

## Domestic Violence: Awareness of Parental Alienation in Families

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### **ABSTRACT (TNR 11, bold, capitalized, spaced 1, before spacing 6 pt, after spacing 10 pt)**

*Parental alienation has been recognized as a kind of domestic violence and child abuse. This study examines the family knowledge level of PA in an average family without reported domestic violence cases. Six participants were purposively selected for an interview; three practitioners who work with families (Social Worker, Legal practitioner, and Counsellor) and three adult parents (mother of two kids and two fathers of a child). Participants are nationals and residents of Nigeria United Kingdom and Czech Republic. The findings reveal that practitioners may not have a complete understanding of the term "Parental Alienation." However, they are able to identify Parental Alienation in families when supplied with the deceptions of PA. The study gathered the following characteristics of parental alienation in families: domestic violence, relatives' interference, partner victimization, momentary hurting (a form of family conflict), PA tactics, such as parents lying, reporting or seeking sympathy from same-gender children to support positions, and ignorant. The study demonstrates that parental alienation has detrimental and long-lasting impacts on the child, targeted parent and family system. These include child repetition of behaviour patterns in future relationships, depression, confusion, emotionally inconsistent, anxiety, frustration, substance abuse, distrust, demonization, hatred, sibling conflict, animosity between relatives, inappropriate behaviours including disregarding parents, and low empathy and solidarity. The current study acknowledges that practitioners are cognizant of PA in their clientele, but it appears they have inadequate skills to deal with PA in families. This study demonstrates that parental alienation is present not only in families experiencing domestic violence (dysfunctional families) but even in some families that appear stable. This leads to the conclusion that educational programmes on parental alienation in families and social support services are needed to improve the knowledge and skills of parents and practitioners in dealing with parental alienation*

**Keywords:** *parental alienation, domestic violence, functional and dysfunctional family.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Parental Alienation (PA) has been defined in the literature as a parent's attempt to influence the child's thoughts and nurture enmity against the other parent for no apparent cause, such as abuse or neglect (Haines et al., 2020; Harman, Kruk & Hines, 2018). This article is a component of a master's thesis on domestic violence and social interventions (Jegede, 2022). Parental alienation is prevalent in families experiencing domestic violence and child custody problems. Families face challenges due to changeable conditions, such as worldwide changes that affect lifestyles, health conditions, migration, societal disputes, economic issues, and raising children with disabilities. Families in these situations are susceptible, and if these difficult circumstances are not addressed appropriately, the family dynamic could be disrupted, leading to instability. In literature, Parental Alienation has been described as a form of emotional abuse, a kind of domestic violence (Neilson, 2018). It is also considered child abuse (Barnett, 2020b) since the alienating parent manipulates the child to develop animosity for the targeted parent by providing false or inappropriate information about the targeted parent. It is a more complex kind of family violence but frequently involves coercion, control, and instilling hatred in the child against the other parent (Harman et al., 2019). This study examines the family knowledge level of PA in an average family without reported domestic violence cases. PA research tends to exclude the typical family picture; PA does not occur in a family in a single day; it passes through phases and is related to various factors; dysfunctional families were functional before a problem rendered them dysfunctional. This study will expand upon previous research that has investigated the experience of children and parents exposed to PA (e.g. Harman et al., 2022; Neilson, 2018; Barnett, 2020b; von Boch-Galhau, 2018; Verrocchio, 2019; Silva, 2021; Fuat et al., 2022). Additionally, this study will incorporate the experiences of practitioners who engage with families to comprehend PA in both functional and dysfunctional households. The primary concerns of this study are as follows: (a) what is the quality of parental and practitioner awareness of PA? (a) What characteristics are associated with PA in families? (b) what consequences does PA have? c) How may PA be addressed in families?

## **METHODS**

### **2.1 Participants and data collection**

In October and November of 2022, six interviews with a semi-structured format were held. Four men and two women between the ages of 24 and 45 comprised the sample. Three professionals who work with families (Social Worker from the United Kingdom, Legal practitioner from the Czech Republic and Counsellor from Nigeria). Three adult parents (a mother of two kids from the United Kingdom, two fathers of a child from Nigeria). The participants were purposefully selected using criterion sampling to obtain diverse perspectives. Purposive sampling is frequently employed in qualitative research to discover information-rich situations to make the most efficient use of available resources (Patton, 2015).

Each participant selected a convenient location for the interview; four were conducted using Zoom and two with WhatsApp video calls. The interviews were done in a dialogue format using an interview guide, which comprised, among others, the following questions: Do you know about Parental Alienation? (Yes or No)/ If no PA descriptions were provided (APA description). What are the consequences of PA in families and among family members? Imagine yourself as the child exposed to PA; how would you feel? The interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes and were recorded digitally. The recordings were subsequently transcribed into text, resulting in a total of 25 pages of text.

### **2.2. Ethical Consideration**

This study gave priority to ethical issues and concerns about personal data because they are important parts of social research (Bryman, 2012). Participants were provided with information regarding the study, and its objective was described clearly. Participants were assured anonymity and made aware that their participation is voluntary. The information gathered was securely kept.

### **3.3. Data Analysis**

This qualitative study employed Thematic analysis as a method for data analysis to identify meaningful patterns across qualitative datasets to infer meaning (Barun & Clarke, 2006; Barun et al., 2016). The interview material, consisting of 25 pages of text from each of the six interviews, was read multiple times to ensure a comprehensive understanding. The material was classified and organised into words, phrases, and paragraphs pertinent to the study's objective. The meaning units were merged and coded

using Atlas-ti 5.0, the most widely used programme for qualitative analysis (Lewis, 2004), to identify associations, linkages, similarities, and differences and organise them into themes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interview with three practitioners and three parents, focusing on their perceptions and experiences of parental alienation in families, reveals that there are various features associated parental alienation in the family, which not only have negative repercussions for the family as a whole but also have enormous effects for the child exposed to parental alienation and the targeted parent. In addition, the participants contributed helpful recommendations for resolving parental alienation; these are grouped into five main themes: (i) features associated with parental alienation in the family, (ii) consequences of child exposure to parental alienation, (iii) experiences of the targeted parent, (iv) reflections on parental alienation's implications on the family and among family members, and (v) suggestions for addressing parental alienation.

**Table 1. Study participants**

S/N	Status	Gender	Do you know what Parental Alienation is?	After being provided with PA definitions and examples. Do you notice this in families
1	Social Worker	Male	Yes, a little bit	Yes
2	Legal Practitioner	Female	Not sure of the correct meaning	Yes
3	Counsellor	Male	No	Yes
4	Married with two kids	Female	No	Yes
5	Married with one kid	Male	Not sure	Yes
6	Married with two kids	Male	No	Yes

### Features associated with Parental Alienation in Families

The narratives, experiences, and perceptions of this study's participants regarding the features associated with Parental Alienation in families are consistent with other circumstances that facilitate PA in the literature, as well as the various tactics used to marginalise children from a parent. Figure 1 displays the graphical analysis exported from the data analysis software (Atlas.it).

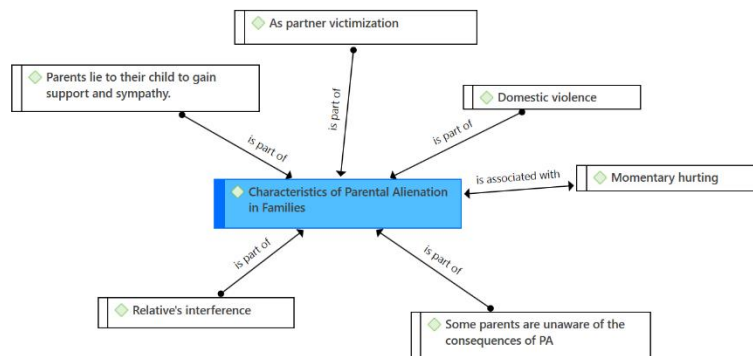


Figure 1 Theme: Features associated with PA in families

It is believed that domestic violence, partner victimisation, and momentary hurting are connected with PA. Parents mentioned that they experienced parental alienation as children when their parents were undergoing domestic violence or having severe disagreements.

*My mother will constantly report my daddy to me whenever they are fighting, I do not why she chose to because I was am the youngest and I have two older sisters...maybe because I am the only male in the family, even at a tender age when I understood nothing, she'll me how terrible and unfaithful my father is (Josh, Parent, Nigeria)*

*I can tell of a family in my neighbourhood, whenever they are not in agreement the mother usually disallow the children from running errands or help their father in anyway, if they do they will be in trouble with her (Mrs Roseman, Parent, Nigeria)*

*My parents do this often but I am confused as of if they hate each other because they have being married for 38 years but when ever my mummy is angry with my dad she just wants all of us in the house to be angry at him too (Josh, Parent, Nigeria)*

*So I have some family cases where there was this kind of violence, and I need to take PA into consideration while I was working with people or at the end when I am deciding (Mori, Legal Practitioner, Czech Republic)*

Practitioners stated that PA is associated with parents lying to gain sympathy and support from their child, parents ignorant about the negative effects of PA and the interference of relatives.

*PA happens in families in form of lies; a parent trying to lie to paint the other parent bad to get the child to side their own opinions and decisions in the family. Your mom is wicked. I will not even allow you to see your mom. Some even try to lie about the existence of the partner by telling the child that the other partner has died. (Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*There was this case I had this year actually it was quite complicated because they had four children and they were really little children, and actually the father was trying to, manipulate the children against the mother. So he was telling them things that were not true. Like, 'your mother is going to die', 'you will be alone in this world', your mother doesn't like you... And then the children were always crying and he couldn't understand what he was doing wrong. He was like, I'm not hitting them. I'm not doing this kind of stuff. And I told him that it is not just about hitting, the damage could be through words also, not just through your hands.. (Mori, Legal Practitioner, Czech Republic).*

*And as the child grows and understands things the negative untrue information is reprocessed and lead to confusion and mistrust. The love and orientation of the child towards the parents become a problem. The child might grow up to disrespect both parents. especially when the child found that that information was false and he feels he did not have a chance to enjoy his time with that parent (Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*The boy was little when the divorce happened, his mother dies feel years after the divorce but the mother's relative lied to the boy and poisoned his mind with negatives about his father, that he is so evil and that the boy should not attempt to meet his father for any reason. But the boy further felt depressed...(Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

Parents were asked to reflect on their experiences to see if they had unconsciously played the role of alienating or being alienated. The majority acknowledged that it occurs and that the interview served as an enlightenment for them to realise that PA is abuse and has detrimental impacts on children and the family system.

*Actually, I can say no but when you say unconsciously.....maybe jokingly like when a child does some terrible that annoys you and you tell the child 'you behave like your father {...hahaha} but this is an eye opener for me to be more careful of my words (Mrs Roseman, Parent, Nigeria).*

*Yes. that's yes, it happens that way and outside my family; unintentional, during disagreements {...ummm} I have also seen it happen that way in other families. It because*

*some parents do even know that this thing is the beginning of disagreement in family (Paul, Parent, Nigeria).*

*Of course some of them being unconsciously and consciously, also most times they just see the need to paint the other parent bad at that particular moment maybe because they are angry or hurting and they need a backup to fight the person but not putting the child's feeling into account (Josh, Parent, Nigeria).*

### **Child exposed to Parental Alienation**

Child is the most frequent term in the narratives of this study's interview participants and in the literature; the WordCloud generated after the analysis of the collected data ranks 'child' highest. Unfortunately, children bear the brunt of the harmful effects of PA, and they appear to suffer the most in the long run, as indicated in figure two below. This theme was generated from practitioners' and parents' narratives; practitioners were asked to consider and describe the experience of a child exposed to PA based on their work with children or families. Similarly, parents were asked to place themselves in the position of the child exposed to PA and reflect on their feelings and prospective experiences. Practitioners and parents shared similar perspectives regarding the effects of PA on children.

*I'm just thinking of the child...umm..the schema, so the framework for relationships and emotional transactions, out there yeah. That in itself is difficult. Obviously, that forms the patterns of behaviour for adulthood. That's either that the person grows up painting their parents or painting the targeted or the other parent because they feel that they've been manipulated or whatever (Drogas, Social Worker, UK).*

*....most of these children don't always turn out well, for example here in Nigeria, you see many children today on the streets, children that are supposed to be in school are on the street begging for alms then you actually ask yourself about their parents. These are the result of domestic violence, separation, Parental Alienation and a broken home..... (Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*Children try to learn from their parents, they would practise what they observed when they are alone and this may lead to them not having balanced relationships in the future (Paul, Parent, Nigeria).*

They concluded that PA could affect a child's behaviour, causing him to disrespect either the targeted or alienating parent. They emphasized the long-term implications, such as the negative perception of marriage, the influence on the child's holistic development, both-parent care and affection deprivation, and the repetition of the same unhealthy behaviour in future relationships.

*I see their perception of the opposite sex to be unhealthy because of their experience.....If this happens to a male child, his perception would be 'women are evil, not good for marriage...no...I will not go into marriage and the same thing is applicable to the girl child. These I have seen in practice (Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*I experienced a lot in my family and I feel it was part of the things that kept me away from the idea of marriage for long. Yea, people will never understand that. Sometimes the families where you come from, determines how you look at marriage. Yes...it always, always determines because I was thinking and scared that I could experience the same as my father has experienced with my mum (Josh, Parent, Nigeria).*

*My kind of person. If I were exposed to such.. I do not think I would want to even experience marriage in the first place. Personally, would I say my mother tried to cover that up, I wasn't exposed to it as a child while I grew up now I know that there were a lot of things she concealed because she did not wants any form of hate from me to my father (Mrs Roseman, Parent, Nigeria).*

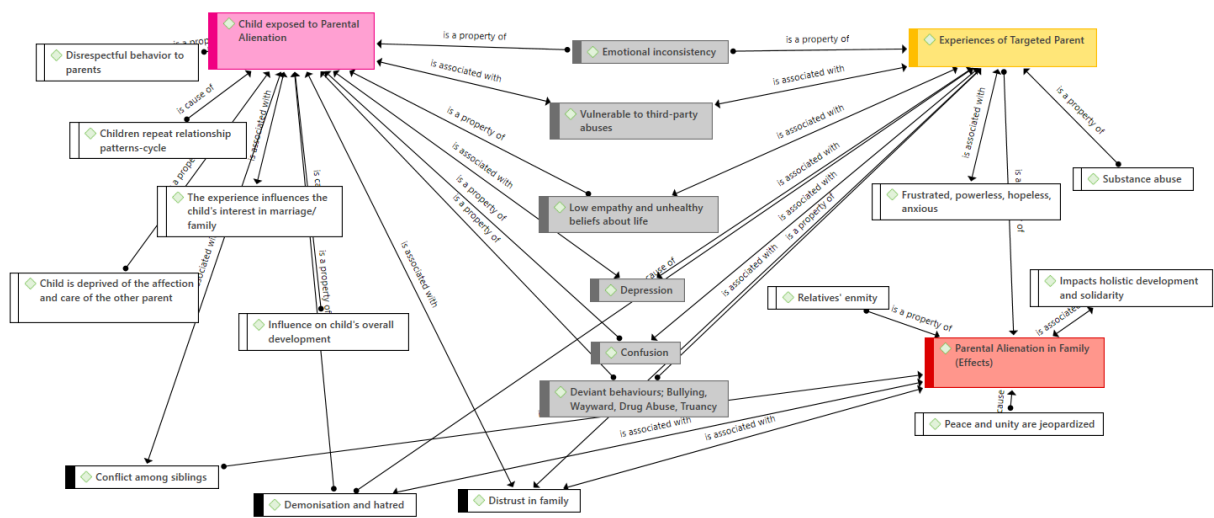


Figure 2 Themes: Child exposed to PA, Experiences of targeted parent and effects of PA in family and among family members

### Experiences of targeted parent

As seen in Figure 2, the experiences of the targeted parent are comparable to those of the child exposed to PA; struggling with confusion, depression, and emotional inconsistency, low empathy, PA also makes them susceptible to third-party abuse, and they may become deviant (bullying, wayward, drug abuse, truancy). The participants indicated that PA could cause the targeted parent to feel frustrated, powerless, discouraged, and lonely, which could lead to substance abuse.

*Confusing, it might be extreme in terms of emotions.....probably inconsistent and slightly incongruent. Because if the child hasn't noticed these things themselves, that seems to be fine, and he is been told his mom is a monster. Yeah, it might be....incongruence....so it becomes problematic and upsetting. yeah, I also think it makes him as a family member to be deviant in some way; so it is upsetting (Droglas, Social Worker, UK).*

*They find it difficult to help....due to their experience. I see their perception of the opposite sex to be bad because of their experience (Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*I think the experiences would be alienated, I guess probably the alienated parent would feel quite frustrated and powerless, especially. If the other parent has that custody of the child, a parental responsibility, then you sort of quite powerless to change that narrative or counter it. and I think...angry....maybe fearful for the future. And there's always the risk that there's an attempt at countering with more negative views (Droglas, Social Worker, UK).*

*Depression...ummmm..you see people like this, most of the time, they are always depressed. When see them they look good but deep down in them they are bothered and it affects their behaviours in new relationships...you know especially when they are not guilty and are not given the opportunity to voice out their mind to the child. They keep looking for an opportunity to clarify it to the child and they say, I'm not guilty, I did not do anything bad, I do not understand, so in the long run, depression sets in (Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*It must be a difficult situation for such parent, and I think it's really difficult to fight against a partner who is doing the alienation (Mori, Legal Practitioner, Czech Republic).*

*I said it earlier, it is depressing, one parent is telling the child negatives about the partner. So basically, it's depressing. Because as a child, it's difficult for a child to hate on one parent. It's difficult. So the child placed in state of confusion (Mrs Roseman, Parent, Nigeria).*

## Parental Alienation in Family

It may be extrapolated from Figure 2 that participants saw distrust, demonization, and hatred as PA's effects on the child, target parent, and family as a whole. Participants in the study highlighted some PA implications in the family and among family members, including sibling conflict, the enmity between relatives, a hindrance to holistic development and solidarity, and peace and harmony.

*Trust, Just trust; it breaks down the trust...(Droglas, Social Worker, UK).*

*It creates hatred. I think that is the major effect(Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*PA may cause damage, like mental health issues to the partner or to the children (Mori, Legal Practitioner, Czech Republic).*

*PA also make children question their biological parents if the alienated or alienation parent is truly their real parent. The love for a parent can die due to PA and cause enmity(Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*The child doesn't speak out. So issues that bothers the child, he try to look for a third party to speak to. and from there so many things could come in; from depression, drug abuse...sexual abuse from outsider, it grows with child, the child is not able to take good decision, no peace from home, it could make the child a bully at school. it can make the child having sexual re-orientation particularly if the targeted parent is the same sex the child do not want to grow up to be in that gender role and world...so basically it destabilise the life of the child. It is a big crime on the child (Mrs Roseman, Parent, Nigeria)*

*PA could affect the level of peace and sustainable development in a family. When there is no peace, then no progress in such a family becomes a struggle, it could lead to fear and lots of misunderstanding (Paul, Parent, Nigeria).*

*Of course, it's going to lead to distrust, I feel like between I and my siblings; there are six of us and then some side my mom and some will support the option of my Dad. Like, this PA thing create distrust on so many things. You know, we are suppose to be family but she brought distrust into it. We're supposed to be harmony. As soon as all of this happens, then it just goes downhill from there; we were supposed to come together and make things happen, help each other. But this one does not want to talk to this one because this one support mom and do not support Dad that he supported...so the whole family goes downhill from there (Josh, Parent, Nigeria).*

## Suggested recommendations

Participants in the study, practitioners, and parents contributed to the figure 3 recommendations in the event of parental alienation in the family. Parents were asked to consider what they would do if they found themselves to be targeted parents, and practitioners were asked to describe interventions offered to support families in the event of PA.

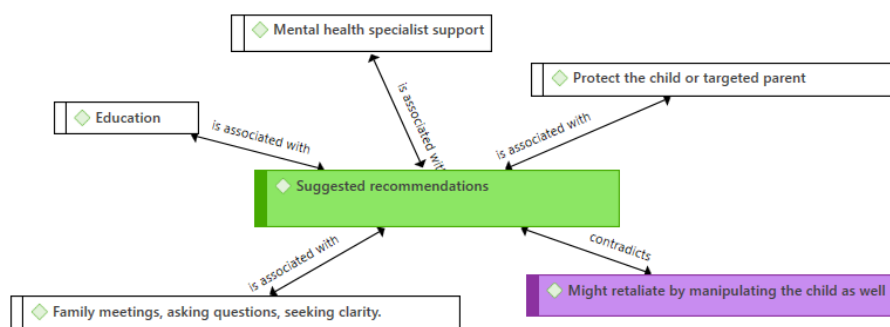


Figure 3 How to address Parental Alienation in family

The majority of participants explicitly stated that educating the alienating partner will their first step in case of PA, and practitioners indicate that educating the entire family about the repercussions of PA is essential throughout any intervention.

*Yes. I think interventions are partly around educating families about emotional consequences (Drogas, Social Worker, UK).*

*In cases like this. Over the years, I always go back to education and I do this having the whole family members and then with the responsible parent. I think this is the best intervention. The parents need to know the consequences of PA on the development of the child (Jid, Counsellor, Nigeria).*

*I think people need to be educated about this PA thing especially the intending parents and they have learnt some of these from their own parents and would make same mistakes if not informed (Josh, Parent, Nigeria).*

*So as a parent, because we both have individual differences we do not think or do things the same way. So I will sort for a good approach. I know I am not perfect. So I will ask for advice from people that are older with perfect marriages and experiences. But I will not allow it to escalate to divorce (Paul, Parent, Nigeria)*

In accordance with the practitioner narratives, parents also acknowledged the need to seek the services of a mental health specialist in the event of PA in the family.

*Get some professional help. Like finding a therapist or psychologist or the Familial Center to support something like this (Mori, Legal Practitioner, Czech Republic).*

*Maybe some dialectic behavioural therapy type approaches...to address changing patterns of behaviour could be helpful (Drogas, Social Worker, UK).*

*If I notice that my partner is doing that to me the first thing I will seek is counselling, So he that he can know the danger because he may think he 's that to hurt me but at the end he's rubbing it on both of us (Mrs Roseman, Parent, Nigeria).*

Some participants said there should be opportunity for family dialogue to ask concerns and clarify matters.

*I think family meeting could help also help (Paul, Parent, Nigeria).*

Practitioners believed it was crucial to protect children in cases of PA to prevent additional abuse and, if feasible, to protect the targeted parent.

*But if they continue, then we move to interventions to protect the child or individual from abuse (Drogas, Social Worker, UK).*

*Because if I would want to do the same thing he is doing it means that I am only aggravating the whole problem and that means I'm also abusing the child. I will seek for support, I wont revenge (Mrs Roseman, Parent, Nigeria).*

All of the participants stated that fighting back is not an option they will consider or advise parents to consider because it puts the child in a worse position.

This study explored the narratives, perspectives, and experiences of practitioners and parents about parental alienation not only in families facing domestic violence or separation, but also in functional families. The major objective of the study was to assess the level of PA knowledge among families and practitioners. The findings reveal that practitioners may not have a complete understanding of the term "Parental Alienation," but they are able to identify it among their clients when supplied with explanations of PA. This is partially in agreement with Fuat et al's (2022) assertion that practitioners lack sufficient knowledge of PA; however, this study acknowledges that practitioners are cognizant of PA in their clientele, but it appears they have inadequate skills to deal with PA in families. Similarly as seen in Table 1, parents are unfamiliar with the term "Parental Alienation;" nevertheless, when supplied with definitions of PA, they immediately acknowledged its existence in families and offered their own



parents as an example. It was found that participants, particularly parents, had insufficient knowledge of the detrimental impacts of PA in families.

Participants recognised events or characteristics related to PA in families, emphasising that PA may occur during domestic violence, relatives' interference, partner victimisation, and immediate hurting (family conflict), as reported in the literature (Gardner, 2006; Harman et al., 2018; Neilson, 2018; Zemp et al., 2016). In addition, the study participants identified other characteristics that may also be indicative of PA tactics, such as parents lying to alienate the child, (e.g. Harman et al., 2018), reporting or seeking sympathy from same-gender child to support their positions, and being ignorant of the effects of Parental alienation, as some parents jokingly make some degrading statements about the other parent in the presence of the child, which often confuses the child (Darnall, 1999, Hands & Warshak, 2011; Baker & Fine, 2014; López et al., 2014; Silva, 2021; Myers & Mercer, 2022).

In agreement with prior findings, the current data demonstrate that parental alienation has detrimental and long-lasting impacts on the child, as it influences the child's future relationships, behaviour, and emotions, and that family experiences serve as the foundation for adulthood (Baker, 2005; Miralles et al., 2021; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Silva, 2021). The participants also highlighted that parental alienation could cause the child to be depressed, confused, emotionally inconsistent, and anxious, so impacting their mental health (Turkat, 2002; von Boch-Galhau, 2018; Verrocchio, 2019; Silva, 2021; Fuat et al., 2022). Additionally, they identified some listed inappropriate behaviour, such as bullying, waywardness, drug abuse, disregarding parents, and a lack of empathy, as potential PA impacts on the child (Harman et al., 2022), as well as the influence of PA on the disintegration of parent-child interactions (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Miralles et al., 2021; Verhaar et al., 2022).

Similarly, participants reported similar PA impacts with targeted parents, as shown in figure 2; alienated parents struggle with depression, confusion, anxiety, emotional inconsistency, loneliness, and frustration, which is in line with the results of recent studies (Balmer et al., 2018; Lee-Maturana et al., 2020; Tavares et al., 2021). Participants also suggested that the experience could result in substance abuse, low empathy, and a loss of belief in a just world (Dalbert, 2002; Hafer & Rubel, 2015). In addition, practitioners and parents reflect equally on the effects of parental alienation on the family as a system, as depicted in Figure 2; they note that PA is associated with distrust, demonization, hatred, sibling conflict, animosity between relatives, impact on peace and harmony, and family development. This finding is compatible with previous students focused on the effects of parental alienation on the child, the targeted parent, or the family structure as a whole ( Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Harman et al., 2019; Miralles et al., 2021; Kruk, 2018; Krill-Reiter, 2019).

Finally, the last theme emerged when participants were asked to consider what they would do if they were the targeted parent. Practitioners were asked to identify interventions that could be beneficial in addressing parental alienation. Participants collectively agreed that educating the alienating parent and the child is the most crucial step. Practitioners also mentioned that, in addition to educating the child, they would protect the child from future abuse. As PA is associated with depression, the participants said that they would also seek out counselling and mental health care for rehabilitation. In addition, participants emphasised that opposing the alienating parent by alienating the child against the alienating parent would not be an option because it would do the child more harm. Unfortunately, there are few studies on PA remedies and the process of addressing PA in families; however, the finding of this study is consistent with Andreopoulos & Wexler's (2022) emphasis on the necessity for parental alienation education programmes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Parental Alienation has been recognised as a kind of domestic violence (Harman et al., 2018; von Boch-Galhau, 2018) and child abuse (Barnett, 2020b). This study demonstrates that parental alienation is present not only in families experiencing domestic violence (dysfunctional families) but even in some families that appear stable. This research aims to increase parental and practitioner awareness of PA in families and social support services.

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