnston, 2005; Johnston, Walters & Olesen, 2005; Rand, 1997; Summers & Summers, 2006; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Waldron & Joanis, 1996; Warshak, 2001; Warshak, 2003; Ziropiannis, 2001). Whilst British practitioners in many fields – the legal profession, social care services and mental health – acknowledge on some level that alienation does occur, there is no consensus on how to deal with the problem, either in the legal arena or in the therapeutic one (King, 2002). The English and Welsh courts are bound by the principle that a child benefits from contact with both parents and that this should be the norm unless “exceptional circumstances” are present. This has recently been re-iterated and re-enforced in the Children and Families Act (2014). When post-separation inter-parental acrimony results in a child’s reluctance to have contact with one parent, this seems to be viewed as sufficient exceptional circumstance for the contact to be immediately stopped, thus perpetuating and entrenching any alienation (Hobbs, 2006).

More recently, there is evidence to suggest that the tide is beginning to turn in the UK, and at least there is increasing recognition and willingness to intervene in the higher courts in England. High court judge the Honourable Mr Justice Coleridge (2012) has affirmed the recognition of parental alienation and its damaging effect on children, suggesting robust, swift intervention where one parent repeatedly frustrates contact. In a recent High Court judgement, Mrs Justice Parker harshly rebuked social workers and acknowledged the psychological damage caused to children by parental manipulation and alienating behaviours:

Parents who obstruct the relationship with either mother or father are inflicting untold damage on their children and it's about time the professionals truly understood this. I regard parental manipulation of children, of which I distressingly see an enormous amount, as exceptionally harmful.

(Mrs Justice Parker cited in Barrett, 2013, para.5)

In the lower courts, however, it is difficult to assess the situation, though it is thought to lag a considerable way behind. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the concept of parental alienation is perceived as “American twaddle” and is dismissed out of hand by the judiciary, solicitors and Cafcass officers when raised in the majority of family proceedings. It is difficult to refute these suggestions due to the closed nature of the UK family courts, whereby disclosure of any court material other than by a judge renders the informant in contempt of court.

## **The study**

54 parents who identified themselves as alienated parents – either by reference to behaviours they had experienced with their child or former partner, or by their personal understanding of the term “parental alienation” – took part in the study. Although these parents identified themselves in this way, they are not a homogeneous group. 54 parents completed the study - 47 fathers and 7 mothers - aged between 32 and 66 years of age living across England, Wales and Scotland. They were recruited through social media channels and parent support organisations.

The study was conducted using Q methodology. Prior to the main study, the researcher aimed to identify a comprehensive and broad discourse on the lives of alienated parents in the UK. In light of the limited peer-reviewed literature on British experiences, focus groups with alienated parents were held to gather personal accounts. Together with an exploration of parents' personal blogs, support sites and social media, these accounts contributed to the concourse of the phenomenological experiences of alienated parents in the UK. This concourse was sampled to arrive at an 80 statement Q set. During the Q sort process, parents were asked to rank these statements in order of strength of agreement or disagreement. This sorting process is constrained by the use of a standard distribution grid, in essence forcing participants to give greater consideration to their responses: which aspects of their experience do they feel most strongly about. This Q approach enabled the shared experiences of parents to emerge, enriched by individual narratives and

contextualised with demographic and concrete data collected in a supplementary questionnaire.

## Powerless

During the analysis process an overwhelming and pervading sense of powerlessness emerged.

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

*I feel completely impotent about the matter [P41].*

The lack of power that these parents experience is implied through their experiences with, and perceptions of, the socio-legal system. There is a sense that the legal process is itself powerless, unable or unwilling to enforce the repeatedly broken contact orders which it has sanctioned. Forty two of the participants reported that they initially had direct contact with their child when their relationship broke down, and that contact broke down at a later date. Fifty one (94%) participants had engaged in family law proceedings regarding their child and the full range of Section 8 orders feature in the findings. Thirty eight (70%) reported that their ex-partner repeatedly broke one or more of the court orders in place. As such, many parents feel that their former partner holds all the power.

*The resident parent has all the power to influence the children and if they are predisposed can and do block any contact [P54].*

There is currently no direct contact for 42 participants (78%) and 30 (56%) have not seen their child for more than a year. There is no indirect contact– no letters, emails, telephone calls, texts or cards – for 34 (63%). In 39 cases (72%), the child has no contact with the participant's family.

This failure to ensure proscribed contact, together with the perception that the personnel involved in their cases lacked understanding and failed to act on their concerns for their child is evident in the majority of participant responses. Thirty nine participants agreed with statement *The legal process or Cafcass further alienated or damaged my child*, 14 of them rating this response strongly.

*The courts have to learn to recognise cases like this, where if they don't intervene, things will be very bad [22].*

*Cafcass had the power to end my sons abuse but through lack of insight could not see what was happening [23].*

*The impact of CAFCASS was severe and damaging to them [30].*

This powerlessness is further evident in the perception of bias experienced with the legal process. Both mothers and fathers reported prejudice, including gender bias. Forty eight participants disagreed with the statement *I feel as though the authorities or legal system are fair, unbiased or supportive of me*, 25 of them rating this as a strong disagreement . It is worth re-iterating here the nature of a Q study. Participants are not merely indicating their strength of opinion about this statement, they are additionally saying that this was one of the mostly strongly held views in their experience of parental alienation.

Thirty nine participants agreed with statement *I found the expert witness, Cafcass or police to be biased by information given by my former partner*, 12 of them strongly agreeing.

*... it is becoming increasingly more common for courts to judge mothers and believe false allegations against them by ex-partners. Mothers are judged more harshly than fathers and it is deemed unacceptable to simply be a "good enough" mother [P13].*

*...the court infrastructure is set up to ensure that the child is "owned by", or "the property of" the mother. Parenting is perceived only to be the responsibility of the mother, whilst the father is only expected to be the "ATM" [P28].*

These findings on engagement with the socio-legal process and their personnel are particularly important and align with findings found in the literature (Avitia, 2011; Baker, 2010).

This sense of powerlessness features also when false allegations are considered. The issue of false allegations of child abuse is a dominant theme in cases of parental alienation. In other countries where allegations of abuse are made during custody cases, these have been found to be false, unfounded or unsubstantiated in between 9% and 50% of cases (Brown et al., 1998; Faller & DeVoe, 1995; Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990; Trocme & Bala, 2005). Where parental alienation is a factor, or an alleged factor, rates of false allegations of child abuse have been found to be in the region of 54% (Kopetski, Rand & Rand, 2006).

Thirty six participants reported that they had been subject to false allegations of domestic violence against their ex-partner and 44 reported false allegations of physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect against their child. In private family law proceedings in England and Wales, a child's welfare is paramount. Allegations of abuse or neglect usually result in the immediate cessation of direct contact while fact finding, safeguarding and assessments are undertaken.

Unable to see their child, parents experience a presumption of guilt and a need to prove their innocence.

*I am always having to prove why I haven't done something I have been accused of. Innocent until proven guilty? NEVER! [p4].*

The investigative process in determining the validity of any such allegation is not swift. The absence of direct contact during this period often perpetuates any alienation, rendering the resumption of meaningful relationships more difficult and unlikely. One of the key determinant factors in the perpetuation of the alienation process is time since last direct contact (Fidler et al., 2012). Here again, there is a feeling of both powerlessness and a power imbalance. Those that made unfounded or false allegations, usually the primary carer, are rarely subject to any meaningful reprimand or repercussion.

*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].*

*Have done the court trail just to have child's mother break order after order doing nothing but taking money for her doing so and making another order, the orders are a waist of space and this lady has destroyed our child education, self-esteem and over all well being with the backing of the courts [P20].*

In more moderate and severe cases of alienation, the desire to remove an absent parent from a child's life features more prominently (Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013). The statement *My ex-partner wants to delete me/my family from my child's life* was agreed with by 45 of the participants, 21 strongly so. Responses in this study support the anecdotal comments that false allegations are purposefully used to fracture contact.

*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].*

The findings outlined above may suggest that these alienated parents hold a subjective concept of a vengeful, calculating former partner. The participants themselves, however, on the whole, do not similarly wish to remove their former partner from their child's life. The statement *I want to take my child away from the other parent* was disagreed with by 30 parents, 12 of whom strongly disagreed. There was a neutral response from 12 parents, and of the 12 who agreed with the statement, only 2 strongly did so.

The pervasive powerlessness also features in the lack of transparency in the private family law process. With little or no publication of anonymised case data by the courts or Cafcass, it is difficult to evaluate the underlying dynamics and arrive at more objective analysis.

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

The publication of judgements as suggested by Munby (2014) is unlikely to rectify this situation unless they are quite detailed, though recent judgements by Parker (cited in Barrett, 2013) and McFarlane (cited in Hardy, 2013) are starting to raise the issue of parents who actively deny contact.

The sense of powerlessness is also apparent as participants feel unable to uphold their responsibility as a parent or to protect their child from the threat of harm and psychological damage. The statement *I have no concerns about my child's mental/emotional/psychological health* is disagreed with by 46 of the participants, 32 strongly disagreeing.

*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].*

As is highlighted in the literature, there is evidence to suggest that children who are alienated present with more clinically significant symptoms and behaviours than other children involved in family breakdown (Johnston et al., 2009). Furthermore, over the life-course, there is a greater incidence of clinical disorder, relationship difficulties, substance misuse and core issues with identity and sense of self (Baker, 2005; Baker, 2007; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013; Denollet, Smolderen, van den Broek, & Pedersen, 2007). Although it is not possible from this data to objectively assess these parents' concerns, the literature suggests that these are likely to be well-founded.

The powerlessness experienced by the parents in this study mirrors the sense of frustration and powerlessness identified in the literature (Avitia, 2011; Baker, 2010; Goldberg & Goldberg, 2013; Johnston et al., 2009).

## **Beyond the subtext**

In addition to the overarching powerlessness theme, 6 narratives of shared experiences emerged from the Q analysis.

### Narrative A

These older parents are confident that they are good parents, though they have been prevented from carrying out their parental responsibility for a number of years. They acknowledge their child's rejection of them, perpetuated by their former partner. Yet, in some part they have worked through their ambiguous loss and grief, managing to hold on to their love for their child whilst accepting that there is no more that they can do. Their sadness and loss is evident in their narratives. Having battled for such a long time to be in their child's life to no avail, having tried their best, they have reluctantly resigned to move on. In some measure, this has enabled them to regain some sense of power or control in



aspects of their life. They maintain real fears for their child's emotional well-being and psychological development, a damage which they believe to be entrenched, perpetuated by engagement with Cafcass and the legal process, which they themselves also found to be difficult.

*5 years later the pain is still there and the real life dreams of reunion continue. I have learnt to live but a huge part of me died. I hold some hope that I will see him again one day based on research I have done but some days this feels like a pipe dream [P43].*

*He wants nothing to do with me and no 10 year old child can have this view without being influenced [P25].*

*The kids have simply put up a wall. There is quite simply nothing left for me to try, and thus I have and am moving on with my life – with some regret but a lot of sadness [P28].*

*A parent can only parent if allowed to. I have been excluded from that to both mine and their loss [P28].*

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

*There is an urgent need to address PA in the legal system. CAFCASS is untrained, and therefore their actions are detrimental to the children's interests. The impact of CAFCASS was severe, and damaging to them [P30].*

*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].*

*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].*

*The Courts just thought that time would heal. It doesn't, it just gives your ex the chance to alienate more [P22].*

*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'. The fact that you*

*do not have a voice and the court has shown no regard to me is damning [P25].*

*They [Cafcass] are simply out of date with modern parenting that involves both parents. It is easier for them to believe in the concept of a feckless father, than that of a caring father [P28].*

*I was left astounded and bereft that the court was unable to see or apparently care what was going on [P43].*

### Narrative B

In contrast to the parents above, the fathers represented by narrative B, on the whole, still have contact with their child and are confident in their child's fondness and love of them. Their child is central to their life and sense of self, and their desire to nurture, care for and protect them is evident in their findings. There are clear anxieties about their child's psychological well-being, and they believe that their child is subject to abuse by the other parent. They recognise that alienation is taking place, but they have not yet been totally rejected by their child. They believe that the legal process is perpetuating the alienation and contributing to the psychological damage of their child, as well as taking its toll on their own emotional well-being. Living with the ongoing alienation process is impacting on their work and they find it difficult or impossible to concentrate.

There is a deep sense of frustration and disappointment with the legal process, which they have also experienced to be biased and unsupportive. Most hold court orders for direct contact, yet these are repeatedly breached by their former partner. All but one of these fathers reported that they had been falsely accused of abuse against their child. They feel quite powerless to effect any change or progress and are frustrated by their experience with the bodies involved in their child's life.

*Every night they are with me we end the night with "I Love You". It's still the greatest thing my children tell me [P17].*

*I am not a bad parent. I've been and still am a very hands-on dad. I'm not a person who's walked away or shirked their responsibilities [P10].*

*I have 2 reports from an independent court appointed clinical child and adult psychologist that comments at length about her concerns for the current and future mental and physical welfare of my children [P3].*

*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].*

*I feel powerless. The trauma on my daughter has been long lasting and I feel that she may need to see a child psychologist in the future [P10].*

*I have massive concerns – my eldest states that he feels sad when bad things are said about me. I feel I am losing my children [P26].*

*Cafcass were useless, the comments made by Cafcass in court after meeting my daughter for 45 minutes destroyed 10 years of contact and court battles [P29].*

*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].*

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

*I've been through the family court system twice, it's been emotionally exhausting and nearly broke me [P10].*

*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].*

### Narrative C

A sense of psychological damage, distress and pessimism permeates narrative C. These parents have encountered considerable mental ill health; depression, anxiety and suicidal action and ideation are prominent. There is guilt and self-blame that they are unable to protect their child from emotional harm. They hold concerns about their child's psychological well-being and brainwashing, as their former partners try to remove them from their child's life. There is some sense that they would like to remove their child from the other parent. Bias in the legal system also features as does the belief that the legal process contributed to their child's alienation and their own emotional ill-health. There is little optimism for the future: a sense of emptiness and loss.

*My Ex Partner really negatively influenced my son. My son has gone through a hell of an ordeal. He was upset a lot. Hopefully is well now but due to Parental Alienation he was also so confused [P36].*

*My son is horribly brain washed, like he's in a cult. His father has taught him to be disrespectful to me in the extreme [P1].*

*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].*

*I had many thoughts of ending it all as social services were on a personal witch-hunt against me and documents proved it. I felt that I was fighting the world and could never win [P24].*

*I attempted suicide by overdose twice, self-harmed by cutting myself for 2 years, suffered with depression and anxiety and had to stop working due to my mental health [P11].*

*I have almost no hope for the future at all [P1].*

*I do not know what the future holds, feeling in limbo is about the best I can put it [P38].*

#### Narrative D

The narrative D parents experience emotional pain, loss and rejection. Living near their child and struggling to maintain a foothold and stay involved, they are frustrated by their former partner who seeks to remove them from their child's life. These parents are concerned for their child's psychological well-being and the powerlessness and frustration in being unable to fulfil their obligations is evident. This has begun to impact on their parental identity, though they do not feel themselves to be a bad parent. Other areas of their life are suffering, including their professional life where they feel in limbo. They feel that this has been perpetuated by a legal process which is unsupportive and biased.

*I realised maintaining the battle through the courts with my ex who involved my children in every aspect of proceedings which was completely inappropriate for them was continuing to damage them which I did not want any longer. I removed the "fuel from the fire" from my ex which he would have continued with otherwise to justify his beliefs and position [P39].*

*Every Day is emotional torture. This has been by far the single worst experience of my life. I reside in a limbo, waiting for the day that my children are old enough to see the truth, whilst every day worrying about how this will affect them [P2].*

*The constant shattering of your hope each time you get rejected by family court for contact is unbearable. Your confidence, drive, energy, happiness, ambition, love and passion are extinguished. Your work life is destroyed, your personal life is destroyed, you can't focus, you can't eat, you [can't] sleep, you forget how to laugh, you forget*

*how to have fun. I have not slept properly for nearly 3 years, I have lost everything [P14].*

*I moved to live as close as possible to my children in order for them to be able to have the same routine and local friends when at my house, and to make the handovers as easy as possible - also to be very close to their school. I am given no opportunity to be alone with my children by my ex-partner [P2].*

*You cannot comprehend how a former partner can betray your own children this way by denying them a loving, nurturing and ongoing relationship with you and your extended family and friends [P39].*

*I sit at home wanting to see my little boy, play with him, talk to him, help him, and just do all the things a good loving parent does [P14].*

*Having the ability to parent your own child taken away from you and losing a key part of raison d'etre changes you completely. Experiencing PA particularly as a mother devastates your life - you lose your identity and confidence as a person, partner and parent [P39].*

*I am fighting through court to see my little boy, I have sacrificed my job, my house, my partner, my money and my life to keep fighting for him. I guess that makes me a good caring parent [P14].*

### Narrative E

There is a conflicting suggestion of optimism, yet a sense of powerlessness, rejection and pain in the presence of their child's coldness and barriers in narrative E. Parents feel abandoned and want their child to be aware of their efforts to maintain contact, though they fear that their child will forget their relationship. While they see their child, they do not feel able to carry out their parental obligations. It almost feels as though a sense of over-riding hope and optimism is *necessary* in order to make sense of their status quo. They have become financially diminished due to legal costs and have possibly relinquished social connections in order to move closer to their child.

*I have little contact with my son's school, even after 4 years of continued meetings etc. about the issues. They promise to improve things but I still have made little progress [P5].*

*I am not able to give him life advice, to share his concerns and worries, to know how he really feels about the situation, about his school, to take him to the school, to take him to the doctor, to share*

*his other activities. I am starting again legal proceedings in the hope that will help to re-start contact [P44].*

*My son will also not speak to me when he is in her company. His mother will put her hand on him, as soon as he sees me. He acts like I am not there. He glances at me but when I smile back he looks away [P5].*

*I feel there is a high risk he might opt to keep further to himself and further away from me. i.e. there will be no relationship to remember [P44].*

*My son has made it clear that he wants to see me more, yet his mother has told him that he sees me too much as it is [P5].*

### Narrative F

Despite their fears of loss, and the evident emotional distance, the parents in this narrative seem to be functioning well in other aspects of their lives. The narrative is suggestive of parents who have some acceptance of their situation firmly rooted in an explicit understanding of parental alienation. There is a sense that any blame for the alienation lies without, the legal process and their former partner perpetuating this. These parents may have cut their losses with regards to a perceived biased legal process. Although, they feel that they are good parents, they are unable to carry out their parental responsibilities. They continue to fight to be a presence in their child's life but fear that they may already have lost them.

*Unfortunately, my children have been let down by their Mother, her family and the entire legal system [P21].*

*Parental alienation and criminalisation of fathers is frequently abused by mothers and supported by the current legal system and government offices [P33].*

*Before you know it the child has been enmeshed in the hurtful lie's by the other parent, the child is lost to that parent [P20].*

*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].*

*From the first court hearing anything that is said fell on deaf ears but all that said and stated in court by mother was believed [P20].*

*I've fought through a gravely inept and sexist judicial system to find that Mothers can lie about everything and court orders are meaningless to them. She even got my boys to lie to a Judge about me [ ] sadly nothing is done..... [P21].*

*The reality is that I might never see her again. It's not what I want, but I have to accept that it is a possibility [P31].*

## **Limitations of the study**

Purposive recruitment was through two main routes. Firstly, through support organisations and secondly on a Twitter feed. In both cases, the initial communication stated that the research was looking at the issue of parental alienation. This recruitment process is likely to have recruited participants who had some understanding of parental alienation, and had defined their post separation relationship in these terms.

As outlined above, in Q methodology studies, participants are “forced” to consider and rank their responses in a standard distribution grid. Some participants contacted the researcher stating that it was “impossible” to complete the Q sort, because they couldn’t place the responses where they wanted – typically they had very strong opinions which they could not, or were not prepared to, differentiate between and rank. This difficulty was not identified in the piloting stage, and may suggest the strength of feeling of those who wished to participate in the study, or indicate a poorly constructed Q set.

There were some difficulties relating to the use of the on-line FlashQ program. Whilst this enabled easy access throughout the country, some issues with the program became apparent, despite prior testing and piloting. Steps were taken with individual respondents to overcome these issues where possible, or to offer a manual study as an alternative.

Despite these limitations, 54 completed Q sorts satisfy the requirement of this study for 40-60 participants.

## **Implications and recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest a number of implications relating to mental health, the family justice system and social injustice. Parents hold very real concerns about their child’s mental health; these concerns accord with findings in relation to the long term outcomes

for alienated children in the literature. Despite holding parental responsibility, they are prevented from fulfilling their obligations to take care of their child and ensuring that they receive any specialist support or input that they may require. Their concerns for their child and their enforced separation from them also impacts on their own well-being.

Parents feel powerless. It is clear from the responses that the majority of parents held court orders for contact with their child, which were often repeatedly broken without apparent redress by the family justice system. Furthermore, false allegations of child abuse and domestic violence are prominent, again resulting in disrupted contact. This fractured contact sanctioned by the family justice system by its action and inaction is likely to further any alienation, rendering a successful outcome for children and their parents more unlikely.

In most family court proceedings, and associated processes such as those involving Cafcass, there appears to be little transparency. Court appearances and interviews are not recorded; discussion of the case outside of the court is prohibited; there appears to be no means of evaluating consistency or determining whether judgements ensure the best welfare outcomes for the child. Parents clearly feel unheard, disbelieved and unsupported in this process.

This study suggests a lack of knowledge and understanding about parental alienation in the UK. This resonates with the researcher's own experience when raising the topic with mental health professionals, practitioner psychologists, colleagues in social care and education. Failure to recognise an alienation dynamic, and differentiate it from justifiable estrangement, may lead to inappropriate therapeutic or judicial intervention or collusion, with potentially long term detrimental repercussions for the families and individuals concerned.

At this time of upheaval in the family justice system, it is imperative that parental alienation is now given a place on the research and policy agenda to ensure the safety and psychological well-being of children, their right to a relationship with both parents and the eradication of social injustice. Evaluation of knowledge and understanding of those who work with children and families in conflicted family breakdown would be beneficial to highlight any gaps, to identify training and professional development needs. Multi-disciplinary research with the social care and legal professions, with a focus on conflicted private family law cases, would enable a more holistic picture of parental alienation in the UK. Furthermore, collaborative research would enable a focus on effective case management, legal and therapeutic approaches aimed at both early intervention and addressing persistent, entrenched alienation. Systematic studies of appropriate interventions such as those that are being conducted in other countries would be an important feature of any such research.



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