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# The Not-Forgotten Child: Alienated Adult Children's Experience of Parental Alienation

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the experience of adults who had experienced parental alienation during childhood. Ten alienated adult children participated in 60 to 90-minute semi-structured interviews about their experience of parental alienation. Using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis framework, seven themes were identified. Participants described experiencing abuse perpetrated by the alienating parent. They described experiencing anxiety, depression, low self-worth, guilt, attachment problems, difficulty in other relationships, and reduced or delayed educational and career attainment that they attributed to their experience of parental alienation. These results demonstrated that children's exposure to parental alienation may have lifelong ramifications for their psychological well-being.

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Parental alienation (PA) is said to occur when a child rejects a parent and resists contact with them, without reasonable cause (Haines et al., 2020). An alienated child expresses unjustified negative emotions regarding the targeted parent (Kelly & Johnston, 2005). This alienation is purportedly triggered by the alienating parent (AP), who consciously or unconsciously, engages in behaviors that damage the relationship between the child and the targeted parent (TP), such as demeaning them in front of the child, corroding the child's relationship with the TP (Baker, 2005, 2007; Warshak, 2015). Importantly, the breakdown of the child's relationship with the TP contrasts with its former positive or at least acceptable nature (Baker, 2005, 2007).

Some researchers have suggested that PA tactics constitute a form of child abuse (Haines et al., 2020; Harman et al., 2018). Essentially, alienated children (ACs) are implicitly or explicitly told by the AP that: they are the only parent who loves them, that their other parent is harmful to them in some way, and also unforgivably absent, and that seeking a relationship with the TP threatens the child's relationship with the AP (Baker &

Chambers, 2011). According to Baker and Chambers (2011), such emotional/psychological abuse can result in the child internalizing a sense of worthlessness and conditional value.

It has been proposed that disruptions to the attachment system explain the negative sequelae experienced by alienated children (Haines et al., 2020). Attachment theory explains that it is the quality of early parent-child interactions that lead to the ability to emotionally regulate, integrate a sense of self, and the capacity for fostering secure relationships in later life (Bowlby, 1982). When the parent-child attachment bond has been damaged as a result of alienating behaviors, ACs are unable to form a stable and healthy internal working model of themselves and develop an internal working model of others as untrustworthy (Haines et al.).

A number of researchers have reported an association between experiencing PA and poor psychological functioning in alienated children (Baker, 2005, 2007; Baker & Verrocchio, 2016; Godbout & Parent, 2012). Baker and Verrocchio (2016) found adults who were raised by an AP had elevated anxiety and depression levels. Research has also shown that alienated adult children experience low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, trust issues, alienation from their own children, divorce, and lack of identity and sense of belonging that the adult alienated children attribute to being parented by alienating mothers and fathers (Baker, 2005, 2006, 2007). Research into the experience of targeted children has largely come from the work of Amy Baker and her colleagues. This research has provided important insights into the experience of alienated children; however, these studies are limited by the fact that the participants were all US citizens. Therefore, further research is needed in order to contribute to the growing knowledge of parental alienation. Specifically, further research employing evidence-based qualitative methods with a diverse sample is necessary.

The aim of the present study is to qualitatively investigate the lived experience of adults who were alienated from a parent during childhood as a result of the behaviors of an alienating parent. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and type of analysis to be used, hypothesis testing will not be conducted (Patton, 1990).

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Ten individuals participated in a semi-structured interview focused on their experience of PA. Both females and males aged 18 years and over who were alienated from a parent as children or adolescents were recruited internationally, through global social media platforms such as Facebook and international PA support groups. The researchers posted the following

advert on these social media sites: “*Were you alienated from a parent when you were a child? Did you feel like one of your parents turned you against your other parent when you were a child? This study is looking at parental alienation from the point of view of adults who were alienated from a parent during childhood.*”

Interested participants were invited to contact the researchers via email for more information about the study. Eligibility to participate in the study was based on the individual identifying as having experienced PA as a child or adolescent. Prospective participants were screened using the Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ; Baker & Chambers, 2011) to determine eligibility. The BSQ is 20-items and asks respondents to rate how frequently they were exposed to alienating behaviors using a 5-point scale. An example item is: “*Made comments to me that fabricated or exaggerated the other parent’s negative qualities while rarely saying anything positive about that parent.*” Baker and Chambers (2011) report the BSQ has good internal consistency,  $\alpha = .93$ .

Participants were aged between 26 and 54 years ( $M = 35.1$  ( $SD = 9.85$ ); eight were female and two were male. See [Table 1](#) for a summary of the sample.

### **Procedure**

This study was approved by the Tasmanian Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee. Prior to interviews, all participants were provided with an information sheet detailing the nature of the study and a consent form specifying the limits of confidentiality.

Once participants provide their informed consent to take part in the research, they participated in 60 to 90 minute semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow for individual differences that emerged during interview based on the unique situation and concerns of individual participants. During the interviews sociodemographic data were collected. All interviews were recorded on a Sony 4GB USB Notetaker (ICDPX470). The following question stems were used during the interviews:

1. Tell me about your experience with parental alienation and what it means to you now?
2. What do you think triggered the alienation? What makes you think that?
3. What sorts of tactics has the alienating parent used to alienate you from your parent?
4. What impact has the parental alienation had on you?

**Table 1.** Demographics of targeted adult children.

Gender	Current residence	Birth country	Current age	Age at separation	Alienating parent	Reunification status	Relationship status	Education level	Employment status
Female	Australia	Australia	47	2	Mother	Yes	Divorced	Tertiary	Employed
Female	Australia	Australia	54	3	Mother	Yes	Single	High School	Volunteer
Male	Thailand	UK	35	8	Father	Yes	Single	Tertiary	Employed
Female	Australia	Australia	44	10	Father	Yes	Divorced	Diploma	Student
Female	Australia	Australia	49	7	Mother	Yes	Married	Tertiary	Employed
Female	Australia	USA	26	13	Father	Yes	Single	High School	Casually employed
Female	Belgium	Belgium	44	7	Mother	Yes	Married	Tertiary	Employed
Male	Australia	UK	30	11	Mother	Yes	Single	TAFE	Casually employed
Female	Australia	UK	33	3	Father	Yes	Single	Tertiary	Student
Female	Germany	Germany	28	12	Father	Yes	In relationship	Tertiary	Student

5. How do you think your experience impacted your development as a child/adolescent?"
6. Do you think the parental alienation has impacted on your past or current relationship functioning, or parenting?
7. What supports have you used to cope with the parental alienation?
8. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience?

At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed as to the purpose of the study and provided with the opportunity to ask questions.

The interviews were conducted individually at the Psychology Research Center at the University of Tasmania in person, via Skype or telephone (Hanna, 2012; Holt, 2010). The recorded data were subsequently transcribed verbatim and served as the raw data for the study. Participants were provided with a copy of the transcription, which they were free to edit for clarity and accuracy. Edited transcripts were analyzed.

### **Data analysis**

The transcripts were thematically and inductively analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014) and clustered by codes using NVivo-11 (QSR International, 2015). Braun and Clarke (2006) six phase thematic analysis framework was used.

To ensure the scientific rigor of the study, the Four Dimensions Criteria described in Forero et al. (2018) were used. Credibility was established through the development of an appropriate interview protocol. Only one researcher conducted the interviews to ensure consistency between interviews. Members of the research team met regularly to review all aspects of the project. Dependability was established by developing an audit trail of the data using spreadsheets and NVivo. The authors independently coded all transcripts to ensure inter-coder reliability. Both authors immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts until themes emerged. To establish confirmability, themes were presented to peers and these themes were revised according to peer feedback. Themes were triangulated by comparing them to individual transcripts, researcher reflections and previous literature. Transferability was established through purposeful sampling and data saturation. The authors determined data saturation had been reached when the interviewer determined that the content of the interviews had become repetitious and when both authors were satisfied no new themes were evident in the data.

### **Results**

Seven themes emerged from the data: 1) Alienating Behavior and Impact, 2) Mental Health, 3) Relationship Difficulties, 4) Learning and

Development, 5) Grief and Loss, 6), Disconnection and Dysfunction, and 7) Coping and Healing.

### ***Alienating behavior and impact***

Alienated adult children described experiencing numerous alienating behaviors that they considered damaged their relationship with the TP and negatively impact their psychological wellbeing. There were a total of 146 references across the data set. Seven subthemes were identified within the Alienating Parent Behaviors and Impact theme.

### ***Abuse and control***

Participants shared their experiences of being physically and emotionally abused by the alienating parent. The data set included examples where the AP elicited guilt or fear in the child and withdrew their affection when the child showed any sign of noncompliance with the AP's views of the TP. Participants also described needing to act to regulate the AP's emotional state in order to avoid the AP's negative reactions to minor transgressions.

*“I just wanted to keep the peace, because he was quite a difficult character, you really never knew where he was going to go. So, I used to have to be like super hyper-aware, all the time, just to try to, keep the peace. But sometimes it didn't matter what I did, like if I would load the dishwasher in the wrong way or something, it would be an explosion of craziness”.*

Participants described these experiences with the AP continued well into adulthood.

### ***Denigration of the targeted parent***

Alienated adult children described how the AP repeatedly denigrated the character of the TP. Alienated adult children reflected that this denigration impeded their bond with the TP and resulted in conflicting feelings toward them.

*“So, in the beginning I wouldn't trust my father because I was told all these bad things about him, and I was even scared of him”.*

### ***Adultification***

Alienated adult children commonly stated that their parent made inappropriate disclosures to them and enlisted their support during custody disputes.

*“In essence my mother treated me like an adult, she requested adult responsibilities like taking care of my siblings, being her secret agent, messenger and gatherer of*

*information, she told me things that I now realise were not for children to know – like things about their sex life”.*

### **Disrupting alienated adult child and targeted parent relationship**

Participants described ways the AP acted to disrupt the bond between the alienated adult child and the TP. Some participants said they were taken away from the TP as a result of the AP moving them interstate or overseas, or otherwise disrupted them from communicating or having a relationship. This disruption and damage of the relationship included inciting the child to misbehave when visiting the TP.

*“She would say things like “but you know if you don’t want to go to your father, you just have to make it clear, you go on the weekend, you know what you can do you can put toothpaste down the drain, you can mess up with his furniture”, she was really tipping us on how we could make his life, for the time, for the limited time we were there, difficult”.*

Participants also described how the AP would tell them that the TP did not love them.

*“my heart and my mind were kind of toyed with in the way that if I didn’t adhere to one parent, I would be without love, I would be with insecurity and without a future.”*

### **Perceptions of the AP’s characteristics**

Most participants described their AP as lacking in empathy. Participants reported that the AP appeared to lack insight into the impact of their behavior even when confronted by their child. Some alienated adult children felt unable to discuss their grievances due to fearing that the parent would cut them out of their lives as they did others. Alienated adult children also observed that their AP was self-absorbed and critical, and that this affected their relationship in the present day.

*“Once I tried to engage in a conversation with her, and then she says, “yeah but you know I never jeopardized you guys from having contact with your father”, she literally says that, and I know she believes that. And then I should be able to speak up and say look, my view is different, that was not my choice. But you know, I do not have the energy to have these discussions with her. And I’m also fearful that she would break with me”.*

### **Neglect**

Participants described being neglected and abandoned by the AP, and the impact of this neglect on their lives.

*“I lived with that through my whole life, and same with the vision thing, and same with the breathing thing, but those things, important things that most parents would listen to their child and go oh I’ll get your eyes tested, I’ll get your ears tested, you know were just completely disregarded ...”*

In some instances, the neglect left the alienated adult child vulnerable to sexual abuse perpetrated by others.

*“... my mother’s second husband fucking sexually abused us. It was horrific, my dad didn’t know.”*

### ***Alienated adult child experience suppressed***

There were numerous examples of participants feeling compelled, consciously or unconsciously, to suppress their own thoughts, emotions and even memories, particularly regarding the TP.

*“I stopped talking about Mum and all the memories and all the good things and stuff, so all the good things were just put away, they were just stored, completely stored, it was like as if, it got to the point I almost couldn’t remember them, just so distant”.*

### ***Mental health***

Alienated adult children referred to mental health issues experienced both during childhood and adolescence and in the present. There was a total of 70 references across the data set. Three sub-themes were identified.

#### ***Mental health difficulties***

All participants discussed mental health problems including anxiety, panic attacks, depression, emotion dysregulation, attention problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, disassociation, eating disorders, suicide ideation and self-harm. These difficulties occurred both during the more active alienation period, and later in adulthood. Participants attributed their mental health difficulties to being alienated from the TP and as a result of the behaviors of the AP. Participants reflected that at the time, they struggled to understand what they were experiencing.

*“The impact, I think for instance, one of the things I find, is that throughout my life, starting from the age of 17 or less, I suffered from depression, but I don’t think I was really aware... or that I was conscious of the fact that the way I was feeling was not really normal... But I could have really very emotional moments, and I felt lonely. Also... I often had suicidal thoughts that was throughout my twenties”.*

#### ***Self-Esteem***

Participants spoke about having low self-esteem and low confidence in themselves and their abilities.

*“I never had any self-esteem, I never believed in myself. And I spent too many years trying to put myself back together rather than create a future for myself. Because I didn’t think I actually think I had a future”.*

#### ***Substance use***

Alienated adult children described using alcohol and drugs, for some at an early age, as a way of coping with their experience.

*“I smoked weed pretty much since I was 15, first tried when I was 13.”*

*“I actually stole vodka and started drinking at school.”*

### **Learning and development**

Alienated adult children described how their childhood experience of parental alienation impacted their development and capacity to learn. There was a total of 37 references across the data set. Two subthemes were identified examining the specific impact on their sense of identity, and education and employment.

#### **Identity**

Alienated adult children described the process of developing their identity and sense of self, and how this was complicated by their AP's behavior and denigration of the TP. For example, they were conscious of how they were like the TP and felt shame about this, having internalized the AP's view of their parent as 'bad'. This connected back to APs telling them that they were just like their father or mother as an attack.

*“I remember standing in front of the mirror after speaking to my dad because my dad said ‘oh you’re exactly like your mother’ because I didn’t agree with something he said. I remember looking in the mirror, and I could see myself starting to look like my mum, but I was starting to think that it was a bad thing, to look like my mum. And so, I went and got some hair dye, and I went and dyed my hair ...”*

For some, the development of their sense of self also involved rejection of the APs behavior and the conscious desire to live differently to them. Responses also illustrated how the demands of the AP suppressed the developmental needs of the alienated adult children to find their own self-identity.

#### **Education and employment**

Most participants described facing obstacles to their learning which impacted their life trajectories. These included difficulties focusing and achieving at school due to conflict, anxiety, and the stress of disruptions.

*“Well I actually sat my exams, I ran away from home... and things got so bad... I thought I’d had enough, and so... I went and I packed a bag, and I ended up finding like a local field that was near my high school. So, I was going to school, for like study practice, ‘cause this was like the two weeks leading up to my final exams, and I was revising under like a tarp ...”*

Responses highlighted that alienated adult children felt that they were blocked from fulfilling their potential at school because the AP's needs were prioritized over theirs. Participants also referred to difficulties with

employment and further education, in some cases stating that their mental health was an ongoing barrier to their career.

### **Relationships**

Alienated adult children described difficulties across friendships and romantic relationships. There was a total of 64 references across the data set. Five subthemes were identified.

#### **Difficulty relating to peers**

Responses highlighted that participants felt unable to relate to their peers. This often involved a sense of being different to other children and feeling unable to share their experience of parental alienation with them. Such difficulties pertained to a perceived lack of social skills, due to reduced opportunities to socialize and isolation. Alienated adult children considered that the behavior of the AP also impacted on typical friendship activities such as being unable to invite friends over after school.

*“Because I didn’t have, I didn’t interact with other kids at school, and I didn’t grow up the normal way that kids do, because I had social problems, because of the mental abuse that she was inflicting upon on me with my father. So, I didn’t have any other kids that I could relate to my own age and by the time I got to school the only people I’d been relating to were, well the person was her, and she was an adult. I couldn’t relate to other children and then I had this shit floating around in my head about, single mothers and broken marriages and all that kind of stuff, so I didn’t know how to relate to other children. And then that affected my social skills and I didn’t talk to another kid at school until I was about 12 years old. The first friend I had at school was when I was 12”.*

#### **Fear of loss**

The majority of alienated adult children described loss within relationships. This involved fear of losing a relationship, which left some participants avoiding conflict in relationships or avoiding entering relationships. Participants described being sensitive to signs of rejection within relationships. Adult alienated children related these experiences to the loss of a relationship with the TP and the poor relationship they had with the AP.

*“I fear rejection a lot, I find the whole ordeal of having to navigate the minefield of trying to impress somebody and then the fear of losing them...”*

When relationships came to an end, alienated adult children reported finding this particularly painful because it is a repeat of the rejection they felt during childhood.

### **Difficulty trusting**

Most alienated adult children described finding it difficult to trust people. They expressed disbelief that someone would support them and therefore, they described concealing their difficulties from significant others.

*“... I was also very avoiding and fearful of conflict, because conflicts to me, it means, you know it’s going to break. It’s the model I got from my parents, because you know they didn’t manage to resolve their conflicts.”*

Some participants commented that they also have difficulty trusting in their own judgment and they found it difficult not to feel suspicious of others’ motives.

### **Dysfunctional and abusive relationships**

Participants described feeling trapped in unhealthy or abusive relationships, and that their alienation experience influenced these relationships. Some described staying longer in dysfunctional or abusive relationships due to ‘*never ever wanting to get divorced.*’ For others, they imagined what life could have been like had their parents remained together and worked it out. Some participants described feeling desperate for love and secure attachment bonds, so they entered unsuitable relationships early in life in an attempt to find secure attachments.

*“It was like being in a river full of crocodiles and I was just hopping from rock to rock to rock trying to find safety, to find a safety net because I didn’t have one.”*

Others related that their partner choice was influenced by the alienation, either by choosing a partner similar to the AP, or trying to fulfill a relationship need that was never met by their parents.

### **Struggle to maintain healthy relationships**

Participants described difficulties with forming and maintaining positive relationships. They attributed this to a lack of role models on how to relate to a partner in a healthy way, mental health issues, and inadequate relationship skills, such as communication skills and resolving conflict. Participants also believed their lack of self-esteem impacted their relationship functioning. For example, one participant described being dependant on her husband’s insight and had sought therapy to help maintain their relationship.

### **Grief and loss**

Participants expressed a pervasive sense of grief and loss which was strongly linked to their relationship or lack thereof with the TP, and the

broader impact of the alienation perpetrated by the AP. There was a total of 79 references across the data set.

### **Anger and emotional pain**

Many participants were angry at the AP. They expressed anger that they continued to have to deal with ‘the mess’ made by their parents, and that it never really went away for them. They expressed resentment at the “injustice” of what had happened to them.

*“Yeah, very angry, for a long time. And just frustration with not being, you know not being heard. Feeling like you’re not, can’t make yourself understood...”*

### **Missed out on a childhood**

Alienated adult children felt as though they had lost the time to simply be a child. This extended to feeling as though they had missed out on learning basic skills such as cooking or playing sports. Participants also referred to an early loss of innocence.

*“I didn’t have the nurturing, I was the mum, I felt like I’ve always been the adult, and sometimes it’s just such a burden”.*

### **Guilt**

The majority of alienated adult children experienced guilt induced by the alienating parent, and also in relation to their own treatment of the TP. They regretted their behavior. They also spoke about ongoing guilt toward the AP (or the AP’s attempts to induce this guilt), if they had resumed a relationship with the TP. For some, this sense of being torn persisted long past childhood. Some internalized a sense of blame and guilt for the breakdown of the family despite logically knowing it was not their fault. Participants recounted that their self-blame and guilt was reinforced by the AP’s ongoing emotional manipulation.

*“I really have a lot of guilt, and not just towards my father, but also towards my mum now. Because somehow I know she sees me as a betrayer...”*

### **Grieving the loss of relationship with the targeted parent**

Most alienated adult children described a deep sense of loss regarding the time they lost with the TP and relationship they wished they had had with them.

*“Most of my childhood memories are just, oh God, even up until the age of 40, I just want my dad, I just want my dad”.*

### **Disappointment with their relationship with the targeted parent**

Some participants expressed sadness and dissatisfaction with their relationship with their TP. Some had formed the view that the TP had moved on

with a new relationship or family, given up on them too soon, or was disinterested in them.

*“I think he’d fought as much as he could, and then ... I don’t know, he then he just gave up”.*

### **Disconnection and dysfunction**

Participants described family lives characterized by segregation and that these often appeared to be intergenerational. There was a total of 76 references across the data set. This was broken into two subthemes, which are explained below.

#### **Disconnection**

Alienated adult children described what they considered to be abnormal family lives. They referred to having isolated childhoods with limited and irregular contact with extended family.

*“The entire family is segregated, I don’t have any normality as in family life, I don’t have anyone contacting me.”*

For some, their family were hostile or disconnected, and participants expressed sadness and loneliness around this lack of normality that was especially felt during holidays. Other participants had ceased all contact with the AP because the relationship was too dysfunctional. Some participants reported being alienated from their siblings due to the actions of the AP. They described that their decision to reunite with the TP had caused friction with their siblings who had chosen not to.

#### **Intergenerational transmission of trauma**

Alienated adult children discussed their parents’ dysfunctional relationships with grandparents and experiencing family violence. They theorized that their parents had learnt their behavior.

*“... she wasn’t raised by her own mother she was raised by her great grandmother and she didn’t know that her own mother was her mother until she was about 14 ...”*

Two participants had become targeted parents in adulthood. For these participants, their insight and knowledge from being once an alienated child helped them understand their children’s perspective, but this was also a source of suffering.

#### **Coping and healing**

Participants related how they had coped with the alienation. There was a total of 91 references across the data set. Four subthemes were identified and are explored below.

### **Coping and resilience**

Participants described how they coped with their experience on their own. For some the TP offered support, or they developed a bond with an alternative caring and protective person.

*“When I was a teenager, there was many times I was about to kill myself, and at the last minute I’d remember that my dad loves me ... And I would phone him in Melbourne, and he was nothing but loving...”*

### **Reunification attempts**

At some point, alienated adult children tried to reunite with their TP. Most of these decisions were self-initiated, but some participants were encouraged by other people in their lives. For some this was part of the healing process, whilst others were ambivalent about reunification.

*“When I met him, it was as if there hadn’t been 25 years passed. And, it was like, so many of the things, and feelings I had, the bad feelings disappeared...”*

### **The healing process**

Participants reflected on the past, attempting to make sense of it. Several participants had sought therapy. Some expressed hope for improving the quality of their parental relationships, whilst others felt they had to accept them as perpetually disappointing. For several participants, discovering that their experience was parental alienation helped their healing process.

*“As I got a bit older, I decided to go see a therapist and that started to put things in place, and break the normalisation... Yeah, when you start to realise that what you’ve gone through was abuse.”*

### **Parental alienation awareness**

Alienated adult children expressed the desire to contribute to raising awareness of PA. They spoke about wishing that there had been intervention at the time.

*“I think it’s really important, that also the people, the judges and so on, they know what’s going on...”*

## **Discussion**

This study explored the lived experiences of alienated adult children in order to further understand the nature of parental alienation and the impact parental alienation has on the lives of alienated children.

### **Alienating behavior and impact**

In this study, the majority of participants, of their own volition, described their experiences as abuse. These findings are consistent with prior research

**Table 2.** Subtypes of child abuse corresponding with alienating behavior and impact subthemes.

Subtypes of Emotional Abuse	Subthemes of Alienating Behavior and Impact
<b>Physical abuse:</b> acts of a caregiver that cause the child actual or potential physical harm	Abuse and control
<b>Sexual abuse:</b> acts a caregiver uses on a child for their own sexual gratification	Neglect
<b>Emotional abuse:</b> failure of a caregiver to provide an adequately supportive environment such as isolating, denigrating, rejecting, threatening and intimidating the child.	Abuse and control  Denigration of the TP Adultification Disrupting TAC and TP relationship AP Narcissistic TAC experience suppressed Identity Guilt Neglect
<b>Neglect:</b> failure of a caregiver to provide for the development of the child such as inability to care for this child's health, educational, emotional and nutritional needs. Inability of the caregiver to provide safe living conditions.	Adultification Education and employment Substance use Missed out on childhood

(Baker, 2006; Haines et al., 2020; Harman, Hines, & Kruk, 2018) and consistent with the World Health Organization's definition of child abuse (WHO, 2002). Table 2 summarizes the association between the WHO's definition of child abuse and the findings of the current study.

Child abuse has been shown to be related to the development of the child's attachment system (Muller et al., 2012). This was evident in the current sample of alienated adult children. The parenting experienced by participants was described as unpredictable, intrusive, rejecting, self-referential, role-reversing, or otherwise frightening and neglectful, all of which can result in insecure attachments (Bowlby, 1982) and subsequent multiple negative outcomes in later life (Groh et al., 2017; Riggs, 2010).

### **Mental health**

The current study identified mental health as an important aspect of participants' experience of PA. These findings align with previous research reporting mental health difficulties in alienated adult children (Baker, 2005, Baker & Verrocchio, 2016, Ben-Ami & Baker, 2011, Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012, Godbout & Parent, 2012, Johnston, 2003). The building blocks for positive mental health are created in childhood, through the quality of interactions between a child and their caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989). Abusive parenting results in chronic arousal in the child because their parent (Lyons-Ruth et al., 2004). Consequently, children develop regulation

strategies that compound their distress, including rumination, avoidance, and suppression (Aldao et al., 2010), as seen in the current study.

As suggested by Ben-Ami and Baker (2012) and seen in the present study, APs attempt to persuade their child that the TP does not love them, resulting in the child's belief that they have been rejected, and are undeserving of love. The psychological intrusion and manipulation exerted by APs may lead to the development of a highly critical self-representation, and the sense of being valued only for what they can provide to another (Baker, 2005; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Soenens et al., 2005). Consistent with the idea that emotional abuse has a negative, cascading influence on alienated adult children's mental health, it is unsurprising that experiencing PA is also associated with problematic relationships throughout life.

### ***Relationship difficulties***

The current study identified pervasive difficulties across friendships and romantic relationships as an important component of the participants' experience. These findings are consistent with previous research (Baker, 2005, 2006, 2007; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Baker & Chambers, 2011). Numerous studies have linked attachment insecurity to later relationship problems (Simpson & Rholes, 2017). The alienated adult children in this study described profound difficulty with trusting others, and a fear of abandonment. Such difficulties are consistent with insecure attachment styles and could be traced back to the parenting they received.

### ***Learning and development***

The participants in this study described dissatisfaction with their level of educational and career achievement, attributing this to factors such as diminished mental health. This finding is consistent with research showing that childhood abuse and neglect are related to poor school adjustment and low academic achievement. employment (Gilbert et al., 2009; Currie & Spatz Widom, 2010). The development of autonomy and self-sufficiency is necessary for building an individual's sense of competence in the world, and their ability to set and achieve goals. Children preoccupied by parental intrusiveness and hostility have a reduced capacity to freely attend to their environment and pursue intrinsically rewarding activities (Bowlby, 2012; Moss & St-Laurent, 2001). As indicated by the findings, APs typically invalidate their child's need for autonomy and self-determination by prioritizing their own agenda. APs obstruct the normal development of interpersonal boundaries, moving between parentification, adultification, and infantilisation (Garber, 2011). Most parentified and adultified young people

experience higher levels of stress due to increased responsibilities, placing them at risk for poor educational and career achievement. Infantilised alienated children are kept in a prolonged state of dependence (Burton, 2007; Garber, 2011). Natural identity formation processes are compromised when young people are adultified, parentified and infantilised.

### ***Grief and loss***

Grief was found to be an important characteristic of the current study's participants' experience. Alienated children lose a living person, the TP, whom they are attached to. They also lose a childhood (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013). They are confronted with this loss during the alienation period and in adulthood, where the milestones of adult life serve as triggers of grief. Additionally, they are faced with the potential loss of the AP, if they defy them (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013). The grief described by the participants appeared to be disenfranchised. Their anger, sadness, despair, and frustration in relation to their family of origin remain unacknowledged. They must cope with the loss of the TP alone, because the AP has indicated that it is unacceptable to love and grieve for the TP (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

### ***Disconnection, dysfunction, coping and healing***

The alienated adult children described their families as segregated and dysfunctional. PA seems to affect family ties at every level, including grandparents, siblings, and the alienated adult children's own children corroborating Baker's (2005, 2007) research. Alienation appears to be transmitted inter-generationally as is family violence (Haines et al., 2020; Harman, Hines, & Kruk, 2018).

Healing from the alienation and its aftermath appears to be a lifelong endeavor, and the participants differed in their perceived ability to do so. However, despite these challenges, many alienated adult children described taking pride in their achievements in life despite their childhood experiences. Understanding parental alienation seemed to be an important aspect to healing. Reunification attempts also formed part of this healing process.

### ***Study implications***

From the results of this study, it is contended that PA should be considered a form of child abuse, and as such, a child protection matter. As identified by Poustie et al. (2018) and Templer et al. (2017), taking no action is likely to aggravate the alienation. This study provides some evidence that this is indeed the case. It is important that mental health professionals possess an appropriate understanding of PA and its impact in order to work

effectively with this population. The ideal components of therapy for alienated adult children will vary by their specific presentation, however attachment related concerns are likely to be a key target area. Any therapeutic approach addressing emotion regulation is also likely to be beneficial (Templer et al., 2017).

### **Study limitations and future directions**

A limitation of qualitative analysis is that it relies upon the validity of one individual's narrative as a true and accurate account. Bearing this in mind, the richness of the data obtained is valuable and not easily obtainable (if at all) through other means. Although the sample comprised of individuals from different nations, these were all developed countries. In addition, this study had a small sample size, which further limits its generalisability. Lastly, as with all qualitative studies, the researchers' own biases (involving their own experiences and subjective worldview) is present to some extent despite attempts to neutralize it by employing an inductive approach (Hansen, 2006). Altogether, these findings provide a rationale for future investigation into this area in order to effect change. In order to support the evidence in the field, future research should seek to be generalizable. Large-scale studies examining the prevalence of parental alienation and its outcomes are needed.

Finally, in the words of an alienated adult child, *"I don't want other families to be ripped apart. I want people to find ways to come back together."*

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