

Abused and Rejected: The Link Between Intimate Partner Violence and Parental Alienation

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Previous studies have demonstrated a connection between intimate partner violence (IPV) and a child's alienation from the abused parent, but little is known about the relationships between the type of IPV, aspects, and severity of a child's alienation, and the target parent's gender. This study assessed the presence of an IPV history (verbal and physical aspects) among parents who identify as targets of their children's unreasonable rejection. Also investigated were associations between the form of IPV and manifestations of a child's alienated behavior, parent's gender and type of IPV, and parents' gender and degree of the child's alienation. Self-identified alienated parents ($n = 842$) completed an online survey that included an IPV screening measurement (Hurts, Insults, Screams, Threatens screening tool) and a measure of the parent's perception of their child's alienated behaviors (Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale). The majority identified as IPV victims and reported a higher level of verbal than physical abuse. More mothers than fathers identified themselves as IPV victims. As a group, IPV victims rated their child as more severely alienated than did non-IPV alienated parents. Mothers were more likely than fathers to report physical aggression by the other parent and more likely than fathers to assess their child's alienated behaviors as more severe. Victims of physical violence reported their children were less likely to withhold positive affection from them. This knowledge may assist in earlier identification of the alienation process and greater recognition, legitimacy, funding, and opportunities for enhanced collaboration among stakeholders. This, in turn, may lead to improvements in

prevention, intervention, and accountability, thus helping to interrupt alienation processes.

KEYWORDS: parental alienation; divorce; child abuse; domestic violence; family violence

Parental alienation (PA) is a condition in which a child aligns with a parental figure while rejecting another parental figure whose behavior does not warrant the child's rejection (Lorandos & Bernet, 2020). This unreasonable rejection of a parent usually occurs under the influence of the aligned parent (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Harman et al., 2018). Courts have referred to parental alienating behaviors that lead to the "poisoning" of a parent-child relationship as a form of mental cruelty and emotional abuse that is incompatible with a child's best interests (e.g., *D. v. T.*, 2021; *J. M. v. Malant*, 2006; *McClain v. McClain*, 2017; Miller & Todd, 2011).

The domestic violence (DV) literature has long described how some coercive controlling parents undermine their children's relationship with the other parent (e.g., Bancroft & Silverman, 2002), but there are some DV researchers and victims' advocates who regard the concept of PA as antithetical to understanding DV and protecting its victims (e.g., Jaffe et al., 2010). Thus, PA scholarship and DV scholarship have largely developed as separate lines of research. This separation has begun to erode, however, and there have been an increasing number of scholars who have noted that PA and DV are both family violence, with one area of research focusing on the impact of DV on the child and the other focusing on the perpetrator and their victim. For example, Harman et al. (2018) have conceptualized parental alienating behaviors as a form of family violence that entails a pattern of aggressive behavior that harms the other parent and the parent's relationship with their child.

Researchers have proposed various typologies to classify different patterns of intimate partner violence and/or abuse (IPV/A) (also called domestic violence) (Beck et al., 2013; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). Situational couple violence, which is largely reciprocated between partners, can lead to loyalty conflicts among children who become triangulated in the family dynamic (e.g., Bernet et al., 2016) and has not been found to be a predictor of PA in children (e.g., Harman, Leder Elder, et al., 2019). In contrast, research evidence supports PA as being an outcome in the child associated with unilaterally perpetrated, coercively controlling abuse (e.g., intimate terrorism) by a parent driven by the need for power and control over the other parent (Harman & Kruk, 2022; Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022; Harman & Matthewson, 2020; Harman, Matthewson, et al., 2022).

The current study examined whether parents who identify as victims of PA also identify as targets of IPV/A. If this nexus exists, it further ties knowledge about IPV/A to PA with implications for the identification and intervention of families experiencing this form of family conflict. Additionally, we examined whether specific aspects of a child's alienated behavior are associated with verbal and physical IPV/A, whether a child's alienated behavior is experienced as more severe for parents who identify as IPV/A victims compared to those who do not identify as such, and whether

the gender of the alienated parent is associated with differences in reported IPV/A or differences in reported alienated behaviors.

Impact of Parental Alienating Behaviors on Children

Behaviors intended to undermine a child's relationship with a parent constitute forms of psychological aggression not just against the targeted parent but against the child as well (Harman et al., 2018; Harman & Matthewson, 2020). Alienating parents often badmouth, humiliate, belittle, and mock the other parent directly to or within earshot of the child (Warshak, 2015b), which is an illustration of expressive aggression (Breiding et al., 2015). Threats of physical violence and intimidation intended to discourage the targeted parent from seeing the children are another form of psychological aggression (Breiding et al., 2015).

Children suffer when they are abused physically, psychologically, or sexually and when they witness physical and psychological aggression on another person (Edelson, 1999; Holden, 2003; Huecker et al., 2021; Kitzman et al., 2003; Vu et al., 2016). As victims of coercively controlling IPV/A, children are often pulled into the abusive dynamics of the parental dyad, such as being, for example, forced to take sides, being parentified, and being scapegoated (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Hardesty et al., 2015). Children may also be used as a surrogate to control the victim by monitoring activities, sending messages, or stalking (Johnson, 2009; Stark, 2007). Callaghan et al. (2018) found children who experience IPV/A are not only aware of the coercive control but also strategize to predict and manage the coercion both before and after parental separation.

Although not all children exposed to parental alienating behaviors succumb to the alienating parent's negative influence (Bernet et al., 2016; Gardner, 2001; Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019; Rowen & Emery, 2018), some children identify with an aggressive parent engaging in parental alienating behaviors, and they adopt a shared disdain for their other parent. These children suffer from PA. In some instances, children subjected to aggression may want to avoid the targeted parent, either because they are angry with them for perceived wrongdoings or are afraid of them. In other cases, the children may reject contact to avoid witnessing the aggression directed at the targeted parent during parenting time exchanges. In families permeated by coercive control, it is also possible children avoid contact with the targeted parent as part of a complex strategy to reconcile the dangerous, unpredictable environment by aligning with the perpetrator, and forming a trauma bond (Adorjan et al., 2012). Reid et al. (2013) describe conditions conducive to trauma bonding, such as a perceived threat to one's physical and psychological survival, intermittent perceived kindness from the abuser to the victim, isolation, and inability to escape (Reid et al., 2013). Subsequent or simultaneous acts of parental alienating behavior may create a fertile ground for trauma bonds to grow. Each of these coping strategies and dynamics can explain why a parent who is the target of a former partner's aggression is also likely to be the target of their child's rejection.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (DSM-5); American Psychiatric Association, 2013 captures a link between a parent's expression of hostility toward the other parent and its effect on a child in the category titled "child affected by parental relationship distress" (CAPRD). This category is used "when the focus of clinical attention is the negative effects of parental relationship discord (e.g., high levels of conflict, distress, or disparagement) on a child in the family" (p. 752). Two psychiatrists who developed the DSM-5 chapter on CAPRD, along with a third colleague, clarified CAPRD and its intended relevance to PA (Bernet et al., 2016). Bernet et al. (2016) noted that when clinical attention focuses on an alienating parent's manipulation and indoctrination of a child, the DSM-5 term *child psychological abuse* is also appropriate.

Characteristics of Unreasonably Alienated Children

Estimates of the prevalence of PA among children in the United States vary between 0.5% and 4% (Bernet, 2020; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019; Johnston, 2003; Warshak, 2015a). Richard Gardner (1985) was the first to identify a constellation of eight distinct manifestations that he labeled "parental alienation syndrome" (Gardner, 1985). Many professionals dispute the conceptualization of this problem as a formal syndrome (Warshak, 2021), although there is near-universal agreement that the phenomenon of unreasonably alienated children is genuine (Baker et al., 2011; Warshak, 2015b). The literature has moved in the direction of referring to this disturbance as *parental alienation*, with no implication that it constitutes a syndrome. The eight specific manifestations include a campaign of denigration of one of the parents; weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations for the deprecation; lack of ambivalence; "the independent thinker" phenomenon; reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict; absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the alienated parent; the presence of borrowed scenarios; and the spread of animosity to the friends and/or extended family of the alienated parent (Gardner, 1998); each is described below.

Alienating children employ a "campaign of denigration" against the alienated parent, treating the parent as having no value (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013) while expressing an "absence of guilt" or remorse for their hateful behavior (e.g., Bow et al., 2009). Unless they accuse a parent of abuse, irrationally alienated children generally cite trivial and inadequate reasons for severing ties considered "weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations" (e.g., Kelly & Johnson, 2001).

Ordinarily, children have mixed feelings about their parents. By contrast, irrationally alienated children demonstrate a "lack of ambivalence" (e.g., Bernet, Gregory et al., 2020; Spruijt et al., 2005). They can think of nothing good to say about the rejected parent but withhold criticism of the parent with whom they are aligned. In parental disputes, the children automatically side with the aligned parent against the rejected parent and uncritically accept as true the aligned parent's allegations about the other parent, demonstrating a pattern of "reflexive support" for the aligned parent (e.g., Bow et al., 2009). In fact, alienated children incorporate the aligned

parent's catalog of complaints, often using similar language even when this involves words and phrases the child does not fully understand, referred to in the literature as the "presence of borrowed scenarios" (Gardner, 1998; Warshak, 2021). At the same time, even when observers note the alienating parent's obvious manipulations, the children insist that rejecting the parent is their own initiative, free from any influence by the parent whom they prefer resulting in what is referred to as the "independent thinker phenomenon" (e.g., Baker & Darnall, 2007). As their alienation becomes more entrenched, a child's "spread of animosity" from the rejected parent to people, pets, and activities associated with that parent grow (e.g., Gith, 2013).

The Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS), developed in 2016, was designed to capture eight domains of children's alienated behavior as it has been posited in the literature (Gardner, 1985; 1998). Through an initial factor analysis study (Rowlands, 2018) and follow-up confirmatory factor analysis validation study (Rowlands, 2019), a six-factor model emerged as the most parsimonious and includes five of the original domain factors, and one newly identified factor, lack of positive effect toward the alienated parent, which relates to lack of ambivalence (Rowlands, 2018, 2019).

Gender and Family Violence

Rates of violence victimization and perpetration are similar for women and men (Archer, 2000). Large, population-based, and nationwide estimates consistently indicate that 5.2% of men, compared to 5.5% of women, are reported to be victims of IPV within the last 12 months in the United States. In addition, similar proportions of men and women (34%–36%) report lifetime psychological aggression by an intimate partner (Smith et al., 2018), and most IPV involves reciprocal abuse (aka common or situational couple violence, not coercively controlling abuse); however, women do suffer the greater share of serious, life-threatening injuries. Most research on coercive controlling violence, the type of IPV most like parental alienating behavior (Harman, Maniotes, et al., 2021), has focused on female victims with very little attention given to male victims (Follingstad, 2007). However, more recent studies have demonstrated male and female victims are equally vulnerable to coercively controlling partners (Bates & Graham-Kevan, 2016; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012; Straus & Gozjolko, 2014). Scholars have argued IPV victimization is underreported by both male and female victims, reducing the accuracy of prevalence estimates (Breiding et al., 2014; Gracia, 2004). Hines et al. (2015) note that male IPV victimization is likely underreported because men do not often identify as IPV victims, and measurement tools have not historically been tailored to capture male experiences. Thus, determining the prevalence and impact of IPV on male victims have posed research challenges (Walker et al., 2020).

As with other population-based studies regarding IPV, scientists have not found gender differences in who is more likely to be an alienating parent (e.g., see Harman, Leder-Elder, et al., 2019). Similarly, smaller clinical samples have reported equal or near equal distributions of alienating fathers versus mothers (Berns, 2001; Gardner, 2002; Johnston, 2003), and in one small-scale intervention outcome study, 58% of

the alienated parents were mothers (Warshak, 2010). In a review of U.S. trials and appellate cases, about 25% of the identified alienating parents were male, and 75% were female (Lorandos, 2020), which may be due to the resources needed to appeal legal cases (Harman & Lorandos, 2021), or gender biases among legal and mental health professionals regarding the acceptability of parental alienating behaviors (Harman et al., 2016).

Although there are no strong indications that mothers or fathers are more likely to be alienating or abusive parents, research has shown that alienating fathers and mothers tend to aggress differently. Mothers use proportionately more indirect forms of aggression (e.g., badmouthing the parent to others) than direct aggression (e.g., yelling at the other parent during a parenting time exchange), while fathers use similar levels of both types of behaviors (Harman, Lorandos, et al., 2019). Similarly, López et al. (2014) found that alienating fathers are more likely to encourage children to defy their alienated mothers while alienating mothers were more likely than alienating fathers to call their children frequently while in the care of the other parent and to make their children afraid the other parent would harm them. These gender differences in the use of alienating behaviors reflect gender differences seen with other forms of adult aggression (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2006).

The Current Study

The main goal of the current study was to assess the incidence of IPV in a population of parents who identify themselves as victims of PA, that is, as parents whose children have unjustifiably rejected them. Given the parallels between IPV and parental alienating behaviors (Harman & Kruk, 2022; Harman & Matthewson, 2020), our first hypothesis was that more than half of parents who identify as alienated would also report being victims of IPV prior to the separation or divorce.

The second goal of this study was to determine if a relationship exists between the gender of targeted parents and the experience of IPV for targeted parents. Although Sharples et al. (2021) did not find differences between alienating mothers and fathers in who was more likely to be a perpetrator of child abuse, they did find that alienating fathers were more likely to have a substantiated claim of IPV against them than alienating mothers. Given that this study focused on IPV and not child abuse, our second hypothesis was that a relationship would exist between the gender of targeted parents and the experience of IPV for targeted parents such that mothers would be more likely to indicate being a victim of IPV than fathers.

The third goal of this study was to determine if a relationship exists between the gender of the targeted parent and the child's alienated behavior. We formulated no hypothesis and simply posed the question about a possible link. The last two goals of this study were to examine whether specific aspects of a child's alienated behavior if any, are associated with verbal and physical IPV perpetrated by the alienating parent and to determine if a child's alienated behavior is experienced as more severe for parents who identify as victims of IPV.

METHOD

Participants and Recruitment

Under an institutionally approved research protocol, we obtained a convenience sample of parents from multiple PA online parent forums. These forums included facebook.com/Parental-Alienation-Support, ParentsAgainstParentalAlienation@yahoo.com, parentsagainstalienation@yahoogroups.com, <http://www.experienceproject.com/groups/Lost-My-Children-To-Parental-Alienation/>, and <http://againstpas.org/>. These forums are for parents who believe they have been alienated from their child(ren). We also used snowball sampling by asking forum participants to share details about the study with others who were members of the online forums. Survey Monkey, Inc. was used to administer an online survey, which began with a cover letter containing details for the parents' informed consent to participate. A total of 856 parents completed the survey. Fourteen parents who reported convictions for physical and/or sexual abuse were excluded from the study; a child's rejection of a parent may be justified if the parent engaged in behavior that could reasonably be construed as a major contributing factor, so parental alienation in those cases may not be applicable. Hybrid cases, in which a child has a legitimate reason for their rejection (aka estrangement), and the other parent engages in parental alienating behaviors, represent a small proportion of PA cases (Harman & Lorandos, 2021). As the focus of the current study is on PA cases that are not hybrids, these hybrid cases were excluded. The final sample included 842 parents.

Measures

Background Questionnaire. The questionnaire elicited demographic information about the respondents and their children, as well as information based on the respondents' reports regarding the parent-child relationship history, child custody history, and parental relationship history.

Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS). The RPAS (Rowlands, 2018) consists of 23 questions, each tapping one of six distinct domains associated with a child's alienated behavior. Questions, such as "Does/did your child support the opinions expressed by the other parent?" were answered on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*). The six distinct domains include five originally posited by Gardner (1985) and one additional domain, lack of positive affect, revealed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (Rowlands, 2018, 2019). The RPAS validation study (Rowlands, 2019) assessed the convergent validity of the six constructs. The composite reliability of all constructs was above .70, and the average variance extracted values were above .50. Thus, the constructs had convergent validity. Convergent and discriminant validity of the model was assessed by checking its correlations to two other scales: the Baker and Darnall Survey (BDS) measure of PA (Baker & Darnall, 2007) and the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS) (Driscoll

& Pianta, 2011; Pianta, 1992). All RPAS subscales were positively and significantly correlated with BDS factors; likewise, all RPAS subscales were negatively and significantly correlated with the CPRS factors. Therefore, the RPAS model demonstrated both convergent and discriminant validity. Cronbach's alpha for the entire scale was .94. The possible score range was 1–5; the mean RPAS score was 3.57. The majority of the respondents had mean scores within one standard deviation of the RPAS mean ($n = 451$); only 13.4% had mean scores one standard deviation above the RPAS mean ($n = 70$).

Hurts Insults Threatens Screams IPV Screening Tool (HITS). The HITS screening tool is a short scale originally developed at Christ Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, as a simple instrument for medical professionals to identify IPV victims (Sherin et al., 1998). The tool consists of four questions, two about verbal aggression and two about physical aggression. The HITS asks: “Over the last 12 months, how often did your partner: (a) Physically hurt you, (b) Insult you or talk down to you, (c) Threaten you with physical harm, and (d) Scream or curse at you?” For the purposes of this study, the phrase “Over the last 12 months” was replaced with the phrase “During your relationship with your child's other parent” to allow for the fact that some study participants may have ended their relationship with the child's other parent more than 12 months ago. Parents responded to the questions using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*frequently*). Scores greater than ten are considered a positive confirmation of domestic violence for females, scores greater than 11 are considered positive confirmation for males when the perpetrator is female and scores greater than 12 are considered positive confirmation for males when the perpetrator is male (Shakil et al., 2005; Sherin et al., 1998).

To assess differences between types of abuse, a HITS Verbal abuse score was computed as the sum of the Insult and Scream items, and a HITS Physical abuse score was computed as the sum of the Hurt and Threat items. In the original HITS study (Sherin et al., 1998), the lowest and highest HITS scores were 4 and 18, respectively ($M = 6.10$, $SD = 2.80$; $\alpha = .80$). Similarly, the lowest and highest HITS scores in the current study were 4 and 20, respectively ($M = 12.40$, $SD = 4.10$; $\alpha = .84$). As expected, the self-identified, alienated parents in the current sample had higher average HITS scores than reported in the original study. In a systematic review consisting of 33 articles on intimate partner violence screening tools conducted by Rabin et al. (2009), the HITS emerged with the highest specificity rating of 86%–99% compared to the other screening tools reviewed.

Analytic Strategy

Missing scale data were estimated using mean substitution when fewer than 20% of the items were missing within a scale. The normality of the scale distributions was assessed using z scores formed by dividing skewness by the standard error of skewness (West et al., 1995). Four of the RPAS factors and the four HITS item scores were skewed ($z > |3.29|$). Therefore, distribution-free (non-parametric) methods were

used for the comparative analyzes. Relationships between the HITS and RPAS were assessed using Spearman correlations. RPAS scores for parents who were identified as victims of domestic violence using HITS cutoff scores were compared to non-victims using Mann–Whitney *U* tests. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test compared the HITS Verbal and Physical abuse scores. Effect sizes for the group comparisons were computed as Cohen's *d* coefficients using adjustments for standardized Mann–Whitney *U* and Wilcoxon signed-rank tests as suggested by Fritz et al. (2012). The level of statistical significance was set at $p < .01$ to account for multiple comparisons and reduce the risk of false-positive correlations.

RESULTS

Of the 842 individuals in the sample, two respondents identified as transgender (not classified), and the remainder were evenly divided between men and women (49.9% each); the distribution of men and women was not by design. The average number of children in the family was 1.94 (0.92; range 1–5). For the child with whom the respondents reported the most troubled relationship, there were slightly more female than male children (55.0%), most (97.5%) reported a positive relationship history with the child at some time in the past, and more than three-quarters of the sample (76.8%) reported a history of marriage to the child's other parent. More than half (53.4%) of the respondents reported the child's other parent had full or majority custody while the child was under 18 years of age. Descriptive data about the sample are presented in Table 1.

Our first hypothesis was that more than half of alienated parents would also have been victims of IPV prior to separation or divorce. Scores greater than 10 and 11 on the HITS measure are considered a positive confirmation of IPV for females and, males, respectively (Shakil et al., 2005; Sherin et al., 1998), and so these were used as the differential score cutoffs. Based on these cutoff scores, a total of 62.8% of the parents in the current sample identified themselves as IPV victims, which provided support for our first hypothesis.

We also found support for our second hypothesis, which was that there would be gender differences in the experience of IPV such that alienated mothers would be more likely to report being victims of IPV than alienated fathers. A chi-square test revealed that significantly more mothers (65%) were identified as victims compared with fathers (56.5%; $\chi^2(1) = 14.20, p < .001$). Gender comparisons of the alienated parents were conducted using Mann–Whitney *U* tests. All HITS measures were significantly higher for mothers except for HITS item 4 (Scream). See Table 2.

Our next research question explored relationships between the gender of the alienated parent and the degree to which the parent endorsed aspects of the child's alienated behavior on the RPAS. Gender comparisons of the alienated parents were conducted using Mann–Whitney *U* tests. All RPAS measures were significantly higher for mothers, except for lack of positive affect, and these measures are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristics	Percent
Participant gender (<i>n</i> = 842)	
Male	49.9%
Female	49.9%
Transgender	0.2%
Child gender (<i>n</i> = 840)	
Male	44.9%
Female	55.0%
Transgender	0.1%
Parental relationship history (<i>n</i> = 840)	
Married	76.8%
Lived together, not married	17.7%
Never lived together or married	5.5%
Length of parents' relationship (<i>n</i> = 841)	
Under 4 years	14.9%
4–10 years	38.8%
11–15 years	23.4%
Over 15 years	22.9%
Have you and your child ever had a positive relationship? (<i>n</i> = 840)	
Yes	97.5%
No	2.5%
Legal custody status during identified child's childhood (<i>n</i> = 830)	
Shared custody 50/50	29.3%
I have/had full custody	7.8%
Other parent has/had full custody	25.2%
I have/had the majority of custody	9.3%
Other parent has/had the majority of custody	28.4%

The fourth goal of our study was to identify which aspects of children’s alienated behavior, if any, are most closely associated with verbal and physical IPV abuse perpetrated by the alienating parent. Relationships between the HITS and RPAS were assessed using Spearman correlations, as presented in Table 3. Significant relationships were found with three of four HITS scores as well as with the overall HITS for the RPAS campaign of denigration factor, and with all four HITS scores and the overall HITS for the RPAS presence of borrowed scenario factor. We also found that a lack of positive affect toward the rejected parent was negatively related to the HITS Hurt score, revealing a relationship between the child’s affect and the presence of physical abuse in the parental relationship. The HITS combined Verbal and Physical abuse scores were compared using a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, and a significantly

TABLE 2. Gender Comparisons for the HITS and the Rowlands Parent Alienation Scale (RPAS)

	Male		Female		Cohen's		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
HITS							
Hurt	419	2.05 ± 1.11	420	2.33 ± 1.30	.19	2.81	.005
Insult	419	3.97 ± 1.09	420	4.16 ± 1.14	.22	3.42	.001
Threat	419	2.28 ± 1.20	420	2.68 ± 1.40	.27	3.94	< .001
Scream	418	3.70 ± 1.21	420	3.63 ± 1.31	.03	0.42	.673
Overall HITS	418	12.00 ± 3.79	420	12.80 ± 4.30	.21	2.96	.003
RPAS							
1: Lack of positive affect toward this parent	419	3.61 ± 1.01	420	3.74 ± 0.92	.11	1.61	.108
2: Campaign of denigration	414	2.50 ± 1.09	414	3.08 ± 1.11	.53	7.35	< .001
3: Unconditional reflexive support for other parent	415	4.01 ± 1.08	412	4.16 ± 1.08	.19	2.82	.005
4: Presence of borrowed scenario	413	3.23 ± 1.14	410	3.56 ± 1.14	.30	4.26	< .001
5: Spread of animosity toward extended family	412	2.87 ± 1.17	417	3.13 ± 1.22	.22	3.12	.002
6: Independent thinker	412	3.48 ± 1.50	408	3.95 ± 1.38	.33	4.81	< .001
Overall RPAS	420	3.31 ± 0.84	420	3.60 ± 0.85	.38	5.40	< .001

Note. *M* ± *SD*, mean ± standard deviation; *z*, standardized Mann–Whitney *U* test.

TABLE 3. Spearman Correlations: Children's Alienated Behaviors (RPAS) & Parental Experience of Domestic Abuse (HITS)

Rowlands parental alienation scale	<i>N</i>	HITS intimate partner violence screening tool					
		Hurt		Insult		Threat	
		<i>r</i> ₂	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> ₂	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i> ₂	<i>p</i>
1: Lack of positive affect toward this parent	840	−0.10	.005	−0.01	.685	−0.05	.123
2: Campaign of denigration	829	0.09	.011	0.22	< .001	0.13	< .001
3: Unconditional reflexive support for other parent	827	−0.03	.345	0.08	.018	0.00	.985
4: Presence of borrowed scenario	824	0.16	< .001	0.18	< .001	0.19	< .001
5: Spread of animosity toward extended family	830	0.00	.938	0.11	.001	0.09	.007
6: Independent thinker	820	−0.03	.332	0.09	.010	0.00	.920
Overall RPAS	841	0.03	.352	0.16	< .001	0.09	.007

Note. *r*₂, Spearman correlation.

higher level of Verbal abuse (median = 8) relative to Physical abuse (median = 4) was found in the current sample ($z = 23.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.84$).

The last goal of our study was to examine if a child's alienated behavior was experienced as more severe for parents who identify as victims of IPV/A. RPAS scores for parents who were identified as victims of IPV/A using HITS cutoff scores were compared to non-victims using Mann–Whitney U tests. Alienated parents who were also victims of IPV/A reported significantly higher scores on a campaign of denigration and on the presence of borrowed scenarios compared to alienated parents who were not classified as IPV/A victims (see Table 4).

DISCUSSION

For this study, we sought to better understand the relationship between intimate partner violence and parental alienation among a population of parents who self-identified as being alienated from a child by the child's other parent. We found that 62.8% of our sample identified as victims of IPV, and the overall level of verbal abuse, measured by the HITS Insult and Scream factors, versus the level of physical abuse, measured by the HITS Hurt and Threat factors, was significantly higher. This finding aligns with IPV literature, where psychological abuse is estimated to be the most common form of IPV (Dokkedahl et al., 2019). However, a previous study by Harman and Lorandos (2021) found that less than half of appellate court cases involving alleged or confirmed PA had any allegations of abuse, which may suggest the current study included a unique subset of cases or may suggest the absent a formal screening tool to assess IPV (e.g., the HITS), IPV may be under-reported or under-identified.

As anticipated, we also found there to be gender differences in whether an alienated parent identified as being a victim of IPV. Overall, mothers were more likely to identify as victims than fathers and more likely to experience physical aggression (e.g., Hurts, Threatens with violence) than male victims in this sample. Most studies of IPV have focused on heterosexual women; hence, our understanding of the male experience and, importantly, how men conceptualize IPV is lacking (McHugh et al., 2013). As a result, current measurement tools may not accurately assess the IPV experience for male victims (Finneran & Stephenson, 2012).

The third goal of the current study was to explore whether a relationship exists between the gender of the alienated parent and the degree to which the parent endorsed aspects of the child's alienated behavior on the RPAS. Past research on PA has not explored this relationship to our knowledge, so we did not have any formal prediction about this relationship and whether it exists. We found statistically significant differences between mothers and fathers such that mothers reported more severe alienated behaviors of their children than fathers on all factors measured except lack of positive affect.

The fourth goal was to identify which aspects of children's alienated behavior, if any, are most closely associated with verbal and physical IPV/A perpetrated by the alienating parent. We found significant relationships with three of four HITS scores as well as the overall HITS for the RPAS campaign of denigration factor, and with all

TABLE 4. Children’s Alienated Behaviors (RPAS) by Victims of Domestic Abuse (HITS) Cutoff Scores

Rowlands parental alienation scale	Non-victims		Victims		Cohen's	
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean ± SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean ± SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>z</i>
1: Lack of positive affect toward this parent	312	3.77 ± 0.91	525	3.62 ± 1.00	0.13	-1.91
2: Campaign of denigration	305	2.57 ± 1.08	521	2.92 ± 1.15	0.30	-4.21
3: Unconditional reflexive support for other parent	308	4.12 ± 1.06	517	4.06 ± 1.10	0.04	-0.51
4: Presence of borrowed scenario	304	3.17 ± 1.15	517	3.52 ± 1.14	0.32	-4.50
5: Spread of animosity toward extended family	306	2.91 ± 1.14	521	3.06 ± 1.24	0.13	-1.80
6: Independent thinker	301	3.72 ± 1.44	517	3.71 ± 1.47	0.00	-0.03
Overall RPAS	312	3.40 ± 0.79	526	3.49 ± 0.90	0.15	-2.22

Note. *M* ± *SD*, mean ± standard deviation; *z*, standardized Mann–Whitney *U* test.

four HITS scores and the overall HITS for the RPAS presence of borrowed scenarios factor. In addition, the greater the presence of physical abuse in the parental relationship, the less likely the child lacked positive affect toward the alienated parent. A child may be more apt to empathize with and maintain affection for a parent who is the victim of physical abuse compared with verbal abuse while being less likely to identify with the perpetrator of physical as opposed to verbal abuse.

The fifth goal of our study was to determine if a child's alienated behavior is experienced as more severe for parents who identify as victims of IPV/A. Based on RPAS and HITS screening tools, alienated parents who were also victims of IPV/A scored the behavior of their alienated children significantly higher on the campaign of denigration and on the presence of borrowed scenarios compared to alienated parents who were not classified as IPV/A victims. These findings suggest that for alienated parents who are victims of IPV/A, a campaign of denigration and the presence of borrowed scenarios are experienced as the most severe alienating manifestations. Whether the severity of the alienation is actually worse or this is just a perception remains unclear, so it would be useful to examine this relationship more closely in future research.

Limitations

This study has several limitations related to the sample, the measures used to collect the data, and the operational definition of "severe PA" used to quantify severity. First, the self-identified group of alienated parents was presumably more knowledgeable about PA than the general population. We do not know whether the responses were based on actual experiences or exaggerated to "fit" the participants' presumed understanding of PA criteria. Thus, the use of a convenience and snowball sample in this study limits the generalizability of the findings.

Due to how the HITS survey is worded, we had to adjust the items to reflect abusive behaviors when the parent was in a relationship with the other parent rather than in the last 12 months. While some of the parents may have reflected behaviors that occurred within 12 months, other parents' relationships may have ended well over 12 months ago. The extent to which this change in the measurement tool impacted the results is unknown. Wang (2013) found that in delayed recall, women can provide more detailed and accurate memories than men, which may contribute to the higher number of women identified as victims of DV/A by the HITS screening tool. Future research should include other measures of DV/A that are potentially less susceptible to recall biases.

Another limitation of the current study is the cut-off score used to identify victims of domestic violence. Authors of the HITS tool suggest cutoff scores of greater than 10 for female victims, 11 for male victims when the perpetrator is female, and greater than 12 for male victims when the perpetrator is male. Because the study did not gather data for partner gender, we used the lower threshold of greater than 11 for identifying male victims, assuming most male parents were in relationships with female partners. This assumption might be incorrect. Thus, the study's conclusion

should be limited by noting that 45 of the 236 identified male victims, or 8.56% of the total identified victim population (male and female parents), had a HITS score of exactly 12, which means they may have been misclassified as victims.

Finally, another limitation of this study is that there was an assumption that higher RPAS scores are indicative of more severe PA. This assumption is based on validation studies of the RPAS (Rowlands, 2018, 2019), wherein RPAS scores were higher for cases where a court evaluator or court judgment confirmed the presence of PA. It was assumed PA was more severe when a court evaluator or court judgment had confirmed the presence of PA. Future research should include additional measurement tools to confirm the severity of alienation.

Future Research Directions

Future research should further clarify the relationship between PA and IPV, and the differences between families impacted by PA with and without a history of IPV. For instance, how does the process of becoming an alienated parent differ for families also impacted by IPV? Are there differences in outcomes for alienated children (e.g., depression) when families are also impacted by IPV? Are there differences in outcomes for the relationships between alienated children and alienated parents for families also impacted by IPV?

Implications

This study found more than half of the 842 parents who identified themselves as alienated also identified themselves as victims of IPV. The level of verbal abuse was significantly higher than the level of physical abuse, and there was a significant relationship between aspects of a child's alienated behaviors and the type of IPV that was reported. For alienated parents who were victims of IPV, PA was experienced as more severe, and the most severe manifestations of alienated behavior in children were a campaign of denigration and the presence of borrowed scenarios. When IPV took the form of physical violence, victims reported that their alienated children were less likely to withhold positive affection from them.

The impact of PA on children and families can be devastating, life-long, and inter-generational (Warshak, 2010). The consequences of PA on a child's cognitive, emotional, psychological, and social well-being can be severe and far-reaching (Baker, 2005; Baker & Verrochio, 2013; Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 1998; Hands & Warshak, 2011; Jaffe et al., 2017; Lee & Olesen, 2001; Rand, 1997a, b; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Warshak, 2019). Families harmed by moderate and severe alienation benefit from timely interventions informed by PA dynamics and related best practices. Conversely, traditional interventions or interventions implemented without recognition and understanding of the alienation dynamics can contribute to the alienation and exacerbate the consequences by inadvertently reinforcing the alienation (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Garber, 2015; Kleinman, 2017; Lowenstein, 2015; Moore et al., 2013; Rand

et al., 2005). Despite the plethora of research and practice supporting the concept of PA (Harman, Warshak, et al., 2022), the presence and severity of this phenomenon often go undetected or rejected (Warshak, 2020). Missed opportunities for meaningful interventions, regardless of the cause, have significant consequences for children and families. Not unlike other maladies impacting children and families, some risk factors exacerbate the likelihood, severity, and form of a child's irrational alienation. Confirming a relationship between IPV and PA may assist in earlier identification and meaningful intervention. Beyond identification and intervention, confirming a relationship between PA and IPV provides opportunities to include this form of child maltreatment as a target for a larger community response. More specifically, IPV is widely recognized as a public health threat, a crime, and a form of abuse with significant and well-documented consequences (Holden, 2003; Kitman et al., 2003). As such, numerous state and federal policies and related funding streams support community accountability, intervention, financial resources for victims, interventions, laws that hold offenders accountable, and research. Including PA under the larger umbrella of IPV could provide greater recognition, legitimacy, funding, and opportunities for enhanced collaboration among stakeholders. This, in turn, may lead to more efforts at prevention, intervention, and accountability, thus helping to interrupt alienation processes.

Given the link between factors associated with PA and with IPV, professionals should consider both possibilities when either problem is alleged. This consideration can promote earlier identification and intervention, thus improving outcomes for families. Moreover, when PA is recognized as a form of family violence, this recognition is accompanied by an umbrella of established policies that bring greater credibility to the concept of PA and access to funding for research, practice, and intervention.

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