

Power dynamics in families affected by parental alienation

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to apply interdependence theory to understand the power dynamics in families affected by parental alienation. We hypothesized that the power dynamics between alienating and alienated parents are imbalanced such that this form of family violence (Harman et al., 2018) more closely resembles intimate terrorism than situational couple violence, where power dynamics are more similar between partners. We also hypothesized that shared parenting custodial arrangements would afford more power to targeted parents than unequal parenting plans and provide them with more opportunities for action. A qualitative analysis of transcripts from interviews with targeted parents of alienating behaviors ($n = 79$) using interdependence theory as a framework found support for our hypotheses: most situations described by parents were of asymmetric dependence, with power concentrated almost exclusively with the alienating parent, and/or were

Statement of Relevance: The balance of power in relationships has been an important differentiator of different forms of family violence. This project is the first to apply interdependence theory as a qualitative framework to determine that families affected by parental alienation have asymmetries in power between parents. Results indicate that all “high-conflict” divorced families are not equal, and that a better understanding of abusive power dynamics can be used to identify more effective methods of intervention.

direct challenges made by the alienating parent to gain control over their children and the targeted parent. In addition, the proportion of situations in which asymmetries in power were described was highest when the alienating parent had primary or sole custody of the children. Discussion focuses on the need to better understand and consider the role of power in the assessment of parental alienation so that appropriate and effective interventions may be implemented to protect children and their family members.

KEYWORDS

abuse/aggression, divorce, families, other

1 | INTRODUCTION

Parental alienation refers to a family dynamic in which a child aligns with one parent (the alienating parent) and rejects their other parent (the targeted, or alienated parent) for reasons that are not legitimate (Harman et al., 2021). Affecting an estimated 3.5 million children in the United States alone (Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019), parental alienation most commonly occurs in families where the parents have separated or divorced, and it can start prior to or after the parents separated; it can, however, also occur in intact families (Baker & Verrocchio, 2015). Although mothers and fathers are just as likely to be alienated from a child (e.g., Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019), research has indicated that alienating mothers and fathers tend to use different strategies to drive the alienating process in the child (Harman et al., 2020; López et al., 2014), which results in making the child believe that a safe and “good enough” alienated parent never loved them, abandoned them, or that they are dangerous (Harman et al., 2021).

Parental alienating behaviors, which are the strategies a parental figure uses to harm another parental figure and their relationship with their child(ren), are the primary drivers of a child's alienation from a parent (e.g., Baker & Darnall, 2006). These behaviors have been considered a serious form of family violence because they include elements of intimate partner violence (IPV; Harman et al., 2018; Dijkstra, 2019) and child abuse behaviors (Kruk, 2018; von Boch-Galhau, 2018). These behaviors have been directly mapped onto a gender-neutral adaptation of several power and control wheels used in the Duluth Model (Harman & Matthewson, 2020), which are tools used in batterer intervention programs to understand patterns of abusive behaviors. For example, coercively controlling individuals (aka batterers or intimate terrorists) and alienating parents use strategies such as threats and intimidation, coercion, and their own children as weapons to try and control the target of their abuse (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, 2017; Harman & Matthewson, 2020). In fact, “domestic violence by proxy” has been used to describe alienation techniques utilizing children by parents with a history of committing domestic violence (Leadership Council on Child Abuse & Interpersonal Violence, 2009).

Although domestic violence and parental alienation researchers have studied the behaviors of parents who use children as weapons against the other parent (and use different terminology

to describe them), little attention has been paid by domestic violence scholars to how being used as a weapon affects children (Harman & Kruk, in press). Many children who have been used as a weapon against a parent become alienated from them (Harman, Bernet, et al., 2019; Harman, Stewart, et al., 2019), and the more severe the alienation, the more active the child becomes in their rejection and negative campaigning against them. Indeed, abusive and alienating parents often adultify children (treat them as adult equals) and grant them power to make adult decisions, such as whether to maintain a relationship with the alienated parent (e.g., Harman & Matthewson, 2020).

Previous studies have hypothesized that parents who have been alienated from their children have diminished power in the family system (Harman, Bernet, et al., 2019; Harman, Stewart, et al., 2019; Warshak, 2015). In the context of families in which parental alienation has occurred, another way that power imbalances are created by the alienating parent is by using loyalty inducing behaviors directed toward the children (Harman & Matthewson, 2020). Such actions create a strong allegiance with the child(ren) against the targeted parent by sending the message that they are the “better” parent, guilting them for feeling or expressing any positive feelings toward the targeted parent, and encouraging/rewarding them for acting as proxies of abuse toward the targeted parent (Baker, 2007). Parental behavior that negatively impacts the children's views of the other parent often reorganizes family power dynamics by placing children in an adult role of deciphering parents' behavior (Garber, 2011), resulting in the undermining of power and parental authority of the targeted parent.

Imbalances in power are also created by alienating parents using patterns of coercive controlling strategies to gain or maintain control and dominance over the targeted parent, such as with the use of harassment, threats, and intimidation (Harman & Matthewson, 2020). For example, divorced mothers (Toews & Bermea, 2017) and fathers (Hines et al., 2015) have reported their ex-spouses as having used their children against them to hurt and control their behaviors and decisions. In addition, alienated parents often describe being the targets of stalking behaviors by the alienating parent and/or their allies (Harman et al., 2018). Stalking is an intentional and patterned strategy that can escalate to violence (Meloy, 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2007), often with relationship-based intentions, such as power and control (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). The resulting climate serves to create fear and disempowers the parent by making them feel their behavioral options are limited—they become afraid to act out of fear of losing their children, being hurt, or incurring some other form of damage.

Although a parent with primary or shared custody of a child may become alienated from them due to the loyalty inducing behaviors and controlling strategies described above, imbalances in power between parental figures are often exacerbated (or possibly even created) by court ordered parenting plans that provide unequal parenting time to one parent over the other. The reasons for this exacerbation are because court officials are often unable to easily recognize patterns of and responsibility for abuses of power (Mante, 2016). Court ordered custody arrangements impact the amount of quality time that children have with their parental figures after divorce or separation (Fabricius & Suh, 2017). When these custodial arrangements are imbalanced, then the custodial parent has more power in this complicated family system (Kelly, 1993) because they have more opportunities for exercising their decision-making authority (Ogolsky et al., 2019) and are the gate-keepers for access to the children (Saini et al., 2017). It is often only through cooperative coparenting relationships that noncustodial parents can have contact and high-quality relationships with their children (Sobolewski & King, 2005), yet this is often unlikely when abusive dynamics are at play. Together, these dynamics leave targeted parents with few behavioral options, essentially rendering them powerless. The

purpose of the current study is to apply interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) to understand the power dynamics in families in which parental alienation has occurred so that a clearer understanding of power dynamics in this form of family violence can be gained.

2 | INTERDEPENDENCE THEORY, POWER, AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

Interdependence theory provides a useful framework to understand power in relationships. Power and dependence are two of the most salient themes in interdependence theory and they are treated as related but independent constructs (Kelley et al., 2003). For example, an individual can be both powerful and dependent on another individual for outcomes, which describes a relationship in which there is mutual dependence. In such a relationship, the more powerful partner may have most of the control, but they also care for their partner and want them to have good outcomes. Therefore, the powerful person will act in ways that benefit their less powerful partner because it ensures they stay in the relationship. In contrast, an individual can be powerful and not dependent on another person for outcomes, leaving the other person with low power and high dependence on them. This situation is one of asymmetrical dependence, where the more powerful partner may not care at all about the less powerful person, yet they control all their outcomes. The less powerful partner is completely dependent on the more powerful partner for beneficial outcomes and has no influence on any outcomes themselves (Kelley et al., 2003).

An individual may bring pre-existing bases of power and affordances to their relationships that are valued differentially and generally give them more social power over the other partner (e.g., gender, social class, income; Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019; Pratto et al., 2010). An interdependence framework acknowledges that such potential power discrepancies may exist; however, power is conceptualized as manifesting in proximal and situational circumstances rather than in broader relationship contexts because it details situational features (e.g., the legal system, family members) that impact the interdependence individuals have on each other for outcomes (Vanderdrift et al., 2019). Therefore, power is useful to understand when interpreting the behavioral choices of actors in any given situation. The less power an individual has, the fewer behavioral options they have at their disposal for action. Importantly, when patterns of power and control are observed over time, different forms of family violence can be identified.

There has been a recent push to better clarify and provide a theoretical rationale for different forms of power and control dynamics in the context of family violence (Coleman & Straus, 1986; Emery et al., 2017; John, 2003; Malik & Lindahl, 1998; Suprina & Chang, 2005; Wagers, 2015). Emery (2011) has argued that to classify an act of domestic violence, one needs to ask whether the power between the perpetrator and victim is generally shared or unequal. If the power is shared, then it is considered an act of conflict that occurs in the context of an argument, and therefore is characteristic of situational couple violence. Power dynamics between partners engaging in abusive behaviors can be balanced or imbalanced, which makes it possible to differentiate between two forms of IPV: Coercively controlling behaviors and situational couple violence. Coercive controlling abuse (aka intimate terrorism) is characterized by one partner engaging in abusive behaviors to exert power and control over the other (Johnson, 1995, 2008), whereas situational couple violence is characterized by a partner engaging in violent behaviors in the context of conflict (e.g., such as to end an argument; Hines & Douglas, 2018; Johnson, 1995, 2008). If the power dynamic is unequal, then such conflict is considered a

“violent act of control” and is characteristic of coercively controlling abuse (Babcock et al., 2017). These types of power and control motives have become central elements to batterer intervention programs (Grose & Grabe, 2014; Wagers, 2015), demonstrating the clinical implications of power and control distinctions.

3 | THE CURRENT STUDY

Support for the hypothesis that there are power imbalances in families where parental alienation has occurred has been limited to clinical reports and legal accounts (Baker, 2006; Lowenstein, 1999; Warshak, 2015), and most of the research on family power dynamics has focused on intact families with two biological parents (Ogolsky et al., 2019). Power dynamics and struggles become considerably more complicated when the structure of families change, such as when parents’ divorce, remarry, or form new blended families (e.g., Giles-Sims & Crosbie-Burnett, 1989). Interdependence theory posits that power is determined by situational circumstances and context (Vanderdrift et al., 2019), so these changes in interpersonal dynamics and conflicts after relationship transitions such as divorce do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they are impacted by the behaviors of other individuals (e.g., children, new spouses), groups (e.g., extended family, religious group members), and systems (e.g., legal, administrative). For example, a parent acting individually to block access between a child and the other parent is much more effective if they have a court order (system) to make access to the child more difficult for the other parent. Such court orders can be facilitated by extended family testifying in court (groups) and lawyers (individuals) who aid in the process. The legal domain demonstrates the nested and interactive nature of these contexts.

Testing whether the power dynamics resulting from parental alienating behaviors more closely resemble coercively controlling abuse than situational couple violence is critical because the results have important implications for intervention and treatment. Today, many professionals promote what is called a “hybrid” model of family conflict (e.g., Fidler, 2017), which implies that *both* parents are responsible for a child’s rejection of a parent in post-separated families. Targeted parents engage in proportionately fewer parental alienating behaviors than alienating parents, whereas parents who put the child in a loyalty conflict, or bind, tend to reciprocate parental alienating behaviors (Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019). Due to a lack of understanding about what these differentiating features mean for identifying different forms of family conflict and violence, targeted parents are often blamed by family court officials for being victims of parental alienating behaviors (e.g., “why can’t you two just stop your fighting and do what’s best for your children?”) and are chastised for needing continual family court intervention to gain access to their children (Harman et al., 2018). If parental alienating behaviors are more like coercively controlling abuse than situational couple violence, then these perspectives of the problem are grossly incorrect—it would be like accusing a victim of battery as being just as responsible for their abuse as the batterer.

The perspective that both parents are responsible for conflict is also reflected in court orders and procedures forcing the victim to try and negotiate and cooperate with their abuser who is continuously trying to coerce and dominate them (e.g., in court mandated mediation). Many mental health practitioners have also recommended whole family interventions for treatment of parental alienation because the families are assumed to be primarily “hybrid cases” (see Fidler, 2017 for a review). Domestic violence organizations do not recommend couples counseling or other forms of mediation because it gives the abuser tools and terms for justifying their

abuse and results in further abuse of the victim (e.g., The National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2014). To treat all families that have been labeled “high conflict” the same by assuming that both parents are responsible for their situation can be very damaging to families and children. If the power dynamics in these families are imbalanced, the targeted parent has few behavioral options or opportunities to act, and they are completely dependent on an alienating parent to have a relationship with their children—this is not a “conflict” situation—it is an abusive one (Harman et al., 2018).

The aim of the current study is to examine whether power imbalances do in fact exist in families in which parental alienation has occurred. We will use interdependence theory as the theoretical framework to understand the power dynamics that have been created in these situations. If power asymmetries are found to characterize most of the situations encountered by parents who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors, then this form of violence more closely resembles coercively controlling abuse than situational couple violence (Hypothesis #1). We will also examine whether a situational factor, the custody arrangements in the families, is related to the power dynamics between the parents. We hypothesize that when targeted parents have equal or shared custody/parenting time with their children, they will have more power than when they have less custody (Hypothesis #2). An equal custody agreement allows for targeted parents to retain some control and behavioral choices, even when the alienating parent has more power due to the child’s allegiance. This study provides the first formal test of the proposed hypotheses.

4 | METHOD

Our institutionally-approved research protocol for participant recruitment and interview procedures are described thoroughly in detail elsewhere (Study 1, Harman, Lorandos, et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2018) so will only briefly be described here.

4.1 | Participants

Participants were recruited from a variety of special interest groups on social media (e.g., groups on Facebook organized around divorce or parental alienation). Interested participants clicked on a survey link where they answered a short measure to assess their alienation (survey items published in Smith et al., 2018) and were given an opportunity to provide an email address if they were interested in being interviewed about their personal experiences as an alienated parent. The mean rating on our alienation measure for the sample was 3.95 (out of 5; $SD = 0.56$), so these parents agreed with most statements that they are being alienated or have been alienated from one or more of their children.

Of the 536 email addresses we received between 2014 and 2015, 79 parents who were provided consent forms were ultimately interviewed: 50 fathers and 29 mothers. A step-parent participated in three of the interviews with the targeted parent. Of the 70 interviewees for which we had survey data (not all emails could be matched to the original survey), their average age was 46.36 years (range 26–59, $SD = 7.71$) and their yearly household modal income range was between \$60 and \$80K USD a year ($n = 14$; 13 reported incomes of <\$25K, and 17 reported incomes >\$120K). Most parents were White (81.4%, $n = 57$), with the remaining parents being Black, Hispanic, Asian, biracial, and Native American. Most participants were from the United

States (85.7%, $n = 60$) and many had a bachelor's degree or higher (65.6%, $n = 46$). The mean amount of time parents had been separated/divorced from the alienating parent was 7.17 years ($SD = 4.83$; one parent was still married to the alienating parent). The parents in the sample described their experiences being alienated from 123 children (63 girls, 43 boys, and 17 unknown gender) at varying degrees of severity.

Consenting parents were scheduled for a 60–90 min interview with one of five trained interviewers, and the interviews were subsequently transcribed. Interviews were originally scheduled until we reached a saturation point (Guest et al., 2006), meaning that additional interviews did not provide any new information. The research team determined saturation occurred after about 20 interviews with each gender of parent. Due to having many participants from around the world, we conducted an additional 39 interviews in case we would uncover additional information that was unique in different cultural contexts. The semi-structured interview protocol contained 16 general questions and follow-up prompts designed to probe deeper into topics such as the custody/parenting time situation with their children and specific parental alienating behaviors that the alienating parent has used over time. These questions and prompts are presented in Appendix A. We asked for numerous examples of interactions and events that had happened in their relationship with the alienating parent and their child(ren) so that we could examine more closely the types of power struggles and conflicts that the targeted parent experienced over time.

4.2 | Data coding

Due to the qualitative method used in this study, the authors assessed how their own experiences might contribute to their interpretations of the targeted parent's lived experiences (as recommended by Scharp & Thomas, 2019). One of the authors has experienced parental alienation from the perspective of a step-parent, while the other two have not experienced the problem from the perspective of either parent or child. All three authors have been studying family and intimate relationships for many years and have used mixed-methods approaches in doing so. The first author contends that her experience as an alienated step-parent provides a unique perspective to the study of the problem and has helped to gain the trust and confidence of the parents that were interviewed, as many were afraid or concerned about their experiences not being believed. The other two authors were invited to participate in this research because they did not have personal experience with parental alienation and could provide a more objective interpretation of the data.

Our hypotheses were developed out of interdependence theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and so our thematic analysis of the transcripts utilized a top-down approach. A top-down approach was more appropriate for our purposes than other qualitative methods such as grounded theory or an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which are “bottom-up” approaches to understanding the data (Brooks et al., 2015). Template analysis is considered a form of thematic analysis (Brooks et al., 2015) that allows for a priori concepts to aid in developing a coding template, also known as a codebook approach (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Template analysis is not bound to any particular epistemology, and so the analytic approach can be adapted to the philosophical underpinnings of the work (Brooks et al., 2015). Due to our desire to determine whether the lived experiences of targeted parents aligned with “realist” assumptions about interdependence situations, template analysis provided us the flexibility to approach the qualitative data in a relatively quantitative way.

Initially, a codebook was developed by the first author and her five-person graduate and undergraduate research team based off the 21 entries (situations) detailed in the book *An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations* (Kelley et al., 2003). Four of the six person team did not complete any of the interviews with the alienated parents. Each entry was treated as an a priori concept, as the book presents conceptual descriptions of interpersonal situations varying in their central components that have influence on the party's outcomes, as well as the amount of information available and response of the other partner that are typical in social problems.

In order to develop a working version of the coding template, the research team met weekly to discuss each individual entry to brainstorm how the situations would manifest in interactions between two parents who are divorced and have children together. Descriptions of the entries were created that made it possible to distinguish between different types of situations that commonly occur in such relationships after divorce (e.g., negotiating parenting time plans), and examples illustrating these were added to the codebook. During this iterative process, three entries were not used for this analysis. The first entry removed was #21 (moving among situations: where do we go from here), which addresses the question of who controls where the partners go next in an interaction. This entry was removed because the research team found that such a coding would be duplicative of the coding of multiple situations described throughout the interview. We also did not include #16 and #19, which involved interactions with strangers (e.g., custody evaluators) and third parties (e.g., extended family members) that affect the outcomes of the parents. Although these individuals were often described as being highly influential to the family power dynamic, the focus of the current study was to examine the power dynamic within the alienating-targeted parent's relationship itself. The codebook is presented in Table 1.

After developing the first draft of the codebook, the research team members coded one transcript to determine their degree of rater agreement. This resulted in refinement and clarification of four codes along with examples that further aided in coding consistency. Two additional transcripts were then coded independently and discussed by the team members, and the codebook was refined again. At this point, coding of the entire body of transcripts began with a research team consisting of the three authors of this article who met weekly to review their codes for two or three transcripts at a time. Across the 79 transcripts, 3728 discrete codes were applied to the situations described by the targeted parents. A random selection of five transcripts that represented 9.5% of the total coded situations was used to determine interrater reliability, which was deemed acceptable ($ICC = 0.86$). When there were discrepancies in codes, consensus was reached by discussion.

5 | RESULTS

In order to test our hypotheses, our approach was to calculate the number of times different interdependence situations were mentioned by the parents in our sample to see which were most frequently described. Frequency counts of the times different situations were mentioned by targeted parents were calculated for each parent. There was considerable variability across transcripts in the numbers of situations that were described (from 1 to 91),¹ and the average number was 31.59 situations per interview ($SD = 21.24$). Due to this variability, we calculated the percentage of time each situation was described by each parent, and then calculated the average percentage of times each situation was described across parents.

TABLE 1 Codebook of situations described in *An Atlas of Interpersonal Situations* (Kelley et al., 2003)

Entry #	Description	Examples
1. Independence	A situation where neither parent cares about the other's possible behaviors, and neither has any impact one way or another on each other's outcomes	Split parental decision-making in different domains; parental rules across homes accommodated by the child and not played off either parent; financial independence of parents from each other, or firm uncontested agreements
2. Mutual partner control	A situation where each parent's preferences and aversions affect each other such that people can be of benefit to each other or not. The outcome for each parent is entirely in the hands of the other and offers no immediate cost or benefit to the person	A parent packs appropriate clothes for a child to bring with them to their parenting time with the other parent, expecting them to be returned; a parent makes threats towards the other parent or promises benefits to exert dominance over their outcomes
3. Corresponding mutual joint control	A situation where the parents are not concerned about their own or the other parent's actions, but only the combination of the two's joint actions	Both parents decide to avoid certain children's events to avoid conflict in front of the child; joint decision-making where both parents coordinate actions to care for the child
4. Conflicting mutual joint control	A situation where the actions of both parents affects their joint outcome but they both have different preferences for what should occur. One parent benefits more than the other, or the other sacrifices	One parent wants shared parenting while the other wants sole custody; one parent may withhold information to force the other to communicate with them or trap them; a parent may fail to mediate or cooperate with the other, believing that they will "win" in court and get their desired outcome
5. Prisoner's dilemma	A situation in which each parent has a choice between self- or joint-benefit; if both parents cooperate, they both benefit, but if one cooperates and the other does not, the cooperator loses, and if both fail to cooperate, both parents lose. A parent may offer conditional cooperation (e.g., if you do X, I will not cooperate) and the other needs to decide whether to cooperate or not	The parents verbally agree not to talk badly about each other to their children; if one does it while the other does not, the child aligns with the derogating parent and the cooperator loses; a parent needs to decide whether to agree to a parenting time change, not knowing whether the other parent will fulfill their promise
6. Threat	A situation where one parent has control over how outcomes are divided from both of their joint activities. When the less powerful parent senses unfairness, they feel less loyalty to the relationship and may threaten to leave. The more	The children prefer one parent, and this parent encourages their loyalty and preference, which puts the other parent in a less powerful position. The less powerful parent states that the children will be worse off without a healthy

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Entry #	Description	Examples
	powerful parent cares about the less powerful parent's loyalty because their outcomes are still jointly held	relationship with both parents and threatens to seek court intervention unless a relationship with them is supported with the children; one parent has primary custody of the children and enjoys continuing to engage in conflict with the other parent. The less powerful parent threatens to stop all contact or get a lawyer if the conflict does not stop, so the more powerful parent stops temporarily, only to begin when the conflict has settled down
7. Chicken	A situation where each parent has a choice between a safe choice resulting in middling outcomes, and a risky choice with extreme (good or bad) outcomes, depending on choice of the other parent. The parent who backs off loses, or both parents lose if they select the risky choice	Divorce proceedings go to trial due to not reaching agreement over property and/or custody of children, resulting in large lawyer fees for both parents; one parent files false claims of abuse that the other parent has to answer to or face fines/prison time/loss of custody or parenting time
8. Hero	A situation where both parents want the same outcome but want to accomplish it differently. One parent makes a large sacrifice to benefit both parents, and both parents need to recognize the benefit of the sacrifice for the relationship. The motive of the parent to sacrifice is not for the self but for the joint outcome (e.g., children)	A parent is injured and unable to drive the children to parenting time exchanges. The other parent offers to handle all transportation for an extended period of time, which the injured parent is thankful for
9. Conjunctive problems	A situation where both parents must make some cooperative choice to get a positive joint outcome, and if one fails to uphold their end or promise, they all suffer	One parent does not supervise the completion of homework when the children are with them, making the child's success in school suffer, and all the burden is placed on the other parent; A parent tries to reframe the other parent's negative behaviors in a positive way to help their child cope with the parent's deficiencies (e.g., substance abuse problems, mental illness)
10. Disjunctive problems	A situation where one parent can do the work for both, or their decisions and actions are enough to create a desired outcome for both parents. The costs for the parent(s) who act may or may	One parent has primary custody and is willing to share extra parenting time with the other parent because they see the benefit for all; child expenses could be paid for by

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Entry #	Description	Examples
	not be equal, and this situation assumes both parents have equal ability to take action that benefits all and may take turns over time	anyone, but one chooses to do it, no strings attached, other the parents rotate who is responsible for payments
11. Asymmetric dependence	A situation where one parent can influence the outcomes of the other parent, who little or no influence on the outcomes of the influencer. The more powerful parent often does not care about a joint outcome, which gives them more power	The less powerful parent only has a positive relationship with their child if the more powerful parent is generous; the powerful parent controls the child and uses them against the other parent. The child is also completely dependent on the powerful parent for outcomes and must comply with them; the powerful parent continuously undermines all control of the less powerful parent so that they have no options and are completely dependent on them for a relationship with their child
12. Iterated prisoner's dilemma	A prisoner's dilemma but occurring over time and can spiral into negative interaction cycles when there are errors of perception influenced by past interactions	A cooperative parent withdraws from interactions or court intervention if they know that the other parent will always compete
13. Investment	A situation where each parent makes an investment to reach a mutual goal, and both parents need to be contributing to make this happen. Investment does not require equal contribution of the parents, but mutual contributions	Parents must both make payments for a child's activity expenses or the child will not be able to participate in the activity; One parent may stay in an unhealthy relationship to avoid loss of investment (e.g., children)
14. Delay of gratification	A situation where a parent needs to complete a series of steps before a desired goal is reached and is dependent on the cooperation of the other parent to deliver on their promise of gratification	A parent may agree to an unequal temporary custody arrangement in the hopes that "justice" will prevail, and they will eventually get a more equal parenting time arrangement; a parent tolerates the other's bad behavior in the hopes that it will get better later; a parent tells the child they need to reject the other parent (short term goal) for their own safety (long term goal)
15. Negotiation	The parents have a set of outcomes that can be selected by mutual agreement, there are outcomes that can occur if they do not agree, they disagree on certain factors but have some common interests, the parents can	The parents have preferences to use different health care providers for the children, and their differences are not about the child themselves, so they resolve this through mediation; holiday breaks may be

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Entry #	Description	Examples
	communicate with each other, and they each know their own outcomes for decisions, but not about the same outcomes for the other parent	valued differently due to religious differences between parents, and they need to assess the value of each to negotiate parenting time
16. Encounters with strangers	This situation involves two individuals who are dependent on a stranger for an outcome, such as a judge or a custody evaluator	A new romantic partner who is not interdependent yet on the family members creates uncertainty on how it will affect each person's outcomes; A custody evaluator interacts with the parents to make a recommendation about custody
17. Joint decisions under uncertainty	A situation where parents may choose to make a joint decision that affects both of them and the outcomes are uncertain and irreversible	A parent may blame the other parent for a joint decision that had a bad outcome, such as moving a child to a new school district; parents may not agree on a child related issue and so they ask a court appointed decision maker to make the decision for them, which could make the outcome worse for all
18. Twists of fate	A situation where a parent or both parents find themselves in a position of extreme unilateral dependence on the other for costly help. There is uncertainty around whether the favor would be reciprocated in the future	A parent loses a job and needs to take another job requiring a lot of travel and the parent is completely at the mercy of the other to have parenting time with the children as a consequence; A parent is unable to pay for a child's activities due to some unforeseen expenses and asks the other parent to cover them. The other parent needs to decide whether to pay for the expense
19. Third parties	This is a situation where an outside person or institution influences the interdependence of the parents, and has some level of interdependence with them, or longer history and impact on the family unit	Coalition of one parent with others (e.g., friends, lawyers, teachers) against the other parent; a new child is born to one parent and the children's step-parent; a parent remarries; a therapist works closely with the children and/or family members
20. N-person prisoner's dilemma	A prisoner's dilemma but at the group level	Two step-families need to make a joint decision that can be beneficial for all, or costly to their own family

Note: Situations #16 and 19 were not included as they involved strangers and third parties. While situations involving such parties are very important for the study of violence, the purpose of this study was to examine the interpersonal power dynamic between the alienating and targeted parent. A coding example was not created for #21 (where do we go from here), as it was an iterative process that was captured in the other codes described in the interview.

5.1 | Hypothesis 1

Our first hypothesis was that targeted parents would predominantly describe situations in which they had considerably less power than the alienating parent. To test this hypothesis, we compared the average percentage of times parents described each situation. These percentages are presented in Table 2. The two most frequently described situations were characterized as power imbalanced and where one of the parents was vying for power: Asymmetric dependence and chicken, respectively. These codes made up 81.0% of the total situations described. The other interdependence situations were described much less frequently by parents in our sample and so for brevity sake, will only be addressed in the discussion section.

5.1.1 | Asymmetric dependence

By far, the most common situations described by targeted parents in our sample were characterized by asymmetric dependence ($M = 66.4\%$, $SD = 25.7\%$). These situations typically involved gatekeeping, loyalty inducing behaviors, and the strategic use of money and technology to control the targeted parent. A common thread of these asymmetric dependence situations involved the abuse of power by the alienating parent over the targeted parent when they had little influence on them in return. Perpetrators of domestic violence who display coercively controlling characteristics often use children to control their victims and undermine the authority of the abused parent (Bancroft et al., 2012), and often continue to control and alienate children after separation and divorce to coerce, dominate, control, harass, and punish the targeted parent (Jaffe et al., 2008; Lorandos et al., 2013).

TABLE 2 Mean percentage of times that parents mentioned each situation across all custody arrangements described

Entry #	Mean (SD)
Asymmetric dependence	66.4% (24.7%)
Chicken	13.6% (15.6%)
Conflicting mutual joint control	4.8% (9.9%)
Prisoner's dilemmas (all types)	3.8% (7.7%)
Mutual partner control	2.4% (4.7%)
Conjunctive problems	2.0% (6.8%)
Threat	2.0% (6.3%)
Disjunctive problems	1.3% (9.7%)
Negotiation	1.2% (5.5%)
Corresponding mutual joint control	1.0% (3.9%)
Twists of fate	0.7% (3.4%)
Delay of gratification	0.5% (2.2%)
Investment	0.2% (1.1%)
Joint decisions under uncertainty	0.1% (0.8%)
Hero	0.04% (0.4%)
Independence	0

Both mothers and fathers described examples of the alienating parent being abusive toward them and their children prior to, and after their separation. For example, prior to separating, one father described how he “was in an abusive marriage...14 trips to the hospital. They [the court] didn’t care...my ex said I fell down the stairs a lot, that I was clumsy” (Father, alienated by mother). After separation, parents also detailed abuse dynamics directed at them and the children: “He wants to see me dead... and like garbage. He wants to feel like he prevailed. He gave her [their daughter] a black eye. The result of that was I was the one placed on supervised visits” (Mother, alienated by father).

Many of the situations described by targeted parents involved gatekeeping behaviors (Austin et al., 2013), such that parenting time and communication between the targeted parent and their child(ren) were minimized or prevented entirely. In the context of custody proceedings, gatekeeping is also seen as a form of power and control because conflict and gatekeeping play reciprocal roles that exacerbate one another (Austin et al., 2013). For example, one mother described how her visitation was blocked by her daughter’s father, who ultimately attempted and succeeded in gaining all control and custody of her: “He would deny me visitation with excuses like he was going away on a business trip ... at one point he actually said in court that he had another wife and that I should just leave my daughter alone” (Mother, alienated by the father).

Alienating parents were also described by the targeted parents in our sample as engaging in many loyalty inducing behaviors and behaviors intended to disparage, undermine, and reject the targeted parent. Often these behaviors adultified children, which allowed alienating parents to keep control by positioning children as a proxy for their power. In many cases, the adultification took the form of allowing the children to choose whether they wanted to have their parenting time with the targeted parent or by sharing inappropriate information with the child that only adults should know (e.g., details about the divorce; information about court proceedings). Targeted parents often recounted indicators of such adultification, especially in how alienated children communicated. For example, one mother described phone conversations with her daughter: “The way she started talking.... sounded identical to him...and I know that’s not the way she talks... a twelve-year-old doesn’t talk like an adult. Some of the stuff she knows.... didn’t come from her” (Mother, alienated by father).

Money was described as a primary motivator of the alienating parent and was used as a strategy to align the children against the targeted parents in our sample. For example, alienating parents were often described as including children in adult conversations with comments such as “your father is not giving me enough money” (Father, alienated by mother) and as “using the kids as tools to get things...particularly money.” (Father, alienated by mother). Digital coercive controlling behaviors (Woodlock et al., 2019) were also commonly described, such that pressure was placed on the children by the alienating parent to reject or harm the targeted parent using technology facilitated communication while in their care. A father described this effect on his oldest son, saying “he was answering the phone with F-you and hanging up and interfering with my phone calls with [his] other siblings” (Father, alienated by mother). Additionally, considering negative texts sent from the alienating parent and step-mom, one mother stated: “they were really negative about me, like ‘You don’t have to listen to your mom. Your mom doesn’t know anything. You’re not really safe there.’ They ended up buying her a new car after she quit talking to me and giving her a brand new smart phone” (Mother, alienated by the father and step-mother).

Many situations described by targeted parents in our sample also detailed direct and indirect pressures placed on the children by the alienating parent to reject them. For example, one

mother described the direct tactic an alienating father used on his daughter: “‘Oh what a baby! Look, the baby has to call her mother.’ So there was early shaming [by the father]” (Mother, alienated by father). A father also explained an indirect pressure regarding his daughter's reactions to him in public while she was with her mother: “‘If I said hi to her at a soccer game, she'd start crying. I mean, she'd go into a panic.... If I waited for her mother to go to the bathroom, then I waved to her, she's OK” (Father, alienated by mother).

Other examples of asymmetrical dependence included blocking gifts sent to the child by the targeted parent, kidnapping the child, demanding the children call the targeted parent by their first name or not mention them at all, not informing the targeted parent of the children's activities, blocking the targeted parent's access to children's medical and educational information, pressuring the children to call the police or make false reports to mandatory reporters, failing to respond to the targeted parent when they try to communicate about their child, and badmouthing the targeted parent to the child and others.

5.1.2 | Chicken

Chicken was the second most frequently described situation by targeted parents in our sample ($M = 14.6\%$, $SD = 15.6\%$), and is a situation named after the deadly game of two cars driving on a collision course toward each other. In our study, chicken situations involved an alienating parent challenging the targeted parent in a way that left them with only two choices: they could make the “safe” choice and pull away from the provocation, with the risk of being called a “chicken” or coward, or they could make a “riskier” choice and rise to the challenge. If the alienating parent backs away, then the targeted parent “wins” and is the victor. If both parents engage in the provocation, they potentially face mutual destruction (Kelley et al., 2003).

Chicken appears to be a tactic that was used by alienating parents to gain control in the relationship and with the children, such as to get a custody advantage. False accusations of abuse perpetrated by the targeted parent, verbal provocations at parenting time exchanges, and many other actions were described as initiated by alienating parents to force the targeted parent to defend themselves. If the targeted parent walked away, they risked losing everything, or having the children be told by the alienating parent that they were abandoned by them. If they defended themselves, it could also end badly, and outside observers (e.g., court officials) thought the targeted parents were just as responsible for creating the conflict. Power dynamics, such as the motives that are common for instigators of chicken, are considered a way to distinguish between situational couple violence and coercively controlling abuse because perpetrators often have characteristics that drive them to try to control others (Johnson, 2008).

Many confrontations described by parents in our sample occurred at parenting time exchanges, placing the targeted parent into a no-win situation. For example, one targeted father described how parenting time exchanges went with his son: “‘His mom held him and started crying... ‘mommy doesn't want you to go but you have to go.’ You're in a situation where [my son] is having to pick a parent and you're not going to win” (Father, alienated by mother). Sometimes the chicken situation was created during the targeted parent's parenting time by placing the alienated child in the middle. For example, one alienated daughter continuously asked her father if she could stay at her mother's house during his one-hour-a-week parenting time, making the father think, “well, is it really worth fighting and saying no, you need to come with me?... Meanwhile, my [ex] was texting me, ‘why are you forcing your daughter to do things she doesn't want to do?’” (Father, alienated by mother).

Another way chicken was described was as an indirect confrontation involving an administrative (Child Protection Services, police involvement) or legal action (e.g., a court motion) that required a response from the targeted parent. With legal action, a targeted father explained, “we went back to court [and] that’s when she told me I can have my children at Christmas over her dead body... [I] walked away feeling disgusted by the way the system works” (Father, alienated by mother). Regarding administrative involvement *and* legal action, a targeted mother described her experience: “everything I did he either filed papers in court with his version of how, you know, whatever he says happened, or he went through the therapist” (Mother, alienated by father).

5.2 | Hypothesis #2

Our second hypothesis was that targeted parents who have equal or shared custody/parenting time with their children have more power and behavioral options than targeted parents with less custody. The parents who were interviewed described the entire history of their case, and for many of these targeted parents (40.5% of the total sample), their custodial situation had changed once or twice across the situations that they described (23 and 8 parents respectively). This intra-person variability in custodial status required us to test our hypothesis using percentages of situations varying by custodial status rather than by person ($k = 119$). We identified situations within each transcript that were described as having occurred when the custodial arrangements were primary custody with the targeted parent (80%–100% of the time, $k = 12$), equal or nearly equal shared parenting (35%–65% of the time with both parents, $k = 34$), most of the parenting time with the alienating parent (70%–90% of the time, $k = 34$), and all of the time with the alienating parent ($k = 39$), which was characteristic of times when the children had been completely alienated and were refusing all contact with the targeted parent. It is important to note that even though a legal custody arrangement favoring the targeted parent was established for some, the alienating parent still was able to influence their children using parental alienating behaviors, regardless of the custodial arrangement.

The percentage of times that parents described asymmetric dependence and chicken situations across the four custodial status categories is presented in Figure 1. An ANOVA was conducted using custodial status as the predictor of percentage of times asymmetric dependence situations were described by the parents, and it was found to differ significantly by custodial status, $F(3,115) = 12.67$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.25$. A Bonferroni post hoc test indicated that when children were in the primary custody of the alienating parent (70%–90% and 100% of the time), the situations described by the parents in our sample were significantly more likely to be characteristic of asymmetric dependence (70%–80% of the situations) than when custody was nearly equally shared or primarily with the alienated parent (49%–53% of the situations; all $ps < .05$). Therefore, when a targeted parent was still able to maintain partial or shared parenting, they were less likely to describe situations of asymmetric dependence, indicating that they may have had more behavioral options and choices for action than those parents who had very little or no custody of their children.

We did not find statistically significant differences between parents in our sample based on custodial status on the next most frequently mentioned situation, Chicken, $F(3, 115) = 1.83$, $p = .15$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.05$. That said, a Bonferroni post hoc test indicated a statistical trend in the expected direction such that more situations of chicken were described by alienated parents in our sample when they had primary custody ($M = 20.7\%$, $SD = 0.26$) than when the

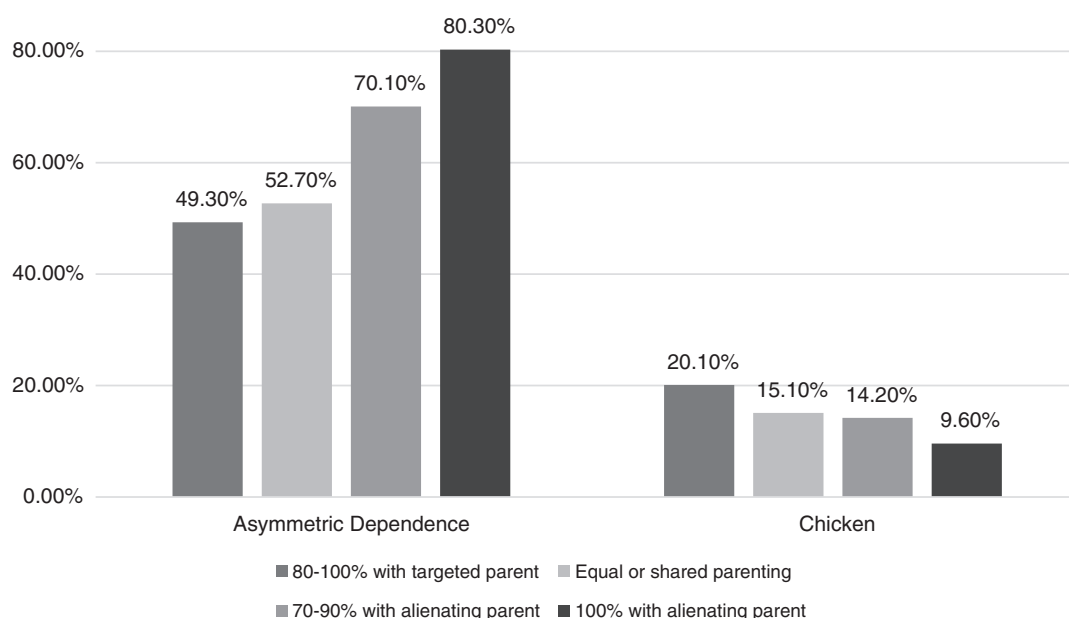


FIGURE 1 Percentage of asymmetric dependence and chicken situations described at different levels of child custody. Although the sample of alienated parents was 79, parents described situations occurring during different custodial arrangements, resulting in 119 different custody allocations described. Therefore, the mean percentages are drawn from 119 different custodial arrangements described rather than by the sample size of participants

alienating parent had 100% custody ($M = 10.0\%$, $SD = 0.09$), $p = .19$ (confidence interval = -0.26 to 0.03). These results suggest that chicken was described by the parents in our sample as possibly being a strategy that the other parent was using to gain control, particularly when the targeted parent had most custody of the children. Forcing the targeted parent to engage in a direct confrontation or to respond to a false allegation of abuse (or else lose parenting time) takes behavioral choices for action away from the targeted parent and serves to potentially empower the alienating parent.

6 | DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the power dynamics of families in which parental alienation has occurred. We found support for our hypotheses that targeted parents of parental alienation in our sample predominantly described situations of asymmetric dependence and direct challenges to gain control (Chicken) by the alienating parent. We also found that the proportion of situations in which asymmetries in power were described was highest when the alienated parent had primary or sole custody of the children rather than when there was shared parenting or when the targeted parent had more custody than the alienating parent.

The disempowerment described by the targeted parents in our sample stemmed from a variety of experiences, such as a history of IPV and a myriad of tactics used by alienating parents such as loyalty inducing behaviors and making false allegations of abuse about the targeted parent. Often, these tactics were multipronged approaches that placed children in vulnerable

positions while simultaneously utilizing the legal system and those embedded in it (e.g., therapists) to gain advantage. Power and control were at the forefront of the campaigns alienating parents used, evident by a host of behaviors that closely resemble tactics used by coercively controlling abusive parents (Harman & Matthewson, 2020). When power and control are threatened, abusive individuals are motivated to regain an advantage over those around them. Data from this study indicate that the use of children is one strategy a parent uses to maintain control and power over the child's other parent. In addition, many targeted parents (regardless of gender) described physical abuse directed toward themselves or their children, and although this was not always the primary tactic used, it remained a salient feature and created an undercurrent of fear for targeted parents who experienced it.

One of the hallmarks of coercive control is the pervasive nature of abuse that evolves over time (Johnson, 2008) and this mirrored the alienation trajectories that the targeted parents described. The targeted parents often related how the full scope of alienation was not visible until a major turning point occurred (e.g., the child refused all contact). This aspect of recognition also aligns with the literature on IPV trajectories and turning points as they relate to recognizing and leaving an abusive relationship (Chang et al., 2010). For many targeted parents in our study, a host of coercively controlling tactics had already been exerted by the alienating parent by the time alienation was recognized, making the child's parental alienation become more severe when the targeted parent tried to stop it. For example, gatekeeping behaviors were easier to use over time by the alienating parent because the child-targeted parent relationship became increasingly damaged. Gatekeeping is intimately tied to power and control (Austin et al., 2013) and resembles isolation tactics that coercively controlling abusers use. Isolating children from the targeted parent was a foundational strategy that fueled further power and control behaviors, all motivated and geared toward disempowering targeted parents.

Although described less frequently, targeted parents in our study detailed several other situations of interdependence that were not reported here for sake of brevity (see Table 2). These situations often involved needing to make a decision that affected both parents but where there was disagreement about how it should be resolved (conflicting mutual joint control), or a prisoner's dilemma where the targeted parent needed to decide whether to cooperate with or stand up to the demands being made by the alienating parent. These situations still oftentimes favored the alienating parent (e.g., they had more information than the targeted parent). Additionally, court officials and extended family played meaningful roles in exacerbating or combating alienation. Future research should explore how strangers (e.g., custody evaluators) and third parties (e.g., extended family members) provide or inhibit powerful advantages to alienating parents in these situations to prevent abusive manipulation.

This is the first study to qualitatively evaluate power dynamics in families where parental alienation has occurred, as well as the first to create and use a coding scheme based on situations of interdependence described in the *Atlas of Interpersonal Situations* (Kelley et al., 2003). Although our findings provided support for our hypotheses, our data were limited to interviews conducted with parents who reported being alienated from their children. We did use a measure to assess parental alienating behaviors and symptoms in the child and found that the sample scored higher than the mid-point, but future researchers would benefit from utilizing alternate methods of verifying parental alienation in their samples of targeted parents (e.g., a custody evaluation). Due to this sample being one of convenience, the generalizability of the findings should also be tempered, as the parent's experiences in our sample may reflect those of alienated parents whose experiences are more severe, or they were more motivated to share their experiences than others. The interviewees also only represent the perspective of the

alienated parent, and not the alienated child, alienated parent, or extended family. Future research would benefit from directly sampling other populations of parents, particularly those whose alienated children have different levels of severity, and from other members of the family.

Another limitation of the current study is that we relied on retrospective interviews from parents about their experiences. Recall biases may have influenced some reporting of past situations; however, we did find that there was general consistency across the parents in the study. Although it may also be useful to quantify the codebook that was used in this study (e.g., create survey items), power dynamics are extremely complex, and involve the assessment of multiple factors at once (e.g., level of knowledge available, amount of dependence, and power). Therefore, the development of a survey instrument to accurately capture the situations that are described in the codebook is challenging. An assessment tool that retains the ability to capture the multifaceted ways that power and dependence operate in interpersonal situations, based on the codebook created for this study, would be extremely useful for the assessment and diagnosis of parental alienation and other forms of family violence and conflict.

Finally, after reaching saturation, we interviewed 39 additional parents from different parts of the world in anticipation that there may have been variability in their experience due to culture and context, such as different parenting norms and legal processes that may impact the experiences of the parents. Our use of a top-down template analysis approach did not help us identify whether there were contextual or cultural differences in the parent's experiences. While it is possible that alienated parent's experiences may be similar across cultures, future analyses or studies with parents in different countries and cultures would benefit from utilizing bottom-up qualitative methods (e.g., grounded theory) to more directly examine the role of these larger systems on this family problem.

7 | CONCLUSION

Parents in our study who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors were found to experience family dynamics like victims of coercively controlling abuse: they had little power in their relationships with the other parent or their children and were often challenged by the alienating parent to further take away what little power they had left. By having a more nuanced understanding of how elements of interpersonal situations affect behaviors of family members in families where parental alienation has occurred, mental health/custody evaluators will be less likely to inaccurately attribute all behaviors of parents as being indicators of characterological flaws (e.g., the targeted parent is hostile/aggressive) and instead note contextual features that may also be influencing the individual's actions (e.g., the targeted parent is frustrated by their lack of power). In addition, treatment and intervention approaches for situational couple violence and coercively controlling abuse are very different due to the power dynamics of the parties, and so treating parental alienation as if the parents have similar levels of power (e.g., loyalty conflict families) could cause more harm than good. When behaviors are understood in terms of the situational interdependence of the parties, more accurate assessments and effective treatments for these families struggling with family violence can be made.

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hours transcribing the audio recordings so that each parent's story could be studied to understand this form of family violence better.

ENDNOTE

¹ The audio quality for one of the interviews was very poor, making the ability to decipher what the parent said very difficult. This was the transcript for which there was only one situation that was codable.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. Due to the possibility that the participants can be identified based on the personal stories described in their interviews, the original transcripts are not available to share unless we obtain consent from each parent individually. The data used in the research are available. The data and statistical output can be obtained at: https://osf.io/gk2c8/?view_only=6efd492f1aa144fa84f822d5e467b872

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APPENDIX A.

Basic background/historical information

1. Can you briefly describe the current custody/living situation with your children?
 - a. How long have you been divorced or separated from the other parent of your children?
 - b. What are your children's ages today?
 - c. How has your custody situation changed (if at all) since you separated/divorced?
 - d. Are there any other adults (such as a step-parent or boyfriend/girlfriend) who are involved in your children's lives?
 - e. Any other step- or half-siblings involved? Where do they live?

Alienation

1. What has been your experience with parental alienation?
 - a. When did you first start feeling your children were being alienated from you?
 - b. What early examples can you provide that your ex either did, or that your children did that made you feel this way—please provide four?
 - c. Can you provide four more recent and specific examples of alienation that have happened?
2. Has your ex used others to assist with the alienation? In what ways were they involved?
 - a. Friends
 - b. Neighbors
 - c. Medical Providers
 - d. Mental health providers
 - e. School
 - f. Social services
 - g. Legal system
 - i. How, if at all, did alienation play a part in any legal issues with your ex (e.g., custody, divorce)?

- ii. Did the legal system recognize alienation was going on? What did they do about it?
 - iii. Did you express your concerns to anyone as part of the legal process? What was their reaction?
3. How have you coped with the alienation? What impact has it had on you?
 - a. Emotionally
 - b. Physically
 - c. At work
 - d. Socially
 4. How often, if at all, as your ex engaged in stalking or harassing behaviors with you? Could you describe them?
 5. Have you ever found yourself doing things that could potentially be alienation the children from the other parent? How did you handle this?
 6. What do you feel motivates your ex-partner's alienating behaviors?
 - a. How conscious or unconscious do you feel these behaviors are?
 7. Has there been any mental illness diagnosis made for any of the parties involved?
 8. How has the alienation changed over time, if at all? Has it ever gotten better or worse at times? Why?
 9. How much of your time do you feel you have had to devote to dealing with this problem?
 10. How specifically do you see your children coping with the alienation?
 - a. E.g., do they put their own needs, wants and desires aside to please a parent, do they act out.
 11. How do you feel your child(ren)'s attachment and emotional relationship to you is being/ may be affected by PA?
 12. If you had a magic wand and could change your situation right now, what would you change, and how would your family look?
 13. What plans do you have for how to handle the alienation moving forward?
 14. If you could provide advice to another parent who is going through a divorce and is being alienated from their children, what would it be?
 15. Last, how do you feel about having participated in this interview?