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Phenomenological Study of Fathers' Parental Alienation Experiences

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Jerry D. Gibson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University

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Abstract

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by

Jerry D. Gibson

MS, Walden University, 2019

MA West Virginia University, 2014

Ed.D., Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Clinical Psychology

Walden University

August 2021

Abstract

High-conflict divorce and resulting parental alienation (PA) impact both the children and the parent who has been the target of PA. This situation has been found to cause mental health issues and unhealthy coping skills in children. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of nonresidential fathers who were alienated from their children in the context of a high-conflict separation or divorce. This study was rooted in Bowlby's attachment theory. Data were collected from interviews with 10 adult participants. The software program Quirkos was used to review the data and discern thematic patterns and correlate the themes. Themes identified in the data were legal issues, physical ailments, mental health consequences, and financial consequences. Better understanding of the perspectives of fathers experienced PA increases awareness of the sequelae of high-conflict divorce. Such awareness can lead to positive social change by helping generate an understanding of what fathers may experience in high-conflict separation or divorce when the relationship with their children is strained or lost during high-conflict separation or divorce. The increased understanding from this study allows clinical professionals to target interventions and the legal system to address issues of PA in divorce proceedings, helping to create better outcomes for parents and children. This awareness allows clinical professionals and the legal system to address issues of PA in high-conflict divorces, helping to create better outcomes for parents and children.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I hereby dedicate this dissertation to my family, especially my daughter Hayleigh, who we lost to the Lord during the process of me working on this study. My wife, Pamela, and sons, Hunter and William, and daughters, Rachel, and Hayleigh, gave me the endless support, love, and guidance throughout my life, which provided me with the courage, motivation, ambition, and confidence to embark on and accomplish this significant achievement. I further dedicate this dissertation to my brother Jeff and sister Joanne who always provided unconditional love and support to my education. And finally, to my friend, colleague, and office manager of the Gibson Counseling Center, Felicia, who gives unselfishly to enhance my success as a professional in the field of psychology. Of the most significant disappointments in my life was the inability to keep my daughter Hayleigh healthy for a long and meaningful life. It is my highest hope that this research dissertation grants me not only the opportunity to provide the best I can for those in need of psychological help, but also to demonstrate by example how anything is possible with sufficient character, determination, and love and support from family and friends. I will always be there and pledge my utmost to help you achieve your greatest aspirations for a full and happy life.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Parental alienation (PA) happens when a parent becomes alienated from their child(ren), usually due to separation or divorce. When a child is unable to choose between parents, one parent can become alienated. The symptoms that sometimes develop from PA can affect a parent's mental state. There is potential for social implications that lead to knowledge to social impact. Most researchers have examined the mother's involvement with a child, but in this study, I looked at the background of PA and considered the theoretical and conceptual framework in relation to fathers.

Background

A gap exists in the literature in relation to the experiences of fathers with PA. Research has demonstrated that infants developing healthy varying relationships of attachment with the mother and father can lead to significant harm disrupting normal development in either of those relationships by assigning favoritism to one parent (Warshak, 2014). For this research, I conducted a phenomenological study of fathers' PA experiences to fill the gap in the literature and expand knowledge about PA among this population of parents.

Problem Statement

According to Harman et al. (2019), PA and the related possibility of parental alienation syndrome (PAS) are defined as mental conditions that may be found among children of parents engaged in high-conflict separations or divorces. Children who

experience PA ally themselves strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and reject a relationship with the other parent (the alienated or targeted parent). This can result from the manipulations of the preferred parent in attempts to denigrate the targeted parent.

The concepts of PAS and PA were first introduced by Richard Gardner in 1971, who hypothesized that children were becoming enmeshed in custodial battles in court during high-conflict divorces (Gardner, 2006). PA can be applied to either a mother or a father (Lowenstein, 2013). Fathers are more commonly the alienated parent because mothers are frequently awarded custody and granted more custodial time; thus, little is known about the experiences of alienated fathers (Lowenstein, 2013).

Over 50 research studies have been conducted that demonstrate that children raised with shared parenting fare better than children raised with sole physical custody (Braver & Lamb, 2018). Empirical evidence indicates that children of divorced parents benefit far more on average from parents who practice shared parenting in which the children live with each parent at least 35% of the time (Braver & Lamb, 2018).

According to Jaffe et al. (2017), PA has received international attention, especially in the courtroom as a factor in custody battles. Although Gardner proposed PA as a mental health phenomenon, it has received limited attention in psychological research, despite persistent interest. Although PA was omitted from the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Diseases*, (5th ed., DSM-5), for many years, there has been considerable interest that PAS be included in the DSM, and the *International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, (11th revision;

ICD-11; Bernet & Baker, 2013). In the ICD-11, PAS could be referenced in the section in Chapter 5 on “behavioral and emotional disorders with onset usually occurring in childhood and adolescence” (Bernet & Baker, 2013, p. 81), or in DSM-5 under “parental alienations should be mentioned in the differential diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder, since both conditions can be manifested by an apparent fear of leaving one of the parents” (Bernet & Baker, 2013, p. 80).

Although PA has been referred to in the literature since the 1970s, it remains controversial because of the need to better understand this phenomenon through continued research (Harman et al., 2018). PA can be an emotionally disturbing phenomenon for those involved. Not only is the targeted parent dealing with divorce and a change of role in the family, the targeted parent also may be dealing with the potential loss of a relationship with a child, and the child may lose the opportunity for a relationship with the targeted parent. According to leading PA researchers Harman et al. (2019), PA is unacknowledged and poorly understood; the phenomenon requires additional research to understand the experiences of alienated parents to mitigate the potential negative effects of high-conflict divorce.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of nonresidential fathers who have been alienated from their children in the context of high-conflict separations or divorces. I used a qualitative design, and key informant interviews were used to develop an understanding of the experiences of fathers who identify themselves

as being alienated from their children. The research built on literature related to PA, but stands alone as an opportunity for fathers to express their experiences to provide a perspective that has been absent from the literature.

According to Poustie et al. (2018), targeted parents described physical and emotional distance separating them from their child, emotional and financial costs associated with their engagement with systems such as legal systems and child protection systems. Targeted parents have described poor mental health and concern for their children's psychological well-being. Targeted parents' alienating behaviors have been considered a form of family violence. Additionally, targeted parents used active coping behaviors. Further research is needed to better understand PA. Mental health and legal professionals must collaborate to optimize support for targeted parents (Moore & Ordway, 2013). The phenomenological approach of this study helped identify fathers' perspectives on the psychological effects of PA for themselves and their children and the significance of PA for the targeted parents' relationships with their children.

Research Question

RQ: What are the lived experiences of fathers who identify themselves as alienated from their biological children?

Qualitative research proved useful for this type of study. Qualitative research provides an in-depth method to explore phenomena and understand the specifics entailed with how a research participant experiences a particular set of events in their life that is researched and analyzed (Giorgi, 2009).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework for the Study

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical orientation for this study was rooted in attachment theory developed by John Bowlby; Bowlby was attempting to understand the intense distress experienced by infants who had been separated from their parents. Attachment theory is a product of Bowlby and Ainsworth's (1991) work. Bowlby and Ainsworth each began with a separate approach to understanding personality development before Ainsworth joined Bowlby's research team at the Tavistock Clinic in London for 4 years. Bowlby and Ainsworth's work represents the merging of many different disciplines that share the finding that children are physiologically programmed to gravitate to caretakers to have their needs met and to have a sense of security, safety, and a place to return to in times of distress. Most often, this person is a child's mother as this is where the initial natural attachment bond is formed (Bowlby, 1969). As the child develops, the need for attachment figure changes based on newfound needs and desires, but the attachment figure through a theoretical perspective was often the mother. Proponents of PA assert that the efforts of one parent to exclude another from the life of their child as part of a high-conflict divorce negatively affect the otherwise natural bond of the targeted parent and child. PA is primarily motivated by one parent's desire to exclude the other parent from their child's life (Lowenstein, 2013). According to Lowenstein (2013), this disruption of bond can influence the child and parent, but in this study, I examined the fathers' PA experiences.

Bowlby (1969) recognized that fathers could also be valuable when exploring attachment but viewed the father as someone the child would gravitate toward for a playmate, as opposed to the mother to whom the child went to as a primary source of attachment. Lowenstein (2013) discussed how attachment theory indicates that the mother holds the primary role of attachment and is the main caregiver. A child will form attachment to any consistent caregiver who responds to social interaction with the child. Bowlby's (1969) research occurred at a time when it was uncommon for fathers to have the principal role of caregiving for their children, and little was written about the role of the father as the primary caregiver. Lowenstein (2013) argued the best interest of the child is if neither parent is abusive or harmful toward the child, and if both parents provide a healthy and equally responsible role in the life of a child. This is an argument for shared parenting as the ideal model to follow, and many organizations agree: the United Nations, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association (Lowenstein, 2013).

Conceptual Framework

PA was the conceptual framework for this study. Since the introduction of PA, the concept has been further strengthened through research conducted by Bernet et al. (2013). The concept of PA is still being researched internationally. However, I was interested in exploring the experiences of fathers who have identified PA as capturing their experiences of nonresidential parenting.

According to Bosch et al. (2018), a high-conflict divorce is characterized by intense or protracted postseparation conflict and hostility between parents, which may be expressed overtly through ongoing litigation, verbal and physical aggression, and tactics of sabotage and deception. High levels of conflict between parties are common when a degree of conflict existed prior to the divorce. The problem, furthermore, is that aggression can prevent the parties from meaningfully communicating with one another and must reach agreement through litigation (Castello, 2016).

Nature of the Study

I studied this topic using a phenomenological qualitative research design. This research study was designed to explore the experiences of fathers by conducting semi structured one-on-one in-person interviews with 10 fathers not living with their children who self-identify as alienated from their children. Because of continued safety precautions for the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted online via Zoom rather than in person.

Possible Types and Sources of Data

Research participants were 10 divorced or separated fathers who reported being alienated from their children. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 70 years and had at least one child for whom there was no age requirement. There was no limitation of education level, employment, or type of job. Participants were required to be divorced or separated for at least 1 year and report they had experienced being the targeted or alienated parent during or after separation or divorce proceedings. The sample was

selected using the social media website Facebook, and participants came from a variety of demographics and age groups. Another possible participant source would have been the Walden University Participant Pool, but it was not needed. Data were collected through interviews with fathers who met the criteria and were selected as study participants. I used Quirkos qualitative research software to analyze the data collected generate dominant themes and shared experiences.

Definitions

Parent alienation (PA): A mental condition in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict divorce—allies strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) based on manipulating behaviors by the preferred parent targeting the other parent.

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS): Children who are alienated from a parent based on encouragement from the other parent in the context of child-custody disputes. Such programming is designed to strengthen the position of the programming parent in a court of law. Many evaluators use the term *PAS* to refer to the mental health effects experienced by such children.

Preferred parent: A legal principle that says custody of a minor child should be granted to a fit parent rather than another person.

Targeted parent: For this study, also known as the *alienated parent*, is the nonresidential father whom the child rejects based on negative characterizations and behaviors of the preferred custodial parent.

Assumptions

For fathers, the most noteworthy connection in their lives is their children, and they are more intensely affected by fatherhood than often assumed. According to Creswell, (2018), most fathers characterize child rearing as the most essential connection they possess and their most critical and esteemed social role. Considering how important this role is to fathers, we can assume they will experience an overwhelmingly emotionally difficult time after a divorce or separation, especially if they become the alienated parent.

Fathers and infants can be equally as attached as mothers and infants. When both parents are involved, infants are attached to both parents from the beginning of life. According to Creswell, (2018), fathers' involvement in a child's life leads to better emotional, social, and behavioral outcomes for the father. Father and child engagement reduces psychological problems and rates of depression in the father (Van De Vijver, 2012).

Scope and Delimitations

Scope and delimitations clarify the boundaries, exceptions, and reservations inherent in a study. I aimed to narrow the scope of this study by recruiting 10 fathers who were alienated from their children. The scope may focus on specific variables such as high conflict divorce, specific participants such as targeted parents, or narrowed to one type of research design (qualitative research). Not only was the targeted parent dealing with divorce and a change of role in the family, the parent who experiences PA was

dealing with the potential loss of a relationship with a child and the child may lose the opportunity for a relationship with the parent (Bernet, 2019).

Limitations

One of the major limitations in this study was that the results of a qualitative study are not generalizable. However, the results from the small sample provide valuable information and insight. The information gained from this study can lead to empirical research for broad applicability. Unpacking a poorly understood phenomenon, as was the goal in this study, is an important first step in the research, even without generalizability.

Another potential limitation of the study was that I may have experienced personal and professional experience and bias with this topic. According to Creswell (2018), there are multiple ways to address potential bias in the recruitment of study participants, the collection of data, or the review of data trends. These strategies include keeping a journal in which personal responses to all phases of the study are recorded, using an audit trail to check the integrity of incoming data, having participants review their interviews, verifying with additional data sources, and checking for alternative explanations.

Gathering data from 10 participants may lead to helpful information about this complex psychological phenomenon that can yield important data and provide unique information from participants' experiences. This study offers a review of PA from the perspectives of fathers, which constitutes a limitation of the study insofar as there is no

support for the idea that PA is a parent-specific phenomenon; mothers can also experience PA. Including both mothers and fathers would be a worthwhile future study.

There are other possibilities of exclusionary criteria, such as fathers incarcerated or transferred to another state. This exclusion may hinder the outcome of this sample. There may be fathers who have been in counseling where alienation was never recognized as an issue because the concept has received legal but not psychological attention. In addition, when interpreting the data, the information shared may be incomplete, misleading, or misunderstood by interpretation (Dyer et al., 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Because the topic of PA is potentially distressing, I made it clear to participants that they could stop the interview or refuse to answer questions that made them uncomfortable. If participants became distressed, arrangements were made so they participants could debrief with a professional counselor or psychologist who was knowledgeable in PA. In the case of a participant becoming distressed or upset, the individual had the option to stop the interview, speak to another therapist, or take a temporary break. Palm (2014) discussed how attachment theory has also generated controversy in generalizing the father–child relationship by applying methods created by observing the mother and infant, and limitations exist in explaining and understanding a relationship between a father and his child.

Significance

There was scarce research in support of the lived experience of fathers who have been alienated from their children. In this study, fathers shared their lived experiences, and it is unknown what may come from such revelations. Considering the scarcity of research for this population, this research could increase awareness and create a foundation for additional research to build on. PA affects the mental health of fathers who have been alienated from their children and who have lost some degree of contact with their children for varying periods of time, months to years, ultimately leading to feelings of depression and suicidal ideation (Sher, 2017). This research was significant in allowing these fathers to share their experiences, validating the trauma they may have undergone, and paving the way to increased awareness, intervention, and treatment.

The current research may prove important to the counseling community in bringing needed interventions, treatment, and resources to those individuals impacted by PA. The main critics of including PA in the DSM-5 argue there is not sufficient data to support the inclusion and studies need to include more participants and greater differentiation among the victims experiencing alienation compared to other types of maltreatment (Cunha et al., 2016). This research may be significant to the counseling community to help create inclusion and to aid in providing more data, participants, and identification of the victims experiencing reported alienation.

Additionally, this research is significant to the children who have been alienated from their fathers. According to Olito (2019), there is a multitude of research that

suggests children who do not have a meaningful relationship with their father have an increased risk of experiencing drug and substance abuse, failing academically, and dropping out of school (Lipari & Van Horn, 2017). McLanahan et al. (2013) documented a negative correlation connected to when children live aside from their biological father, impacting a multitude of domains of their welfare, including education, mental health, relationships with their family, and labor market outcomes. The research is significant for these alienated children, as the breaking up of the family unit may often be life altering and leave a lasting negative impact on a child.

This research could prove significant for clinicians, counselors, therapists, or anyone in a counseling or mental health capacity working with families who have experienced reported alienation. This research could help in recognizing PA as a significant condition, better arming and educating professionals in mental health positions to provide conceptually sound effective treatment. As Bernet and Baker (2013) discussed, when PA receives recognition as a serious mental condition, individuals striving to work in the mental health field will learn about it, practitioners of mental health will be able to identify it much sooner, and researchers will create and assess evidence-based practice to treat it. This research will also be an added value to the American Counseling Association to better serve communities, families, and stakeholders.

According to Moore et al. (2013), this research could also prove significant for the court systems and professionals in the judicial system working with fathers or

children who have undergone alienation. Beliefs about how motherhood differs from fatherhood and men's inferiority in the parent role may be influencing divorce laws. According to the U.S. Census (2016b), "in 2014, about five of every six custodial parents were mothers (82.5 percent) and one of every six were fathers (17.5 percent), proportions that were not statistically different from those in 1994" (p. 60). Considering the large proportion of mothers awarded custody compared to fathers, fathers often serve the role of visiting over the weekends or vacation days spread out through the year, which can impact the bond between father and child.

In a custody arrangement in which the mother is granted sole custody, the father-child bond usually erodes quickly when fathers do not reside on a regular basis with their children (Sodermans et al., 2015). According to Moore et al. (2013), one of the more apparent factors that impacts a father's involvement after divorce is custody arrangements; in most situations, fathers do not determine the amount of time they get to spend with their child, and mothers continue to be awarded sole physical custody. The results of this research could provide education to the court systems and just representation and a greater understanding of the experiences of fathers. The education of the legal system is as important as the education of the counseling community; much distress experienced by an alienated parent results from judicial decisions, which may lead the parent or child to seek counseling.

As Balmer et al. (2018) discussed, PA is extremely stressful and threatening to the alienated parent's current or future well-being and can serve as a critical determinant for

their current or future well-being. The results of this research can provide additional information to the court systems to inform the methods of how custody is awarded and the criteria evaluated when assessing the best intervention for a child. Ultimately, case law may change and the judicial system may deliver legal services to families in need built on a foundation of understanding this population of impacted fathers.

These elements are cohesive to the counseling community as the targeted parent is undergoing a traumatic event and if these judicial variables are modified, the stress level the parents are experiencing may improve. Lastly, it may also prove significant when looking at proper assessment, analysis, and diagnosis for anyone impacted by PA, as there is no current formal measurement for PA (Creswell, 2018). In fact, surveys of individuals who evaluate the allocation of child custody have revealed that despite the overwhelming endorsement of PA, many admit they use generalized global assessments that ultimately lack confidence in the reliability of their results and the assessment. Though this research focused on fathers, the concept of PA is complex and lacks confirmation to validate that such condition exists and the impact it can have. With this research, there is increased likelihood PA can be empirically demonstrated, which may help in creating a valid tool for diagnosing it.

According to Braver and Lamb (2018), this gap in the relevant research may exist because of commonly used theoretical perspectives that tend to lean toward mothers' bonds with children, especially when evaluating custody rights. Scarce research exists that captures the experiences of alienated fathers, despite alienation potentially causing

significant harm to them. I hope to continue to better understand this population of alienated parents, and this research may create a possibility for alienated fathers to receive increased support (Portanenko, 2019).

Hearing the lived experiences of alienated fathers may lead to better understanding of the sequelae of high-conflict divorces and separations that lead to disruption of the father-child bond and have psychological and societal impact. This research could prove significant for clinicians, counselors, therapists, or anyone in a counseling or mental health capacity working with families who have experienced reported alienation. This research could help in recognizing PA as a significant condition, better arming and educating professionals in mental health positions to provide conceptually sound effective treatment.

When implementing a phenomenological approach to qualitative research, it is the role of the researcher to describe the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2018). I sought to culminate the essence of the experiences from several divorced or separated fathers who reported having experienced the phenomenon of being alienated from their children. This was of particular interest to me as I have worked with children and adults impacted by some element of PA and have frequently witnessed a father as the targeted parent. Fathers would express how they felt misrepresented, ignored, and unsupported.

Summary

Within Chapter 1, I created an introductory foundation to define the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, and the background and need of the study. I described the background, context, and conceptual framework used to design the study. I provided the research problem and its purpose, the research questions, rationale, the significance of the study, and definitions of common terms used. I also provided limitations, assumptions, and scope and delimitations, helping the reader understand the full scope of the study and what I was aware of when conducting the research to help the reader gain a greater perspective into the phenomenon under study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

According to Balmer, Matthewson, and Haines et al. (2018), when reviewing the past and present research that supports this study which entails “fathers’ parental alienation experiences,” find it critically important to go to the next step in exploring what existing research has been done, on a topic and determine what additional literature can be unveiled to help conceptualize this reality the phenomenon. Just as fathers are marginalized, the research in support of fathers’ experiences with PA is scarce. Because research dissertations are helpful but very scarce and published scholarly journals are even harder to come by, research related to divorce exists abundantly. A review of the existing literature helps contextualize the topic under study. Through new research and new perspectives, the understanding of a phenomenon can be advanced.

Through this literature review, I was able to identify gaps in current knowledge. A literature review helps establish the background on what has been explored on a topic up to this point in time and increases knowledge of this area of research. The literature review provides context for and positions new research within the ongoing conversation. A literature review can also help explore applicable research methods and opposing viewpoints.

Chapter 2 provides a historical record of research studies that provided findings and analysis to support this phenomenological qualitative research study. In this research, I sought to capture the lived experiences of divorced or separated fathers who reported

being alienated from their children. Despite fathers being a population alienated against, little research exists regarding fathers and PA. Within this chapter, a detailed description of the sample is provided in addition to a description of how the methodological approach was applied to the data analysis process. This chapter also provides a clearly detailed presentation of the data gathered and the data analysis process that encompassed the results, themes, patterns, and description focused on the research question. In conclusion, a summary of the findings is provided as the research transitions into Chapter 5, offering a thorough overall summary of the entire research study. When implementing a phenomenological approach to qualitative research, it is the role of the researcher to describe the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2018).

When researching this phenomenon, reviewing literature, visiting courthouses, interviewing lawyers, reading books, analyzing statistics, and more, I began to discover alienated fathers undergoing a phenomenon that hardly any research had explored. Through this study, I sought to explore this phenomenon and fill this gap in the research. Such research may help these fathers give voice to their lived experiences of alienation from their children.

Literature Search Strategy

A variety of methods were used to find current, pertinent literature related to the alienation of fathers. Databases were searched through the Walden University library and through Google Scholar. Key words and phrases used in the search included *alienated*

fathers, divorced fathers, separated couples with children, children of separated parents, fathers not living in the custodial home, noncustodial parent, and high-conflict divorce parents. Further research revealed a hole in the literature on this topic; parallel topics were also consulted through peer-reviewed scholarly articles related to fathers' PA experiences. A search using university research libraries was conducted to discover related topics as well. Key words and phrases were *PA syndrome, alienation, divorce, fathers, dads, children, alienated, separated, impact of divorce, marginalized, legal, custody, judicial, shared parenting, parenting, judge, divorce court, and brainwashed.* Few peer-reviewed scholarly articles surfaced related to alienation and fathers. University research librarians also searched to identify if there were references available. Because so few references were available, I tried to find a parallel and formulated conclusions, analysis, and application to best fit the current research. This research gap only further supports the need for this research.

As previously stated, little research has been done explicitly targeting alienated fathers and their experiences. Balmer et al. (2018) confirmed that prior researchers have neglected to include men's perspectives of what factors influence their roles as parents after they have undergone divorce or separation. Although research has taken place exploring the targeted parent or noncustodial parent, research related to fathers is scarce (Balmer et al., 2018). The literature review was illuminating as it provided much validity to how important it would be to capture the lived experiences of fathers reporting

alienation from their children. The extensive process in trying to find literature was challenging, but that only created a greater motivation in completing the research.

Previous research was primarily related to a child's perspective and the theory of PA; therefore, comparatively speaking, that area has substantially more literature to draw from (Balmer et al., 2018). Though this area was essential to explore, it was revealing to see there were no studies by other researchers focused on fathers. This research may serve as a launching point and much may be gained in the field of research in addition to counseling and law. Though few peer-reviewed scholarly articles provided fathers' perspectives, I found dissertations that focused on gaining a greater perspective on the nonresident father or the divorced father, and one dissertation was related to alienated fathers (Portanenko 2020). These scholars also remarked when reviewing the literature, the apparent need for more research that encapsulated fathers' experiences.

According to Portanenko (2020), a review of the literature supports the need for research exploring fathers' perspectives of their experiences of alienation and court interventions. The extant literature revealed that the effects of PA on noncustodial parents are little understood, indicating that further investigation is needed. A literature search found no studies involving this population (Portanenko, 2020). Perhaps the research completed by scholars can create the foundation for research to investigate this population.

Balmer et al. (2018) elaborated how most descriptions of features and experiences of alienated parents come from studies with a small sample of fewer than 50 participants.

On the other hand, PA has been identified in reports from legal and mental health professionals focused on alienated parents (Balmer et al. 2018). These professionals work alongside the alienated parent, but because the experiences are not coming straight from the source, the authenticity can be questioned and the actual experience is not captured. Additional research is needed that examines the impact of PA on fathers, explicitly exploring the psychological well-being and perception of parenting capacity from the alienated parents' perspectives. Such an examination will offer a greater awareness of what these fathers experience, how best to support them, and what resources and/or case law needs to be created to address this issue.

By unpacking a phenomenon through qualitative research, the research community is better positioned to extend knowledge through quantitative research. Neither quantitative nor qualitative research is inferior or superior to the other—both are needed, and they build upon the other. Many researchers begin with qualitative methods and then go on to mixed-method or quantitative approaches. Of the scant literature on the phenomenon under study, little was related to quantitative data; much of the data reviewed was qualitative. PA literature is lacking the impact on targeted parents in quantitative research that captures data from parents' experiences with their attorneys (Gross, 2013). This same sentiment was expressed when reviewing areas outside the judicial experience: hardly any quantitative data had been examined.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study is embedded in attachment theory. Attachment theory is the result of the work of Bowlby (1969) and Ainsworth (1969) and emerged from the work of many different disciplines. Attachment theory originated from the concept that children are physiologically spontaneous and gravitate to caretakers who meet their needs. These caretakers also provide children a sense of security, safety, and a place to gather in their time of perceived needs. Most frequently, this caretaker is a child's mother, and this is where the original natural attachment bond is formed (Bowlby, 1969). As a child develops, both mentally and physically, the need for the attachment character changes. This change is based on newly established needs and desires, but the attachment figure through a theoretical perspective is often the mother.

Bowlby (1969) recognized that fathers are also extremely valuable when exploring attachment. However, many individuals saw fathers as someone children found to be a pal or friend to play with as opposed to when a child went to their mother as a primary source of attachment. This paradigm may lead some to think or consider the father may not be considered as a primary attachment figure or if they could be seen as an equal partner in parenting. The Attachment Theory created a lasting impression on a numerous and different area of treatment. According to Palm (2014), the clinical professional in mental health worked with infants and to educate parents and to create different kinds of policies. This effort has a long history that has carefully examined the evolution of the parent-child relationship.

According to Saul McLeod (2017), in the 1970s the father began to serve the role as an attachment figure which was different than earlier in time when the mothers' role was seen as the primary attachment figure. Prior to this era, the focus of the attachment theory was focused on the mother in the role as the primary attachment figure. However, in the seventies, with the parent role changes, significant changes took place.

According to Warshak (2014), there has been much research on Attachment Theory that has modified Bowlby's original theory and instead the new contemporary research data demonstrates that there is no logic behind why there should be a rank of how important one parent is over another.

According to Palm (2014), fathers serve as a safety net for their children from birth throughout life. The interaction between the two, father and child, is unique in many ways as proven by the psychologist Piaget and others. This interaction serves as building blocks for the children to form healthy and stable attachment skills, and a sense of safety as they grow and develop. Because children tend to follow and develop the same behavioral as they view from birth to early adolescence, Palm (2014) revealed how fathers exhibit strong influence to their children when they are observing the father-mother relationship. This observation can allow the child to view a healthy relationship and seek to model that same behavior when building their own relationships.

According to Lowenstein (2013), the Attachment Theory states and implies that a child sees his or her mother as the primary and main caregiver which is the primary role of Attachment (Castello, 2016). However, no data exist within the Attachment Theory

that implies the father cannot also serve the role of a principal attachment figure if he happens to be the one that delivers most of the childcare. The child will form attachment to any consistent caregivers who respond to social interaction with the child (McLeod, 2017). Both parents can be equally as important and both the mother and father's relationship with the child are critically important. Braver and Lamb (2018) revealed that there are over 50 research studies that demonstrate that children who are raised with shared parenting function better than those with sole physical custody (Bauserman, 2002; Nielsen, 2017).

The empirical research data revealed that children who are a product of divorced parents benefit far more on average from parents who practice shared parenting where they live with each parent at least 35% of the time (Braver & Lamb, 2018). As the research data revealed, shared parenting is the ideal method, although as research supports, it is scarcely practiced due to the custodial imbalance of residential time allocation with both parents. When parents separate or divorce, the child does best when they are able to maintain equal relationship with both parents (Braver & Lamb, 2018).

According to Warshak (2014), research in the area of child development revealed to policy makers and decision makers that they can no longer support the belief that mothers are more likely to be the "psychologically primary" parent while ignoring the fact that fathers provide equal parenting skills. In other words, research, policy makers, decision makers cannot support those parents of infants or toddlers be ranked of higher priority than another, instead, individuals in these positions of power should maximize

the potential of advocating for the child to be raised with both parents involved and engaged in their life. Furthermore, research supports those children benefit the most from shared parenting. Sotomayor-Peterson, De Baca, Figueredo, and Smith-Castro (2013), discussed how shared parenting, usually has a positive influence on the quality of how a parent cares for their child, and should positively influence the family emotional environment, resulting in children who fare better in life.

Warshak (2014) revealed how research demonstrates that as a result of infants developing healthy varying relationships of attachment with the mother and father, there is significant harm of disrupting normal development in either of those relationships by assigning favoritism over one parent over the other. Furthermore, Smyth (2017) confirms how shared parenting is most beneficial for separating parents and their children when it is crafted specifically for each individual family. This is not a cookie cutter response that is blanketed with the masses. It needs to be supported by willing parents on their own or through educating lawyers, counselors, and mediators who are in a position of advocacy and intervention as they work in the best interest of the child and family.

According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2012), the Attachment Theory has many commonalities with the Family Theory. This connection between the Attachment Theory and the Family Theory creates many opportunities for researchers, practitioners, and academic professionals to study the understanding of relationships within family characteristics. Furthermore, Attachment Theory is viewed as very positive in describing the importance of the bond formed with the child and their parents or caretakers. There

are critics of the theory regarding the influence it has on decision making for custody, more specifically regarding the father (Mikulincer and Shaver 2012).

According to Lowenstein (2013), the use of Attachment Theory has proven to be one of the more treacherous, immoral, partial, and unjust arguments offered by parents who desire to eliminate the father from the child's life or limiting the contact they have with the child. This may be due to a misunderstanding and a misapplication of the theory. In addition, Lowenstein (2011) affirmed that countless professionals in the empathic occupations, such as therapists, counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and pediatricians have biased opinions that often side with the custodial parent who most often happens to be the mother. Holmes (1993) discussed how Attachment Theory accepts the anticipated popularity of the mother as the primary caregiver. However, there is nothing in the theory that suggests that fathers are not suitable to become the primary caregivers if they happen to be the parent who provides the most care for the child, because Attachment Theory has nothing to do with determining custody.

Attachment Theory can be beneficial, but only if it is removed from the scope of only placing the mother in the position as the primary attachment figure and instead looking at the equal contributions of both parents. It is necessary to view it from more than just the one angle of assuming the mother should be awarded custody due to the bond that is formed between a child and the mother from inception Lowenstein, (2011).

Lowenstein (2011) elaborates how neither Bowlby (1969) nor Ainsworth (1969) had ever known that their research and theoretical perspective would be used to interfere

with the potential of a mother or a father having equal contact with his or her children. Despite Attachment Theory providing a valuable perspective and understanding of the relationship with a child and their parent or caretaker, it also has its limitations when not used with fair and equal analysis. Both the mother and father should play a responsible role in the child's life. Lowenstein (2011) argued the best interest of the child is if neither parent is abusive or harmful towards the child, and if both parents are providing a healthy and equal responsible role in the life of a child, then shared parenting is the ideal model to follow. This is a view that many distinguished professionals agree with, including the United Nations, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association (Lowenstein, 2011).

Although research related to fathering continues to lag compared to that on mothering, recent studies related to father attachment has altered the father's role in the emotional socialization of their children (Freeman, Newland, & Coyl, 2010). Although Attachment Theory unveils critical information of understanding and assessing a myriad of characteristics between a child and his/her parents, it should be considered how absent fathers, made absent not by their own will, may also have strong bonds, healthy relationships, and positive contributions and attachment to their child. In theory, if both parents provide a healthy and loving relationship to the child, they should both be involved in the raising and rights of the child.

Conceptual Framework

According to Harman et al. (2019), PA is defined as a mental condition that may be found among children of parents engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce. The child who experiences PA aligns himself or herself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated or targeted parent) as a result of the manipulations of the preferred parent to denigrate the targeted parent. When exploring the phenomenon of PA and its impact on fathers, the researcher is required to try to draw parallels in other areas, as there is hardly any research specifically in the arena of fathers and alienation. Additionally, the research that is reviewed is primarily qualitative research, as that is the methodology of choice when one is trying to explore a given human experience. Often when interviews are involved trying to capture a lived experience, quantifiable data and research is not the research of choice (Creswell, 2018). As Creswell (2018) explained, researchers often conduct studies using qualitative methods when they need a multifaceted, thorough understanding of the issue. In qualitative data, participants are not only able to report their experiences; they are also able to explain these experiences in detail. In contrast, quantitative measurements are limited in the amount that participants can report and explain. The qualitative process provides in-depth data for the researcher.

According to Balmer et al. (2018), research often does not include men's' perspectives of the reasons that impact their parental role after undergoing a divorce or having been separated. Balmer et al. (2018) further confirmed how the bulk of the body

of literature related to PA focuses on describing the targeted child and alienating parent, meanwhile the perspective of the targeted parent remains under-researched. Furthermore, research has encompassed small sample sizes, and primarily qualitative research. As Balmer et al. (2018) further elaborates, currently most descriptions of alienated parent characteristics and experiences come from research with a small sample that is studied, less than 50 participants, or it comes from reports from legal and mental health professionals of the alienated parent. These professionals are the ones who have worked with the targeted parent or targeted child, or from a child who is alienated when they are interviewed as an adult.

Within the literature review, a more explicit assessment is taken, investigating the impact of alienation on fathers. Furthermore, the assessment of research extended to the targeted parent, or the noncustodial parent. Looking at the non-custodial parent or targeted parent is necessary as it may illuminate and reveal the impact of alienation on fathers. Therefore, the research related to court systems and how that impacts alienated fathers need further study. The impact on children when the father is alienated is revealed. This leads the researcher into whatever the fathers may also be experiencing as they witness the impact it is having on their own child.

History of Alienation and Fathers

Only a small amount of research has been explored concerning the impact of alienation on fathers. This reveals why this focus on the alienation on fathers is so important. As Balmer et al. (2018) revealed and described the effect on the alienation of

children and alienation of the parent, this area of research continues to be misunderstood and therefore under researched. When reviewing literature, much that was found was related to the impact on children, or mothers, and if the search explored the impact of divorce or separation, results rendered scholarly articles that were well over ten years old. Balmer et al. (2018), revealed there is a small amount or no research that focuses on the experience of non-custodial parents who have been alienated from their children. Thus, to provide the most valid and reliable research, the researcher will attempt to find parallels in similar themes with the most current literature available.

When the father is the primarily non-custodial parent, as discussed earlier in this research, divorced, or separated fathers do not have custody of their children close to 90 percent of the time. The custody is awarded primarily to the mother (U.S. Census, 2016b). This is also implied when one considers the term *targeted parent*, as that indicates the alienated parent and as previously mentioned, the alienated parent most often is the father (Lowenstein, 2013). It is difficult to address research related to fathers that have been alienated from their children, but the literature review will look closely for studies related to divorced fathers due to limited amount of contemporary data fathers' experience.

According to Casentino (2017), the massive number of fathers defined parenting as their closest attachment and the primary and most important role they possess in society. As Casentino (2017) described, the fathers' primary attachments when they are married is directed toward children, and fathers are far more likely to undergo

overwhelming emotional pain after suffering a divorce, particularly if the father is denied custody of his children resulting in becoming a nonresident parent. When viewing fathers as a group, evidence supports their overall ability to adjust after having suffered a divorce is lower than that of a mother who has custody of her children (Tsui, 2020). In fact, the risk of alienated father's committing suicide is higher for fathers who are divorced (Tsui, 2020) and fathers who feel less supported by social supports in places that are supposed to be utilized as systems and resources for these fathers to tap into to regain stability.

Jacobs (1986) conducted a study that determined that the greatest impact of divorce on fathers is in the area of mental health. He stated that between 60-80% of men reported significant quantities of symptoms that surfaced in the future are stress related. Ambrose, Harper, and Pemberton (1983) discovered that nearly 70% of divorced fathers exhibited new mental health issues following a divorce. Balmer et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative research study that aimed to investigate the experience of PA from the perspective of mothers and fathers as targeted parents. Balmer et al. (2018) specifically looked to see if there are sex differences in the experience of PA. He also examined if the degree of PA would, predict changes in the targeted parent's mental health. Finally, he examined if they perceived themselves to be competent parents.

Balmer et al. (2018) results did not support the researchers' original hypothesis that read, "Fathers report an increased rate of exposure to PA campaigns". Instead, mothers reported more exposure to PA tactics than fathers. This discovery was also in conflict with previous research that suggested mothers were commonly found to be the

alienating parent, as fathers experience a higher frequency and severity of exposure to PA tactics. This finding may be attributed by the larger sample size and higher number of targeted mothers than in previous studies (Balmer et al., 2018).

According to Goldberg and Goldberg (2013), the experience of the alienated parent can be as traumatic as the death of a child. The difference with PA is that it is ongoing and rarely is emotional closure reached. Within the Balmer et al. (2018) study, the targeted parents reported the alienation was generating moderate levels of depression, anxiety, panic attacks and stress in their lives. This finding is also proportionate with a study by Baker (2010) where she examined the targeted parent experiencing anxiety with 80% of fathers reported increased rates of anxiety and depression.

According to Sher (2015), PA may affect men's mental health in several ways. Adult men who were victims of PA when they were children suffer long-term effects. Those negative effects include divorce, lack of trust, low self-esteem, depression, problems with identity and not having a sense of belonging or roots, alienation from own children, drug/alcohol abuse, choosing not to have children to avoid being rejected by them, low achievement, anger, and bitterness over the time lost with the alienated parent. He also found that the negative effects of PA, where fathers lost most or all contact with their children, have a higher risk of depression and suicide. Lehr and MacMillan (2001) also suggested that being alienated from a parent may contribute to suicide in adult men who are victims of PA. According to Farkas (2011), a parent's worst nightmare is to experience PA. In addition to the grief of marital loss or separation, there is the added

variable of the breaking of a loving relationship between a child and its parent. The current research is aligned with data that supports those men who are divorced are close to 10 times more likely to kill themselves when compared to women who have experienced divorce (Sher, 2015).

Before Sher (2015), Baker (2010), found increased rates of anxiety and depression created a severe interference for these fathers as it limited their ability to interact with others effectively, including professionals and others that they may have within their circle of support. She expands and discusses how the father's preparation, and motivation needed in custody disputes undergo considerable, reduced, and overwhelming emotions. In essence, the fathers are not performing at their maximum levels. When they need all their energy and resources to overcome the difficulties they are experiencing, being alienated from their children hinders their performance considerably. In other words, the impact on fathers who have been alienated from their children can be dangerous and should not be ignored. Some fathers are debilitated from the loss of their role as a father, moving out of the home, and no longer having residency within the family they were so accustomed to having and now having to start all over again with the overwhelming grief that follows them (Bosch, Wessels & Roux, (2018).

Burgess, Locke, and Thomas (1971), confirmed that when a parent can keep the children following a divorce or separation, the parent in turn would experience fewer crises than the parent who is completely cut off from the child. Unfortunately, more times than not, the parent who is most often cut off from the child are the fathers (Lowenstein,

2013). Koszyk (2020) discussed how parents who are fortunate to maintain or establish custody of the children experience much less changes in their life. They also feel less lonely, less insecure, and less helpless in the relationship they have with their child. These fathers have a greater likelihood of maintaining a positive and emotional existence than fathers who have been forced to modify the time they get to spend with their children.

The data derived from literature on fathers who have not been awarded custody following divorce documents how the impact on these fathers' mental health is significant. In addition, Koszyk (2020), discussed how noncustodial fathers experience substantial loss, grief, and helplessness. Coley (2006) discussed how these fathers become apathetic, depressed, and feel incompetent and inadequate. In addition, research has been done to explore the physiological impact that divorce has on fathers leading them to gain weight, high blood pressure, increased drinking, sleep issues, and a range of psychological complaints following the divorce (Kruk, 2010). It is clear these fathers are negatively impacted by the experience of alienation from their children, influencing them mentally, emotionally, and physiologically.

According to Cohen (1987), fathers conveyed that the most noteworthy connection in their life is their children and they are more intensely affected by fatherhood than is often assumed. Most fathers characterize child rearing as the most essential connection they possess and their most critical and esteemed social role (Cohen, 1987). Considering how important this role is to fathers, it is safe to assume they will

experience an overwhelmingly emotionally difficult time after divorce, especially if the outcome is that they become noncustodial or non-resident fathers (Koszyk, 2020).

Warshak (2014) revealed that there is a lack of appreciation regarding the value of a fathers' role by society which is disheartening for divorced or separated fathers.

Warshak (2010) also revealed that fathers not having access to their children and not having social support after they endure a divorce or separation is identified as the foundation where PA develops. These fathers need counseling and/or therapeutic intervention. The review of literature reveals just how devastating this trauma is for alienated fathers (Baker, 2010; Balmer et al., 2018; Coley, 2006; Farkas, 2011; Kruk, 2010; Lehr & MacMillan, 2001). In addition to the hardships, these fathers experience mentally and emotionally they must accept no longer having access to their child daily. In reviewing the literature, it is obvious that the experience of alienation can be seen as the most impactful hurt that alienated fathers' experience. It is imperative and necessary for counselors to be made aware of this experience to help these fathers and provide them with resources they may need to cope or overcome many of the difficulties that surface from the alienation.

Impact on Children

As Koszyk and Bernet, (2020) described, PA as child abuse and the impact it has on the child does not simply disappear; instead, PA scars a child's psyche and those scars can last a lifetime eventually impacting them as adults. They also discussed how children who have been alienated show signs of depression, low self-esteem, express feelings of

guilt, separation anxiety, catastrophic thinking, experiencing phobias, suicidality, sleep and eating issues. PA can be a large form of stress on a child and can cause psychophysiological and psychiatric illness. Alienation can be equally debilitating. The long-term impact on a child experiencing alienation is significant and the risks are high. PA not only impacts a child during their formative years as they are developing, but also as they continue to evolve into adults and possibly begin a family or relationships of their own in the future. The alienation of a child from one of its parents may cause a catastrophic impact on the overall long-term development and well-being of that child. They are modeling the same behavior learned from their parents and, therefore, have greater potential for this problem to continue generationally. The child does not just “get over it.” Inflicted wounds to the child’s psyche can last a lifetime and impact adulthood.

Lucas, Nicholson, and Erbas (2013) conducted a study that identified many things that may affect the mental health of children who come from a family of divorce or separation. The study compared the mental health of 8–9-year-old Australian children from intact families where the fathers are living in the home, to those from divorced or separated families where fathers are non-custodial or non-resident (Lucas et al., 2013). The study used a large nationally representative sample of 4,983 participants that followed up every two years, starting at the age of four to age eight to nine. Data were gathered through self-reports from both parents, and teachers of the children. It investigated whether there was any variability in child mental health that can be explained by variations in socioeconomic status, how they are parented, the mental health

of the parent, or any contributing conflicts with the parents. Finally, it examined which variables have the strongest likelihood of acting as predictors in mental health issues with the gathered sample of children (Lucas et al., 2013).

Results identified how children from the families that are separated have a disadvantage when compared to families that are intact on all measured variables, including the socio-economic status (Lucas et al., 2013). They have a greater likelihood of living in a low-income home only bringing in less than \$500 a week and they are less likely to have parents that have graduated from high school and undergone any higher education, in addition parents have a greater likelihood of being unemployed (Lucas et al., 2013). Despite the researchers not specifically studying how a non-resident or resident father impact parenting practices, the results rendering still provide good information. For example, children that come from nonresident family homes have a far greater likelihood of having psychologically distressed parents. This outcome results in children who have double the chance of having an increased risk of mental health illness when comparing to families that are not separated (Lucas et al., 2013).

This study provided critical information into the causal factors of a child's well-being with relation to a father who is resident in their life (Lucas et al., 2013). The conditions relate to family structures determining the mental health of the children. The significance of fathers to the overall well-being of a child is increasingly proven to have a strong correlation. Findings in the study also emphasized the socioeconomic impact of non-resident fathers, and how that related to stressful events, conflicts, physiological, and

mental impact on the child. Interestingly, the research was conducted in Australia, there has not been any similar research done in the United States. What also is worthy of mention is because of research like this, the significance of fathers to a child's well-being is progressively being recognized in Australian policy (Lucas et al., 2013). There are groups that advocate for father's rights that have increased the awareness of the impact of non-resident fathers' and in turn strive to advocate for change in family law, government policy, and child support which encourages having both a mother and a father in a family unit (Lucas et al., 2013).

McLanahan, Tach, and Schneider (2013) also conducted a study exploring the causal effects of fathers' absence on children's well-being. The research pays particular attention to ensuring articles reviewed adopts an innovative methodological approach that isolates causal effects which omit variable bias and take a rigorous approach to the research. The study reviewed 47 articles and found that, overall, there were significant negative effects on a child's well-being if the father is absent. The articles demonstrated that these effects are stronger during certain stages of a child's development, and the stage it is most influenced effects eventual outcomes of how these children evolve (McLanahan et al., 2013).

This study found significant evidence that the negative effects related to a child's socioemotional development are when the father is absent during early and middle childhood. The negative effects are more pronounced in boys than for girls and the evidence is not as strong when exploring the effect on cognitive ability of a child if the

father is absent (McLanahan et al., 2013). Results showed that the impact of how they developed socially and emotionally is impacted and persists into their teenage years. There was also strong evidence that demonstrates the fathers' absence creates a greater likelihood the child will engage in high-risk behavior in their teenage years; examples listed are smoking or teen pregnancy (McLanahan et al., 2013).

Furthermore, there is a strong effect of completing high school and moving forward to higher education, if the father is absent, then there is decreased likelihood the children will achieve these life goals (McLanahan et al., 2013). Also, it identified with a strong correlation that the likelihood of the child having some type of mental illness as an adult, demonstrating that the psychological harms of not having a father in their lives during their formative years of childhood created a negative impact that follows them throughout their adulthood (McLanahan et al., 2013). When reviewing these 47 articles, again the impact of a father's absence on a child is a significant one. The child must then contend with the added component of being enmeshed within parental conflict, and alienation that has both long and short-term effects throughout their life course. Within the research, it demonstrated how the role of an intact family, with the father present can prove very beneficial to a child's overall well-being.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

According to Michaud (2020), while reviewing clinical and family research, he discovered that fathers were not represented, or minimally represented. The child and family research were focused on clinical issues. Their research discovered that out of 577

studies that focused on parenting, only eight (or 1.4%) involved fathers. Instinctually, one may think that research is outdated, but when the research was duplicated, it again performed closely to 15 years later, the analysis identified that of 514 studies, only 11 (or 2.1%) involved only fathers (Michaud (2020). Identical research was performed close to 15 years later, the analysis research or literature that focused only on the role of the father is scarce in the professional field. As research supports, children need the bond of both parents, and this bond carries a different set of benefits from each parent that is worthy of research and analysis. The lack of emphasis of fathers in child rearing, or child development can be seen in many areas. As an example, a study by Overlock (2017), who investigated 23 popular parenting books and of the 56,379 paragraphs, only 4.2% referred to fathers.

The role of the father in these books is largely supplementary to the role of the mother and often depicted as negotiable and voluntary Overlock (2017). According to Gross (2013), when parents lead children without borders, surprising lessons parents around the world can teach all of us. In addition, some research simply nullified the role of fathers, implying that fathers may not make any notable or distinctive influence on how their child develops. According to Gross (2013), this tendency tends to reappear on multiple fronts.

During the review of literature, the phenomenological experiences of the PA of the fathers who have been alienated from their children and specifically substantiates why a qualitative research study was conducted using a phenomenological research approach.

This methodological approach was used as rich data needed to be collected that described the experiences, and when one uses a quantitative instrument much of that shared experience is lost.

Percy, Kostere, and Kostere (2015) described how the researcher who utilizes a qualitative phenomenological approach is interested in the innermost proportions, textures, characteristics, and constructions of cognitive processes. Most of the research referenced is qualitative in nature, only one dissertation research was found specifically utilizing the phenomenological approach; all other research that was reviewed is qualitative research but not utilizing phenomenology.

According to Portanenko (2020), the goal of a phenomenological study is to determine what an experience means for the individuals who have experienced it, and therefore are able to convey a comprehensive description of their experiences. The participants provide rich descriptions, which reveal the true essence of what they had experienced.

A research dissertation written by Portanenko (2020), utilized a phenomenological research approach to the lived experience of divorced or separated fathers who have been alienated from their children. Portanenko (2020) interviewed 11 divorced or separated fathers who reported being alienated from their children. Participant's age ranged from 21-70 capturing their experience by recording an audio-recorded interview. Themes that emerged from their expression of their alienated experience included: (a) a deteriorated, distant, or broken relationship with their children;

(b) an experience of being denigrated or rejected by their children; (c) the lack of former spouse's support; (d) sabotaged visitation; (e) ex-spouse 's control; (f) loss of parental role; (g) adversarial court system; (h) the child 's changed relationship with extended family (Portanenکو, 2020).

Using the phenomenological research approach, Portanenکو (2020), discovered the participants had experienced a variety of distressful feelings as well as feeling denigrated and rejected by their children and losing their sense of a parental role. Furthermore, the study revealed that the adversarial court system contributed to the experience Portanenکو (2020). By utilizing the phenomenological research approach, the researcher was able to allow the participants to provide a comprehensive description that provided the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrayed the essence of the experience as envisioned by (Braver & Lamb, 2018).

As Balmer et al. (2018) discussed, the phenomenological research captures the knowledge of the human experience, unlike science, which tends to be subjective and have scientific assumptions. The noncustodial parents' perceptions of the experience of PAS were described in their totality as real-world experiences leading to the textual description of each person's experience.

Balmer et al. (2018), was able to capture this phenomenon by revealing the limitation of the study and using the methodological approach. The researcher discussed how the sample size of only using nine participants could have shown a limited scope of the depth of this issue and the population that it impacts. Although, on the contrary

having such a small sample allowed an intimate opportunity of gathering a rich sample of data to draw from and further analyze, as it was confirmed that the research had scientific merit (Balmer et al. 2018). There appears to be a delicate balance when trying to capture the fathers' lived experience without saturating the data. By using this qualitative research method, much was gained from the phenomenon data she captured. It is suggested that further research would be necessary to gain generalizability and a deeper understanding. Another dissertation was found using a qualitative research grounded theory approach.

According to Warshak (2014), a qualitative research study was created to develop a theory about the actions, interactions, and emotions experienced by fathers that felt alienated from their children. As a result, fathers believed that court interventions were intermingled with their experience of alienation. The researcher interviewed eight fathers that were selected through purposeful sampling that shared the experiences that led them to feeling alienated from their children. Thus, the impact that the court systems had relative to the relationship they had with their children (Warshak (2014). Utilizing a grounded theory approach allowed the researcher to create three major categories based on each father's interpretation of the aspects that influenced their experience of being alienated from their children (Warshak 2014).

According to Warshak (2014), using coding to initially establishing categories, and based upon saturation and frequency in responding, finding the links among the categories, properties, and dimensions will allow at least three main categories to emerge

through axial coding. Participants from various research will express sentiments throughout their interview collectively that will fall into at least three main categories: (a) uncooperative custodial parent, referred to the experience these fathers were having in trying to maintain their ability to be a relevant part of their children's life and how difficult the other parent was making it for them to do so; (b) loss of identity as a father, referred to the experience, some fathers believed that they were involved, but instead, saw less and less of their children (Warshak 2014); and (c) loss of power as a father, this included the unfair treatment within the court systems and the overwhelming emotional responses they had experienced. Warshak (2014) reexamined the categories by comparing and combining data in different ways. It was revealed that the relationships between categories and using a coding paradigm that shows the relationship of subcategories to categories. This approach, through grounded theory, allows researchers to best understand these fathers' experiences, and to develop a theory.

As Creswell (2018) described, "grounded theory is a design of inquiry from sociology in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants" (p.13). Warshak (2014) used grounded theory to interpret the way that fathers made sense out of their life, their experiences, and how they structure their world as it related to being alienated from their children and the experience, they had with court intervention contributing to that alienation.

The research conducted by Warshak (2014), produced a theory illustrating that most fathers in the study believed that the custodial parent was responsible for their experience of alienation. It was reported that the alienated parent believed that the custodial parent brainwashed, poisoned, or used guilt to deter the children from having a relationship with the fathers. Some fathers believed that they were involved, active fathers who tried to remain active and involved, but instead, saw less and less of their children Warshak (2014). The research and responses from this qualitative study examined the phenomenological experiences which conclude that the fathers were experiencing similarities in PA. Noting that participants of this study had experienced emotions of anger, these emotions were validated through feedback and they recognized they were caused by the PA. The participants expressed gratitude that someone helped them understand their quandary.

Exploring and researching literature will lead the way to new phenomenological conceptualization. In the study of fathers of PA, the research of their experiences is uncommon. While researching, there is a plentiful journal article available for children of PA, however, the experiences of fathers remain scarce. According to Balmer, Matthewson, and Haines (2018), when reviewing literature related to PA, much can be found that focus on the characteristics of the alienator and the child who has been alienated. Regardless of the bulk of research describing the alienated child and alienating parent, the angle of the targeted parent remains under-researched. This gap in literature

only further substantiates how critically important it is to research this population and the experience they have undergone.

There was hardly any research related to the alienated fathers as the target population. As Sher (2017) discusses and affirms, literature on the parent-child relationship under-represents the fathers' perspective. Furthermore, there was no research that focused on the experience of non-custodial parents who have been alienated from their children (Warshak, 2014). Instead of claiming that fathers were alienated, much of the research utilized words such as non-custodial or targeted parent. When one would review the research method and review the statistical representation, one could identify how the numbers of participants were primarily fathers (Balmer et al. (2018). This further substantiates that research that does specifically look at alienated fathers is necessary to grasp the overall magnitude of this phenomenon that these fathers are experiencing.

Many studies identify what may become of the child, how they will develop and what strengths or weaknesses they may possess due to being alienated from their father (McLanahan et al., 2013). This component is critical to observe and worthy of mention, but the research did not take it one step further and explore specifically the child and father relationship. Research did not exist specifically studying the relationship between the father and child as a result of the alienation. The research that exists is a generalized theoretical concept of children alienated from their parents. More research could encompass isolating the variable of fathers and the impact it has on them when they are alienated from their children.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature review attempted to provide an overall perspective on what research existed about alienated fathers. Specifically, literature reviewed encompassed divorce, separation, and the impact on fathers. Also, research related to the targeted parent, or the noncustodial parent, with hopes that can somewhat mirror the impact of alienation on fathers that had yet to be researched. The discoveries within the literature review help create a foundation for the qualitative methodology utilizing a phenomenological approach to research the lived experiences of alienated fathers. The literature reviewed also depicted the significant gap in literature that this research may help to address. In addition, this literature review helps substantiate why a phenomenological research method was chosen and how it was implemented.

Chapter 3 will encompass the research design of the study. Much of the research covered in the literature was conducted using a qualitative research method. In Chapter 3, I outline the methodological approach to the study, specifically looking at qualitative research using a phenomenological approach. In addition, in Chapter 3, I discuss the sample used, the method of data collected, and how the data were analyzed, and I provide a thorough breakdown of specific procedures used.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology and design of this study. The research study is a phenomenological study entitled “A Phenomenological Study of Fathers’ Experiences of Parental Alienation (PA).” The In this research, I sought to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of separated or divorced fathers who report being alienated from their children. Within this chapter, I discuss the purpose of the study, research question, research design, target population and sample, procedures, and instruments. In closing, I discuss the ethical considerations and conclude the chapter with a summary.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of nonresidential fathers who are alienated from their children within the context of high-conflict separations or divorces. I used qualitative methods design and conducted interviews to develop an understanding of the experiences of fathers who identified themselves as being alienated from their children. The research builds on literature related to PA but stands alone as an opportunity for fathers to express their experiences to provide a perspective that is absent from the extant literature.

According to Poustie, Matthewson, and Balmer (2018), targeted parents describe physical and emotional distance separating them from their child and emotional and financial costs associated with their engagement with systems such as legal systems and child protection systems. Targeted parents describe poor mental health and concern for

their child's psychological well-being (Poustie et al., 2018). For targeted parents, alienating behaviors are considered a form of family violence (Poustie et al., 2018). Additionally, targeted parents may use active coping behaviors, but further research is needed to better understand PA (Poustie et al., 2018). Mental health and legal professionals must collaborate to optimize support for targeted parents (Moore & Ordway, 2013). The phenomenological approach of this research will help to identify fathers' perspectives on the psychological effects of PA and its significance for the targeted parent's relationship with their children.

Research Design and Rationale

The primary research question guiding this research was:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of divorced or separated fathers who report being alienated from their children?

The research question was qualitative, creating the basis of a phenomenological study.

Percy et al. (2015) discussed how using a qualitative research approach is essential when the intent is to understand the specific phenomenon and to better understand the processes and perspectives of the lived experience of that phenomenon. The research question that guided this interview was: What are the lived experiences of fathers who identify themselves as alienated from their biological children?

Qualitative research has proved useful for this type of study. According to Giorgi (2009), qualitative research provides an in-depth method to explore phenomena and

understand the specifics entailed with how participants experience a particular set of events in their lives.

Heidegger's phenomenology was used to understand the lived experiences of divorced or separated fathers who report being alienated from their children. Although researchers can identify the potential bias that might result from personal experiences through journaling, they cannot eliminate the biases based on experiences (Blau et al., 2013). Researchers use a *preunderstanding* or *fore conception* when interpreting new information (i.e., a spiral process of revising understanding referred to as the *hermeneutic circle*). I have many years of preunderstanding, fore conception, and experience with PA, both personally and professionally. Thus, it was reasonable to assume Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological approach would be appropriate for this study (Buser et al., 2016). This process falls into the first phase of hermeneutic phenomenology in which a researcher is clustering and then organizing the data into themes.

The second phase is the imaginative variation, which allows a researcher to capture the structural meanings and essences of the phenomenon and the context that may influence how the participants experience the phenomenon (Blau et al., 2013). Lastly, synthesis involves a process of intuition and reflection that creates results that form the core meaning of the phenomenon (Buser et al., 2016)—in essence, the interpretation of what the participants are conveying. Overall, Heidegger's phenomenology aligned well with the purpose of the study and allowed me to probe deeply in investigating the

meaning of the lived experiences of fathers who report being alienated from their children.

Before selecting the research method and design, I considered the intentions and how best to organize them from a qualitative research approach. The research design of choice was a qualitative research study using a Heidegger phenomenological method, which helps a researcher to understand how people interpret their world, which in turn allows for knowing more about people themselves (Ursa & Koehn, 2015). Through this approach, I was able to understand the essence of the phenomenon of PA these fathers experience through a first-person accounting, which allows for their meaning and understanding of their experiences to be heard.

Using a Heidegger phenomenological approach allows a researcher to capture the meaning of a given experience. Giorgi (2009) discussed how qualitative research methods are more commonly focused on developing an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and its given meaning—specifically focused on why a particular issue occurs, how it occurs, the process, its position, subculture, and social interactions. I was not looking to conduct research that encompasses the larger population; instead, I wanted to isolate the fathers' experiences allowing the understanding of their experiences to emerge.

McGregor (2017) used a Heidegger phenomenological approach seeking to capture couples' marital experiences when one member was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and the other spouse had military experience with at least one combat

deployment. McGregor (2017) isolated the sample to five couples because the researcher was not looking to encompass a large population, but instead was capturing the experiences of a small group to allow the understanding of their experiences to emerge. Hermeneutic phenomenological research is used to emphasize similarities among numerous participants who experience a given phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). As Creswell (2018) discussed, in-depth interviews are not focusing on generalizing to a large overall scope of a given population, and this research does not tend to rely on hypothesis testing; instead, it serves an inductive and emergent function. I was able to interview a small sample of participants who conveyed their lived experiences and formulate understandings that may be interpreted to have a universal essence. This is true throughout the research, as many similarities exist between these alienated fathers and, although the details differ, many of the hardships experienced are similar in nature.

Additionally, this phenomenological approach offers descriptive research on a phenomenon that has hardly been researched. As Giorgi (2009) emphasized, the purpose of phenomenology is to describe the participants' subjective experiences and how they connect with themselves and the world. The research assesses the detailed information of the fathers' lived experiences as they relate to it and how they interpret it. Although PA has become common, fathers in relation to this phenomenon are under researched.

Role of the Researcher

Before any research was conducted, I collected informed consent from participants on the day of the interview at the interview location. Forms were read and

explained to the participants to ensure understanding. Additionally, they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty. When obtaining informed consent from research participants, a researcher ensures the participant understands the scope of the study and grants written permission to participate in the study (Creswell, 2018).

The informed consent process allows a researcher to begin the interview process. I reassured participants about measures to protect confidentiality throughout the study and informed them all data collected, including audio recordings and informed consent forms, would be secured for 7 years in a locked location in my office that only I have access to. Measures to protect a participants' confidentiality included transferring their name to a numeric code. The only forms that identify their names are the informed consent forms, which are kept in a lockbox for 7 years in my office.

I contacted mental health professionals in the area where each participant resides to ensure that a professional would be available to accept a referral in case the participant became emotionally distressed. This is part of the ethical treatment of participants. In the event a participant felt uncomfortable or began to become frustrated or angered as they shared their experiences, I was ready to immediately stop the interview process to ensure the participant would regain stability. I would inform the participant they could stop at any time and were not obligated to continue. I was ready to deescalate the situation with coping skills by allowing the participant to take a break, regroup their thoughts, and allowing them to express any surfacing emotions they were feeling. If the participant

expressed, they wanted to terminate the interview, there was no objection, and I would thank the participant for their time, and their data would not be used. No participant needed to stop the interview.

Methodology

In this qualitative research study, I used Heidegger's phenomenological research method to understand the lived experiences of divorced or separated fathers who reported being alienated from their children. Moustakas (1990) organized a systematic form of investigating the analysis experience called *heuristic inquiry*. This form of embedded and integrated knowledge of the self in relation and in context to the dynamic whole was incorporated in this study. The intent of qualitative research is not to generalize the information, but to explain the specific research topic (Creswell, 2018). Using Heidegger's research method allowed me the opportunity to highlight the specific lived experiences of these alienated fathers; little research exists that communicates these experiences. As Reay (2015) discussed, it is critical to research the experience of alienation because the concept is new and research is scarce. Even though there are a myriad of studies in which researchers examine the parent-child relationship, Creswell (2018) stated that fathers remain on the sidelines if they are present at all. In the literature on the parent-child relationship fathers are hardly represented and if they are represented, such representation does not appear comprehensive.

Katsirikou and Lin (2017) explained that phenomenology is a recommended methodology when research seeks to create a new and fresh understanding of a given

human experience. This is the ideal method to use, as there is no other background related to fathers' experiences. This method offers a fresh and new understanding of these experiences and allows fathers to share their experiences openly in a semi structured interview format.

Participant Selection Logic

Criterion sampling was used to select the participants. The participants had to meet predetermined criteria to be eligible to participate in the study. Recruitment was conducted through social media on a Facebook page. Interested potential participants contacted me via email or phone call to express interest in participating, and the selection process began. Participants were selected based on speaking to them over the phone prior to the interview to ensure they met criteria to participate in the study. Fathers who called and were interested in participating and needed to meet the inclusionary criteria to participate in the study. Screening questions were asked and with the information the participant volunteered, I determined if the participant was eligible to participate.

The potential participant's response determined qualifications to participate in this study. If they did not meet the inclusionary criteria, they were thanked for their interest in participating in the study, and informed they did not meet criteria to participate in the study. They were encouraged to save the Facebook page in the event they come across anyone they thought may be eligible and interested in participating in the study, to invite them to contact the researcher for additional information and to move forward with the screening process.

Target Population and Sample

Provided here is a breakdown of the population and the sample gathered. The population within research is a distinct collection of individuals who are known to have similar characteristics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research, the population is separated or divorced fathers who report being alienated from their children. A sample is a part of that population and the method of sampling the researcher chooses to use is criterion sampling. According to Creswell (2018), sample size for a phenomenological study recommends aiming for 10 to 12 participants or until saturation of the data is reached. Saturation of the data means the point in time when the research participants consistently answer interview questions in the same way. For an example, if the researcher or interviewer 7 people and all of them say basically the same things, then you have reached the saturation point thus you stop the interviewing process.

Population

The population studied was alienated divorced or separated fathers. Any separated or divorced father who reported alienation from their children were included in the study, if they met inclusionary criteria. Specifically, this research intended to provide a representation of separated or divorced fathers who lived in the United States, regardless if participants were from other nations, it is not considered an exclusionary criterion. If one were to assess the population of the U.S. in 2018, when the research was conducted, the overall population was 327,167,434 million (U.S. Census, 2019). In 2016, there were approximately two million single fathers according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and about

40% of them were divorced, 38% of them had never been married, and 16% were separated (U.S. Census, 2016b).

Certain demographic factors were necessary to mention when looking at the population of divorced or separated fathers to provide a clear picture of the population that the sample is drawn. Persons under age 21 comprise over a quarter of the U.S. population, and persons 65 and older make up more than one-seventh of the population. The median age of the United States population is 37.3 years for men and 36.1 years for women. Over 62% of the U.S. population identify as White, 12.2% identify as Black, 16.3% as Hispanic or Latino, 4.7% as Asian, and .95% as Native (U.S. Census, 2016a). When looking more specifically, the median age for marriage is 27 for men and 26 for women (U.S. Census, 2016a). When the research was underway in 2018, the U.S. Census reports there were an estimated 72 million fathers across the nation; 29 million of those fathers also being grandfathers. There are an estimated 2 million single fathers in 2017 living with their children under the age of 18, and 19% of single parents are men (U.S. Census, 2019). Nine percent of these fathers are raising three or more children younger than age 18, and there are 83.9% of children living with their mothers, and the most common (43%) marital status of fathers is divorced (U.S. Census, 2019).

Student Study Sample

Participants were of varying ethnicities and demographics, between the ages of 21 and 70 residing in or within driving distance of a moderate Southern metropolitan area. Recruitment was done through social media; a Facebook page targeted to fathers. Finding

the population through physical locations in the metropolitan area, such as the library, gym, coffee shops proved to be difficult due to COVID restrictions. As Creswell (2018) discusses, the researcher might refer to availability of sampling frames of potential respondents within a population as some participants may not be as accessible as others. Creswell (2018) notes that criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied are a representation of a group of people who have experienced the researched phenomenon; as a result, the researcher can then create a common understanding. A criterion sample is used for the current research that includes 10 divorced or separated fathers who report being the alienated parent. Creswell (2018) states that the nature of the task of a phenomenological researcher demands extensive study of a small sample, fostering the opportunity for the research participants to express themselves and share the logic of their lived experiences. Using a criterion sample allows the researcher to locate needed participants while keeping the sample small affording enough time for the interviews.

Inclusion criteria requires all participants to report that they had experienced the phenomenon of being alienated from their children, they need to be over the age of 21 and up to age 70, and have experienced a divorce or separation for at least a year. Exclusionary criteria include: fathers who have received mental health counseling within the past two years, fathers who are involved in any litigation allegations (founded or unfounded of abuse), or if they are currently undergoing a custody dispute. These criteria allow for a clear picture of the lived experience of the fathers without variables that may compromise the integrity of the data.

The rationale for the sample size is connected to the research design of choice. A Heidegger's phenomenological research design is used; therefore, a smaller sample size is necessary to have the freedom of an in-depth one-on-one interview with the participants, allowing them to speak openly for an extended amount of time. The researcher will not have the time nor the resources to interview hundreds of participants, allowing the opportunity for one-on-one in-depth extensive interviewing.

As Giorgi (2009) discusses, understanding the lived experiences characterizes phenomenology as a philosophy in addition to a methodology. Considering the complexity and detailed nature of PA, the researcher requires a longer duration of time for the interviews. Creswell (2018) addresses how phenomenological research involves studying a small sample through extensive and prolonged engagement to create patterns and associations in meaning. With this information the rationale for the small sample type was chosen.

Expert Review

The researcher asked the dissertation committee to review the chosen questions and then seek approval for the interview questions used in the study. As Reay (2015) discusses, it is critical to research the experience of alienation because the concept is new, and the research is scarce. This limitation only motivated the researcher to conduct the study. Furthermore, field testing is not necessary because the researcher is the primary instrument.

Instrumentation

Instrumentation was systematic throughout the interview process; the researcher was the primary instrument used, no scale was used, an audio recorder was used to capture the interview, and the researcher will transcribe all recorded information on paper. The researcher listened to the recordings as the transcription software had difficulty picking up on some of the shared experiences the fathers had undergone, as they became very emotional at times, which was difficult to capture coherently on the audio recording. The interviews were transcribed using Quirkos to transcribe. This website has software that allowed the researcher to upload an audio file confidentially, and transmit the audio file into a text format. The text format had a multitude of errors; therefore, the researcher needed to go back into the transcripts and fix the errors, requiring the researcher to play back the audio recording multiple times to ensure the transcript was accurate. Themes were derived from the codes identified in the Quirkos software that adequately arrange, analyze, and organize participant perspectives.

Additionally, the researcher was considered the data collection instrument. The researcher observed, recorded, and interpreted each father's behavior throughout the research process using a journal. Using the researcher as the data collection instrument exposed the research to any bias. The researcher engaged in discipline and ongoing writings throughout the research project to help remain aware of biases and relied on feedback from mentors and committee members to challenge any biases.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation and Data Collection

Possible Types and Sources of Data

Research participants included 10 divorced or separated fathers who reported being alienated from their children. All participants ranged in age from 21 to 70 years old and had at least one child for whom there was no age requirement. There was no limitation of education level, employment, or type of job. Participants were required to be divorced or separated for at least one year and be able to report they had experienced being the targeted/alienated parent during/after separation or divorce proceedings. The sample was selected by using the PA group social media Facebook, using a variety of demographics and age groups. Another possible participant source was the Walden University Participant Pool as a potential source from which the researcher could recruit participants, but found it was not needed. A very active group and information site for the gathering of information is the PA Intervention (PAS). Their website is Info@pas-intervention. This site has a plethora of information that can enhance future research. Data will be collected through interviewing fathers who were selected as study participants.

Data Collection

A major step and requirement of all students conducting research, as a part of the Ph.D. degree at Walden University, was the approval of the proposed research, which was directed by his graduate committee. Thus, once the IRB Committee approved the study, then the researcher began the process of data collection. When the participant

responded to the recruitment flyer informing them of the research study, they followed up with a phone call or email informing the researcher they were interested in participating in the research study. At that time, the researcher spoke with the potential participant over the phone and began the screening questions; eligibility was determined for participation. If the participant was eligible to participate, arrangements were made to complete the informed consent form before the interview began. This meeting was scheduled prior to the interview on the same day.

Due to the current COVID-19 health crisis, the process of data collection for the study involved collecting data from the participants through Telehealth or telephone communications. Giorgi (2009) discusses how a phenomenological study involves the process of data collection gathered primarily through in-depth interviews. Colorafi and Evans (2016) discuss how interviews with research participants utilize structured or semi-structured open-ended questions, in addition to observations, review, and close examination of documents and artifacts. The current research uses interviews and observation of the participant's responses, but no documents will be examined or required for the interview.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews that took place in a private room within a public office setting. The interviews were conducted in English and were audio recorded. The duration of time for each interview lasted an hour to hour and a half. Upon interview completion, the participant was presented with a \$10 gift card as a gesture of gratitude for their participation within the study. All research, to include audio recordings

and informed consent forms were collected and were stored under lock and key in the researcher's possession and will be held for seven years. Again, once the required seven years have lapsed, the researcher will destroy all digital files of recordings gathered from interviews using digital erasing software such as Wipe-Drive. Such software allows one to permanently delete digital data while providing a detailed report confirming files have been permanently deleted. Hard files such as consent forms will be shredded to unreadable shreds and disposed of.

Data Analysis Plan

The initial step in the data analysis process was for the researcher to document personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. The researcher journaled a full accounting of personal experience to compartmentalize any preset dispositions, assumptions, or biases that may exist. A research journal was kept so entries were always present during the research, referencing it throughout to ensure no bias were present and to guarantee practicing the most objective research possible.

A list of significant statements was gathered from the interviews and grouped into larger units of themes. A description was written of "what" the participants in the study experienced and are currently experiencing with what happened and a description of how the experience ensued. Ultimately, an all-encompassing description was written of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions, providing what the participant experienced, and how they experienced it (Giorgi, 2009). This method

provided the opportunity for a thorough analysis of the data collection and a greater likelihood of guarding against personal bias.

The preliminary steps of the data analysis process began with the researcher gathering, listening to, and transcribing the data from the audio-recorded interviews. Continuing, the transcripts were read thoroughly and the audio recordings was listened to and reviewed, augmenting the researcher's capacity to develop codes and themes based on the discoveries found in the interviews. This process of going through the data repeatedly promoted clarity and precision and, therefore, created a strong foundation as the researcher immersed oneself within the data to gain the most detailed insights to the phenomena being studied. When the researcher repeatedly reviewed transcripts, notes, and audio recordings, the data evolved into having greater depth and accuracy.

Once the audio recording interview is transcribed verbatim by the researcher, it will be typed into a Microsoft document and saved. Data analysis will encompass the researcher to transcribe the audio recording interviews verbatim and entering it into the Quirkos qualitative analysis software program. This software program will facilitate the selection and comparison of coded sections of transcribed scripts. The Quirkos program is a qualitative analysis software program that will be used for coding the data received during the interview process, which allows the researcher to determine common themes that emerged from the data and code information. The software was used according to how the software dictated, and a more thorough breakdown of the data analysis process related to the software will be discussed in chapter four.

Additionally, the transcribed data was analyzed through the lens of Blau, Bach, Scott & Rubin, (2013) Heidegger's phenomenological theory. As Blau, Bach, Scott, & Rubin, (2013) discusses, Heidegger phenomenology requires reflective interpretation of a text or a study in history to achieve a meaningful understanding. The data analysis was acquired and collected that clarified the essences of the phenomenon experienced. This is a multiple-step process, beginning with horizontalizing, which entails listing relevant expressions from the participant during the interview. The second step is the reduction process in which the researcher reviewed the experiences captured and reduce them into units that have one meaning Blau, Bach, Scott, & Rubin, (2013). The third step involved thematic clustering of the collected audio-recorded data that was transcribed. It requires the researcher to establish core themes from the data Blau, Bach, Scott. & Rubin, (2013).

From there, the researcher compared the data utilizing the transcriptions, literature that was reviewed, and any observations the researcher documented. The researcher compared similarities and differences in the gathered data from the mentioned varied sources and progressed to the fifth step that entails providing an explanation of the interpreted data to stimulate understanding of the participants' experiences (Salmon & Buetow, 2013). The sixth step required the researcher to create structures contingent upon the perceptions made from the participants that share experiences.

The seventh step required the researcher to incorporate textural descriptions (Blau, Bach, Scott, & Rubin, 2013). These are explanations that the researcher has developed to explain the lived experiences of these fathers. The final step required the

researcher to discover the essence of the experience shared by these fathers of the phenomenon of having been alienated from their children (Heinamaa, Hartimo & Miettinen, (2014); Blau, Bach, Scott, & Rubin, (2013). This step-by-step process provided a description of each type of data utilized and the procedures for analyzing each type of data. The researcher used Quirkos qualitative research software to generate dominate themes and shared experiences.

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to validity and reliability. However, in qualitative studies, this concept is more ambiguous because it is put in different terms. Since qualitative researchers do not use instruments with established metrics about validity and reliability, it is pertinent to address how qualitative researchers establish that the qualitative research study's findings are credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable. Trustworthiness is all about establishing these four things with the present study entitled "A Phenomenological Study of Fathers' PA Experiences".

Credibility

This researcher is dependent on the participants to express true feelings and share their believable story from their own perspective. From the research data gathered, the researcher will strive to understand and then describe each participant's phenomenon. However, the researcher must rely on each participant for credibility of results.

Transferability

This researcher will code each participant with a number to ensure his privacy and confidentiality. This number code will then be use to identity any data that is taken from each participant. No outside party will be allowed to review a participant's information; thus, their identity will not be transferred.

Dependability

This researcher will conduct and audio tape interviews. The audio recordings will be transcribed, then returned to the participant for approval. The researcher will then collaborate with an outside evaluator to sustain the audit trail is maintained. This form of triangulation will validate this data analysis procedure strategy.

Confirmability

This researcher will check and recheck collected data throughout the interviews and audio tapes. The researcher will be searching for any instances that contradict prior data collected or prior observations. Then a data audit will be performed to examine the data collection and analysis procedures and making judgements about the potential for bias or distortion.

Ethical Procedures

The researcher is seeking approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and adhering to the standards and the principles outlined by Walden University Graduate School. The Walden University Ethics Guide outlines three ethical principles that must be adhered to when considering research that involves human beings.

The ethical principles include the respect of person's privacy and confidentiality, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects, 1978, as cited in Adams & Miles, 2013). The IRB ensures the rights and welfare of the human research subjects throughout the research will be protected; therefore, revisions from the IRB requires the researcher to ensure the location where the interviews will be held, will indeed be private in addition to the locations where participants will be recruited, will be conducive for the population that will be researched. Within the research, the researcher will ensure all ethical considerations are in full effect from the onset of the research when he gathers participants, setting up the logistics, and conducting the interview.

The American Psychological Associations (1.06), (APA, 2013,) states psychologists cooperate in ethics investigations, proceedings, and resulting requirements of the APA or any affiliated state psychological association to which they belong. In doing so, they address any confidentiality issues. Failure to cooperate is in its self an ethics violation. In addition to the APA code of ethics, the American Psychological Association (APA, 2013) code of ethics also states how to ethically conduct human subject research and publish and/or present results.

The informed consent form is an ethical consideration that will be provided to the research participants that encompasses all the specifics of the study and how the study will be conducted. The informed consent form provides the participants with all the details they need to be fully informed when choosing to participate in the research study.

As Creswell (2018), discusses, an informed consent form in research serves to provide information related to the purpose of the research, what the interview will consist of, if there are any benefits, and if the participant will experience any hardship during the research. The researcher ensures to review the consent form, and the researcher will answer any surfacing questions the participant raises. Mental health professionals will be on call and alerted to the subjects participating in the research study interview. They will have agreed to accept referrals from the researcher should they become emotionally distressed. Each participant will be knowledgeable that should they need to withdraw from the study there will be no penalty and they can quit at any time.

Summary

The research study is a phenomenological study entitled “A Phenomenological Study of Fathers’ Experiences of Parental Alienation (PA).” The research pursues the lived experiences of separated or divorced fathers who report being alienated from their children. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of non-residential fathers who are alienated from their children within the context of a high conflict separation or divorce. This study will use a qualitative methods design. Interviews will be used to develop an understanding of experiences of fathers who identify themselves as being alienated from their children.

According to Poustie, Matthewson, and Balmer (2018), targeted parents describe physical and emotional distance separating them from their child, emotional and financial costs associated with their engagement with “systems” such as legal systems and child

protection systems. They describe poor mental health and concern for their child's psychological well-being. Targeted parents alienating behaviors are a form of family violence.

In this research, the population is separated or divorced fathers who report being alienated from their children. According to Creswell (2018), sample size for a phenomenological study recommends aiming for 10 to 12 participants or until saturation of the data is reached.

Giorgi (2009) discusses how a phenomenological study involves the process of data collection gathered primarily through in-depth interviews. The researcher conducts in-depth interviews that take place in a private room within a public office setting. The interviews will be conducted in English and will be audio recorded. The duration of time for each interview was one to one half hours. Upon interview completion, the participant was presented with a \$10 gift card as a gesture of gratitude for their participation within the study. This process of going through the data repeatedly promoted clarity and precision and, therefore, created a strong foundation as the researcher immersed oneself within the data to gain the most detailed insights to the phenomena being studied. When the researcher repeatedly reviews transcripts, notes, and audio recordings, the data evolved into having greater depth and accuracy.

The researcher studied this topic utilizing a phenomenological qualitative research design. This research study was designed to explore the experiences of fathers by conducting semi-structured one-on-one in-person interviews with 10 fathers not living

with their children and who endorse that they are alienated from their children. Research participants will include 10 divorced or separated fathers who report being alienated from their children. All participants ranged in age from 21 to 70 years old and have at least one child for whom there was no age requirement. There was no limitation of education level, employment, or type of job. Participants were required to be divorced or separated for at least one year and be able to report they have experience being the targeted/alienated parent during/after separation or divorce proceedings.

Chapter 4 offers a presentation of the research data. Within the data collection process, the researcher will strive to ascertain the emergent themes. Some possible themes that may emerge are injustice of judicial system, intense emotions, unfair treatment, and significant change in life and personality.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In the purpose of chapter 4 was to report the findings from Heidegger's phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences of nonresidential fathers who are alienated from their children within the context of a highly conflicted separation or divorce. This study used qualitative methods design and conducted individual interviews to gather data. The data were used to develop an understanding of experiences of fathers who identify themselves as being alienated from their children. The research was informed by the literature related to PA and stands as an opportunity for fathers to express themselves about their experiences to provide a perspective that is noticeably absent from the relevant research literature. The research question used to guide the study, included:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of fathers who identify themselves as alienated from their biological children?

Qualitative research can prove useful for this type of study. According to Moustakas, (2004), qualitative research provides an in-depth method to explore phenomena and understand the specifics entailed with how a research participant experiences a particular set of events in their life.

This chapter reveals relevant demographic data that were collected from study participants. The data which is a description of the setting of this research study was gathered and put into both tables and through the narrative. It was followed by a

presentation of the relevant demographic characteristics of the study participants. The chapter then continued with descriptions of the implementation of the data collection and data analysis procedures described in chapter three. The data was followed by a discussion of the evidence of the trustworthiness of the study's results and then by a presentation of the results. The presentation of results included a detailed analysis of 10 semi structured interviews. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed to develop emerging themes. Quirkos software was used to analyze the data using an inductive analysis method as described by (Moustakas, 2004). The chapter is concluded with a summary.

Study Setting

Participant interviews were conducted at the convenience of the research participants. This was done to ensure that interviewees would be able to describe their lived experiences and perceptions without becoming anxious, which could alter the outcomes. To further ensure that participants were at ease and as comfortable as possible in providing rich and detailed responses to the interview questions, the participants were invited to choose any place they deemed private and accessible to Zoom. In accordance with participants' preferences, participants accessed the interviews in their homes or vehicles. When an interviewee and I connected on Zoom and introduced ourselves at the location the participant chose, we were able to begin the interview process without anxiety of being overheard. There were no personal or organizational conditions at the time of study that affected participants in a way that would influence the interpretation of

the results. Zoom was the method chosen instead of in-person interviews because of COVID-19 restrictions. An added result from using Zoom was conducting interviews with individuals from much more varied geographical locations than would have been feasible with in-person interviews.

Demographics

Participants consisted of ten fathers who reside inside the United States of America and were between the ages of 21 and 70. Fathers represented states from the four corners of throughout the United States. The population is a distinct collection of individuals who are known to have PA. In this research, the population was separated or divorced fathers who reported being alienated from their children. A sample is a part of that population (Creswell, 2018), and the method of sampling the researcher chose was criterion sampling. According to Creswell (2018), sample size for a phenomenological study was recommended as 10 to 12 participants or until saturation of the data was reached. Saturation of data means the point in time when the research participants consistently answer interview questions in the same way (Creswell, 2018).

Data Collection

Creswell (2018) noted that criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied are a representation of a group of people who have experienced the researched phenomenon; as a result, a researcher can then create a common understanding. A criterion sample was used for the current research that included 10 divorced or separated fathers who reported being an alienated parent. Creswell (2018) stated that the nature of

the task of a phenomenological researcher demands extensive study of a small sample, fostering the opportunity for the research participants to express themselves and share the logic of their lived experiences. Using a criterion sample allows a researcher to locate needed participants while keeping the sample small, affording enough time for the interviews. Inclusion criteria required all participants to report that they had experienced the phenomenon of being alienated from their children, they needed to be over the age of 21 and up to the age of 70, and they needed to have experienced a high-conflict divorce or separation for at least 1 year. Exclusionary criteria require the following: (a) fathers who have received mental health counseling within the past 2 years; (b) fathers involved in any litigation allegations (founded or unfounded) of abuse; and (c) fathers undergoing a custody dispute. Participants' ages ranged from 32 to 60 years, with a mean age of 41 years. Participants had between two and four children, with a mean of 2.7 children. Time alienated from their children ranged from 7 months to 30 years. Table 1 depicts relevant demographic information for the study participants.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	State	Time alienated from child(ren)
P1	41	Massachusetts	4 years
P2	33	Wisconsin	2 years
P3	32	South Carolina	7 months
P4	38	Utah	8 months
P5	42	Mississippi	1.5 years
P6	33	Alabama	2 years
P7	47	Indiana	1 year
P8	60	Virginia	30 years
P9	42	West Virginia	8 years
P10	44	Colorado	12 years

Textural Description

The following textural descriptions were generated as the third step of the four-step process of data analysis (Moustakas, 2004). Each textural description is a summary of one participant's lived experience of the phenomenon based on the themes that emerged during the analysis of the data from his interview.

Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to examine the lived experiences of divorced or separated fathers who report being alienated from their children. When analyzing the data, I remained focused on describing the human experience related to the subject matter, including how participants conveyed or expressed their emotional thoughts (verbal, body language, outward emotions, listening skills, participant validated their transcript, etc.) and how participants felt about the phenomenon experienced, and by interpreting what the participants were expressing throughout the interview process. Phenomenological qualitative research requires a researcher to describe the lived experience of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2018). This description concludes in the core of the experiences for several individuals who have undergone the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). During the 1-2-hour interviewing process, the questions asked of the participants allowed them to share their experiences, and I analyzed the data by coding the data to identify emerging themes.

According to Peoples (2021), there are two main approaches to phenomenological philosophy: Husserl's hermeneutic phenomenology and Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. Husserl's hermeneutic phenomenology is a description of phenomena. It is defined in general as the study of essence. Researchers who employ hermeneutic phenomenology within their qualitative design assume they are entering the study of participants' lived experiences without bias. They bracket out their experiences with the

intent of eliminating bias or preconception in their study. According to Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy, people are in the world with experiences while with others and their experiences. Although people can identify the potential bias that might result from experiences through journaling, people cannot eliminate the biases based upon experiences. Researchers with experience use preunderstanding or fore conception when interpreting new information (i.e., a spiral process of revising understanding referred to as the *hermeneutic circle*). I have many years of preunderstanding, fore conception, and experience with PA, both personally and professionally. Thus, it is reasonable to assume Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study.

Once the journaling was completed, the next step in the phenomenological research process was to analyze the data to identify significant statements or quotes and combine those statements into themes that stand out as being relevant for the understanding of the phenomenon, the participants' lived experiences. The data were collected from interviews that were transcribed verbatim. I transcribed the data using the transcribing software Quirkos.

Once the interviews were uploaded and transcribed, the transcriptions were sent to each individual participant for review to verify the accuracy. No inaccuracies were reported; thus, no corrections were needed. This process is known as member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

At this juncture, the researcher read, summarized, and analyzed all audiotaped verbatim-transcribed interviews and observations. The researcher read each interview to

make sense of the interview using open coding, reread to begin developing themes using group code for alike words, patterns or phrases as subcategories, and categories on the data from the participants (Sandelowski, 2000; Waltz, Strickland, & Lenz, 2010).

The process of open coding was the researcher's first step toward gradually making sense of the data. According to Rossman and Rallis (2012), coding is the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks and selecting a word that represents a category. This coding process leads to the foundation of eventually generating a description and themes related to the data gathered. According to Creswell (2018), these themes that are created are the ones that show up as major findings in qualitative studies and are then molded into a general description and concepts. Open coding structures ideas and sub-categories by analysis of the data line by line, identifying, naming, categorizing, and describing the data gathered is also an effective means of coding.

The coding process included organizing the data from the interviews into categories by using Quirkos software, a qualitative data analysis management tool software program. The interviews were transcribed using website Quirkos, where the researcher paid for access to upload his transcripts confidentially. The transcripts were uploaded to Quirkos software, in which Quirkos facilitated data organization and management, and coding of data to create categories. This tool is used primarily to serve as a container that keeps track of all data collected by the researcher. Quirkos maintained the original source data (transcripts of the interviews), consolidated, and organized everything into three emergent themes.

The researcher reviewed all the codes, quotations, and commentary gathered and eliminated those that were not applicable to trying to answer the research question. Similar codes were combined and codes that were not relevant in answering the research question were omitted. Similar codes relevant to the research question were grouped together into categories, which were substantiated with direct quotations from the participant in paving the way to create emerging themes. Throughout the evolution of the data being bracketed, coded, commented, categorized, and themed the process of understanding the phenomenon emerged.

Most problems and issues that surfaced throughout the analysis process had a direct connection to the researcher struggling to make sense of how to use the Quirkos qualitative analysis software. As a result, the researcher contacted a technology specialist of the software. The researcher watched webinars on the internet, read manuals, and was able to watch links provided by the software creators to better conceptualize how to use the program. This process was time consuming, but necessary in order to better understand the software's abilities and application. It was determined by the researcher, through his own experience, that if the research did not require extensive sophisticated measures of presenting and organizing the data, then this software was not the best option. Regardless, the researcher did the best he could from the provided resources.

Data Analysis

Within this section, the results, and findings as they apply to the research question (what are the lived experiences of fathers who identify themselves as alienated from

biological children?) were answered. The researcher identified patterns and themes by using an inductive analysis regarding the participant's experiences of alienation from their children. Coded groups were created that consisted of: bias towards fathers, types of alienation/brainwashing, false allegations, impact on life/personality, insignificance as a father, unethical therapeutic practices, impact of fatherlessness, strong emotions, physical ailments, legal issues and financial consequences, and from these code groups emergent themes surfaced creating the largest density in four particular themes, these being *legal issues*, *physical ailments*, *mental health consequences*, and *financial consequences*. The following reveals the data that illustrates the emergent themes. The emergent themes are listed by the frequency that the theme emerged throughout the ten interviews.

The first emergent theme that surfaced as the subjects discussed and shared their lived experiences (expressed by nine participants) was Legal Issues that occurred as the result of PA. The subjects described how they handle the many situations involved with PA and how they were affected physically throughout their body and mind. One subject described how futile it had been to try and pursue another relationship. This study did not focus on future relationships after PA; thus, this is a gap in the literature.

As we look at the fourth emergent theme, fathers of financial consequences reported being on the receiving end of "heartless treatment." As the researcher evaluates the 10 fathers who entered the court system to seek judicial intervention, all discussed how the father was not given the benefit of the doubt; instead, the assumption was made that each one of them were in the wrong and thus, were required to prove to the court that

none of them fit that paradigm. The fathers found this to be exceptionally difficult to do over and over each time they entered the court room. Finally, as the judges were constantly turning over, or the lawyers were ill-prepared, and they were always limited with the amount of time they had to plead their case. Much of the time, it would take an extensive amount of time for the father to finally convince the court that they were loving fathers looking out for the best interest of their children, which only created further alienation from their children.

Judicial Delay Causes Alienation

Within the shared experiences, several of the participants interviewed discussed the frequent turnover rate within the legal issues in the judicial system. Participants emphasized this was the case with judges specifically, and this only delayed any potential for resolution, in a timely manner, and reunification with their children. As one participant described his issues, he was on his ninth year and fifth judge. One problem some fathers have had is getting their case in front of one judge and the judge seeing the pattern. He described that because the duration of the delay, the mental abuse and alienation had the opportunity to only further influence his children making it even more difficult to overcome the alienation and form any kind of healthy relationship with his children.

Unfairness

When dealing with legal issues within the injustice of the judicial system, several participants shared how there was an innate bias, unfairness towards fathers, they were

made to feel as though they had to prove their value as parents, and fathers faced a preset disposition from the judge and courts from the onset of their case. One participant felt that the court system fails because they side so much with the mother. This father called it status quo.

These fathers recalled how they were at a significant disadvantage in the court system as they need to prove themselves over and beyond what is required of the mother, to only be considered equally eligible for custody of the children. Another participant found the court system to be unfair to fathers. This participant described court as a place where, as a father in family court, you must prove your innocence, unlike criminal court where you are innocent until proven guilty.

Deliberate Incompetent/Corrupt Judge or Lawyer

Several participants shared how they would encounter a judge that was intentionally unkind, unhelpful, or legal counsel that was only interested in taking their money and not justly representing them. Many described how the system was corrupt, despite them desperately wanting it to serve justly for them to finally have a relationship with their children. A participant described it as fighting against everyone there. This father was disgusted with the unscrupulous and dishonest legal system.

Some participants were also military veterans and then had to contend with how military service was used against them when trying to advocate or regain custody of their children. Because they were combat veterans, the children's mother used their service-connected disability, or military background against them. One participant said that he

had PTSD, disclosed it to his first wife and second wife, they both used it against him in the legal battle for his kids. Another participant described how the judges were intentionally cruel.

Judicial System/Government Incentivized to Enable Continued Lack of Resolution

This sentiment was also expressed from several participants, sharing they felt the system was rigged and that the courts and judges got benefits, kickbacks, or incentives to prolong the alienation process. In addition to not advocating for shared parenting, as the government was intertwined in the funding they would receive if families remained in discord. One such participant's current wife was very much involved with increasing awareness to this injustice as they participated in advocacy for fathers' rights in various legislative groups. One participant expressed no matter how many times he went into court with proof of why it's healthier for the child to have an equal healthy relationship with both parents, he believes they don't want to do it because it messes with the government's money. He went into detail about Title 4D Funding in his state where for every dollar that goes through the Department of Revenue, the state makes in federal funding, so taking children away from their parents, by the judges in the court system, is all incentivized money for the state. This participant was shocked at what the court system and his state are willing to do for money.

The only participant who did not discuss the concept of legal battles did not involve himself with legal battles; therefore, he could not speak to that experience. The emergent theme of legal issues continuously presented itself throughout the interviews,

and because it was so frequently expressed, the researcher created subcategories within this theme to provide an accurate picture of the frequency of this theme and the data collected. Table 2 depicts the financial hardships and legal battles fought to gain time to be with their children.

Table 2

Financial Hardships and Legal Battles

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Financial hardship	X		X	X	X		X	X		X
Legal battles	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

First Emergent Theme: Legal Issues

Alienation

Participants stated:

P1 stated,

Her mother is having her talk to men that she is dating, spend time with men she is dating and I can't even talk to my child.... She is telling me my child doesn't want to talk to me. She is telling me her child shouldn't be talking about what is going on at her mom's house.

P4 stated, “The first time I experienced Alienation from my son was exactly when she left, exactly when she took him from my home... I haven’t seen my son in two months; I believe he has forgotten exactly who I am.”

P9 said,

Her mom had picked her up from school. They didn’t tell me what was going on, they didn’t tell me where she was being treated...I was essentially in the dark...I finally called the hospital... I was transferred to her room...her grandmother answered...she heard my voice...she hung up... they filed the domestic violence petition against me... no information...In my opinion, to turn the children against me...

P3 said, “Currently, I haven’t seen them since October of 2020...I have been blocked from all social media accounts and I have no phone number to get in touch with her and no way to know where they are living.”

P7 said, “It was tremendously painful...I didn’t get to have any real meaningful time to spend with her.”

P5 stated, “Her mother is trying to get a restraining order against me.”

P2 said,

My daughter gets off the bus in front of my house, so, my daughter got off the bus with her sister, and they waved at me. I waved back. My daughter came running at me to like give me a hug and her mom basically just scooped her up and would not even allow me to talk to her because it wasn’t my time.

P9 said, “Alienation...puts you in survival mode...I had to dig very deep to get through those days.”

Bias

Participants stated:

P5 said,

It just flabbergasts me that people can look at me and look at her and not know me or her from Adam, but they automatically choose her side...I’ve had friends turn...on me...she has bullied me for 10 years now.

P9 Stated, “As far as my daughter, she is with her mom full time...”

Legal Battles

Participants stated,

P7 said, “...I caught the attorney lying in the courtroom...frustration...”

P2 said

I’ve gotten to the point where I’ve been in and out of court so much, I dread going to court because I don’t know what is going to happen...The last time I was in court was the first time I have been heard by the judge. I had to pull a police report on my daughter’s mom.

P10 said, “...you want to fight but the very system is preventing you from doing the role that you are trying to step up to the plate to do”

P7 said, “...I got a couple threats from the boyfriend and that didn’t work out too well for him...now I have custody of my son. I do not have custody of my daughter...”

The second emergent theme that was identified was brought to the forefront of these fathers lived experiences; the physical ailments which was exacerbated by both mental and physical stress, that mostly turned into trauma for the fathers as they experienced the process of undergoing PAs, while being separated from their children. Expressions began with feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, and would range to experiencing such a strong intensity of pain they had physiologically been impacted and either contemplated or attempted suicide.

All 10 subjects in the study experienced multiple physical ailments. Some of which were still undergoing varied ailments, and some of which had reflected from the past how they had felt. Regardless of when in life the alienation occurred all participants shared an intense response from being alienated from their children. The researcher also added subcategories that frequently surfaced that required illumination, as when data was collected these subcategories within the emergent theme at times encapsulated so much of the interview and was expressed as a very impactful experience that left life altering changes.

Second Emergent Theme: Physical Ailments

Weight Gain/Loss/Sleep

Participants stated,

P6 said, "...I've been losing sleep...I've gained weight because I eat when I'm mad..."

P4 said, "...and it disrupted my sleep immensely...I have just focused on this extreme pain and frustration...I once was able to sleep very soundly...now I wake up and simply shake with grief..."

P3 said, "...I have no appetite really..."

P4 said, "...I have lost 30 pounds..."

P5 said, "I don't eat right...I eat just enough to keep the growl off."

Drug use

P8 said, "...lost contact with my son...addiction...mother didn't let me see him, so I didn't care anymore..."

Heart Attack

P7 states, "...that much to my body led to me having three heart attacks..."

The third emergent theme was dealing with mental health consequences. Of the ten interviewees data collected, 10 participants had expressed various experiences with strong emotions which only exacerbated the alienation they reported experiencing between them and their children. One participant had so many issues that he was heartbroken, which caused his emotional and physical health to plummet. Another participant had undergone excessive stress related to the ongoing life altering process of being alienated from his children. He described how nine years later it was physiologically affecting him to the point where he was frequently hospitalized and had a multitude of medical maladies. These fathers shared how their physical illness was directly related to the emotional turmoil they were undergoing and how prior to the

alienation they were healthy. They described that the emotional impact was debilitating to the point where they considered suicide.

All participants expressed a significant change in how they trusted others. How they initially trusted easily or did not know any better and were completely vulnerable with the mother of their children, and then once they had experienced this gut-wrenching loss and betrayal, they immediately created walls around their heart and no longer allowed themselves to be completely open or vulnerable to hardly anyone and more so to a potential mate. This lack of trust is also mirrored in how they deal with others that may be in positions to help them, as an example, a counselor that was assigned to work with their children. Because they have undergone betrayal and unethical practices in the past with counselors that have been paired to work with their child, they trust no one and are extremely guarded. In example, one participant describes how a counselor that was assigned to work with his son was coaching his son and submitting false Department of Child and Family Service reports that falsely accused him of abusing his son. This participant was furious, yet was unable to make needed changes.

Suicidality

One participant stated his pain was so heavy that he didn't think he could take it any longer. He wanted to end his life to be rid of the pain. He sunk to a very dark place where he contemplated suicide.

One participant described how the mother of his child had family who lived overseas and she would frequently threaten to take his son and leave the country. This

uneasiness and constant anxiety and fear he experienced daily was described as torturous, as he was always on edge faced with her unpredictable nature of operating on threats. Threats he feared that would actualize.

One participant described a myriad of emotions that he was overcome with, that even in the moment of the interview when he revisited the alienation 16 years later, it still brought him to tears and reexperiencing the rawness of that emotion that he had at one time felt he had dealt with. This interview was described to be cathartic for this father as it helped him to realize how much pain he had yet to deal with that still impacted him on levels he wasn't initially able to identify.

Third Emergent Theme: Mental Health Consequences

Anger

Participants stated,

P10 said, "...Depression, but more than that, Anger. I feel angry. I'm trying to step up to the plate. I'm trying to do what my God-given right is to do and father my children."

P5 said, "...I stay angry. I am dealing with anger issues as it is, I stay angry. It makes me so mad that I have thoughts I don't want to have..."

P3 said, "...As far as that is concerned, extreme anger, depression. It is to the point now that I hate my ex-wife. Extreme anger, extreme disappointment that she would do this to me..."

P1 stated, "...The outcome of the divorce was parenting time. She got sole legal and we got shared physical custody. I must pay child support. She physically holds my child. I don't get visitation... I get parenting time...."

P9 said,

It had already started before she had ever filed for divorce. Just the behavior, how she acted with the kids, it was already set up to turn the kids against me...she filed for divorce 8 years ago and it just progressed over the whole period and it just wears you down.

Depression

P10 said, "...Well, quite frankly, I guess I'm just a depressed man. I am having a hard time creating a new sense of purpose..."

P3 said, "I am much more depressed. My kids are my world...I don't even know what my kids like to do anymore because I'm never around them..."

Anxiety

P2 states, "...It gets to the point where I've actually had to take anti-anxiety medications because I've had panic attacks..."

P6 states, "...I emotionally shut down...It hurts me not knowing how she is doing..."

The fourth theme that emerged is that of financial consequences. As you may notice from Table 2, you will see that seven out of 10 participants were burdened with excessive legal fee and child support. Many participants reported they had exhausted

their bank accounts and retirement accounts to get 50/50 custody with their children. One participant had spent over one million dollars on legal fees, \$218,000 in child support, and an insurmountable amount in alimony. Despite spending all this money, exhausting all his resources, and having the mother of his children take the children and move to another state, he was desperate as he was unable to do anything that could change the outcome. Both of his girls were alienated from him and he had not seen them in years, the pain he described he felt was unbearable, often facing the reality of feeling complete hopelessness and despair and considering suicide.

Excessive Legal Fees

Many of the fathers described how they were required to spend an exorbitant amount of money in order to seek legal counsel and other legal issues in fighting for their children. Many of them reported having to deplete their life savings, work multiple jobs, or reaching out to family and friends, willing to do whatever necessary to try to fight for their kids. A participant reported in the past, between the divorce to now, he has spent about 22,000 dollars protecting his son and himself from the son's mother. Unfortunately, some of the participants could not afford it financially and gradually it came to the point they could no longer fight legally and had to give up and had to, therefore, just settle with whatever arrangement the mother was willing to allow.

Fourth Emergent Theme: Financial Consequences

Custody/Parenting Time

Participants stated,

P10 stated,

I did not get 50/50 custody...more like 75/25 split...visitation schedule with them is very inconsistent...I couldn't even read a book with them because it would be like Monday, we would read a chapter, then I wouldn't see them again until Thursday...and alternating Fridays...it didn't work in my favor.

P7 said,

...filed suit against the States of Kansas...policy in Kansas is that if the payment didn't go through the Kansas payment center, then the payment doesn't count, it's considered to be a gift...so they are taking money from me that I have already paid...They took my money...almost four years ...then refused to tell the judge that direct payments had been made so he could fix the arrearages...I was living on probably 50 bucks a week...I was homeless...But they kept coming after me for money I didn't owe.

P7 said, "...The biggest impact...has been financial. It has cost me...buy the time I went to court for the third time...well over one hundred thousand dollars..."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

A study's credibility is the degree to which its findings accurately represent the reality they purport to describe (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance this study's credibility, I conducted member-checking of my interpretation of the data, as recommended by Creswell (2013). To conduct member-checking, I first analyzed the

data from the ten interviews to produce a textural description of each participant's lived experience. The textural descriptions are presented in the demographics section of this chapter, above. I emailed the textural description I had derived from each participant's interview responses to the participant with a request that he review it and either confirm that it accurately represented his lived experience or suggest corrections. All participants responded to this request for confirmation or correction, and all participants confirmed that the textural descriptions I had generated were accurate reflections of their experiences. There were no additional data collected from the member checking process.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the findings from this study will hold true in another research context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is determined by the reader of the study, as the author does not have information about the specific contexts in which his findings might be applied. To allow readers to assess the transferability of the results, I have followed the procedures recommended by Lincoln and Guba. First, I have provided rich, textural descriptions of the study participants, to allow readers to better estimate the extent to which the findings in this study might hold true of other samples or populations. I have also provided thick descriptions of the contexts of data collection.

Dependability

A study's dependability is the extent to which the same results would be obtained if the study were repeated by other researchers using the same methods in the same research context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member-checking enhanced the dependability

of this study's results, as recommended by Creswell (2013). I also enhanced dependability by providing detailed descriptions of the data collection and data analysis procedures I used, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which a study's results are determined by the ideas and experiences of the participants, rather than by any characteristics of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I enhanced the confirmability of this study's results by creating an audit trail throughout the data collection and data analysis phases of the study. In creating the audit trail, I attempted to document every decision I made during the collection and analysis of the data.

Study Results

Interview data were gathered from ten participants. All semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in a private setting of their choice. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, using a digital recording device. The average duration of the interviews was approximately one- and one-half hours. There were no deviations from the data collection plan described in chapter 3 and no unusual circumstances were encountered during data collection. None of the interviews required multiple sessions.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were uploaded into Quirkos software for analysis. Data were then analyzed using the four-step method of inductive analysis described by Moustakas (2004). In the first step of the

analysis, horizontalization, I reviewed the transcripts and highlighted significant statements to develop an understanding of participants' experiences without living in the biological children's home. The second step involved clustering statements with similar meaning into themes, which corresponded to the research questions. In the third step, I used the themes to develop a textural description of the experience of each participant; the results of this step of the analysis were presented in the demographics section of this chapter, above. In the fourth step of the analysis, I used the textural descriptions to develop an essential, invariant structure, or a description of the phenomenon that combined the common elements of the ten textural descriptions. The result of this fourth stage of the analysis is presented as the chapter summary, below. The table in Appendix A depicts the themes that emerged during the analysis of the data, the codes that contributed to the themes and a representative quotation from each theme.

This presentation of results is organized by research question. Results associated with the research question include participants' descriptions of what it means to be a father who identifies himself as alienated from his biological children. Four subthemes emerged from the analysis of data indicating the meaning participants ascribed to lived experiences of fathers who identify themselves as alienated from their biological children: first emergent theme: legal issues, second emergent theme: physical ailments, third emergent theme: mental health consequences, and fourth emergent theme: financial consequences. Results related to the first emergent theme reveals that 9 out of 10 participants were faced with legal battles. In relation to the second emergent theme, 9 out

Table 4*Strong Emotions*

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Depression	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Panic attacks		X								
PTSD									X	
Grief				X						
Anger	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Hopelessness/helplessness										X
Overwhelmed										
Inability to concentrate	X	X	X			X			X	

Summary

Chapter 4 began by providing a brief introduction stating the purpose of the chapter, and a description of how the chapter fits into the overall dissertation. The researcher described his role in the project, in addition to his interest in the topic and any personal influences that needed to be taken into consideration when gathering and analyzing the data.

The research methodology clearly illustrated how it was applied to the data analysis process and how the data analysis was conducted. The steps of the entire

protocol were clearly identified, and problems the researcher faced were also addressed. Finally, the data, and results of the analysis were provided, to offer the reader a clear picture to refer to the raw data, understand the analysis, and a presentation of the themes that emerged that were directly focused on answering the research question. Quirkos software was used to assist in this data analysis process, allowing the researcher to create codes, code groups, and ultimately emerge the most common themes. From a psychological perspective, the experiences revealed by the study participants appear to support that PA is an extreme stressor. Within the following chapter, these data sets are further discussed and interpreted.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative research study was to explore the lived experiences of nonresidential fathers who are alienated from their children in the context of a high-conflict separation or divorce. The goal of the research was to reveal the experiences of alienated fathers, which was absent from the extant literature on PA. Through an analysis of the data collected through interviews, I identified four emergent themes: (a) legal issues, (b) physical ailments, (c) mental health consequences, and (d) financial consequences. In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications of the study, and a conclusion.

Using the qualitative research method provided a significant aspect of the fathers lived experiences that would not have been captured using the quantitative methods. Phenomenology is used to discover the lived experience of varied psychological phenomena of attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and elements that cannot be found using the quantifiable method (Percy et al., 2013). By using individual interviews, I was able to collect data on the experiences of the fathers and gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon of being an alienated father. According to Balmer et al. (2018), there is a need for research on this topic.

Each of the participants shared their lived experience and volunteered to be part of a research study related to PA. I had an overwhelming response of fathers who were

interested in participating in this research study. Within 24 hours, there were more than three times the number of participants needed responding with interest. Past research exploring the targeted parent or the noncustodial parent did not include fathers' perspectives regarding their role as a parent after going through a conflicted separation or divorce (Balmer et al., 2018). According to Balmer, Matthewson, and Haines (2018), PA is often overlooked, ignored, misunderstood, or denied (Balmer et al., 2018). Mothers generally gain primary physical custody of their children and fathers in this study expressed their experiences in receiving what they believe to have been unfair treatment that yielded PA.

Interpretation of the Findings

The results of this study indicate that the participating fathers who reported being alienated from their children experienced physical and mental pain. These fathers felt they have been unfairly treated by the judicial system, have experienced intense emotion, and been subjected to lifestyle changes and mental health consequences as a result of being alienated from their children. Understanding fathers' perspectives of their experiences of this phenomenon is necessary to address PA and ensure the custodial system is based in fairness and justice for all parties and that all parents receive the support they need.

The theoretical framework of attachment theory discussed in Chapter 2 also aligned with the findings. Throughout the data collected, fathers expressed experiences of being the targeted parent and they were not believed and were not allowed access to their

children. Participating fathers explained the intense emotions they experienced related to being alienated from their children. Sher (2017) discussed that PA impacts the mental health of fathers who have been alienated from their children and who have lost some degree of contact with their children, which can lead to feelings of depression and suicidal ideation. The consequences for alienated fathers can be severe, including attempted and completed suicide (Sher, 2015).

Regarding the theoretical framework of this study, Kruk (2010) purported those fathers defined parenting as their closest attachment and the primary and most important role they possess in society. As Kruk (2010) described, fathers' primary attachments when they are married are directed toward children, and fathers are far more likely to undergo overwhelming emotional pain after a divorce, particularly if the father is denied custody of his children. Each of the participants described an attachment to their children that was difficult to express in words.

Two of the emerging themes that surfaced from an analysis of the data that relate to the theoretical framework were: (a) how participants' mental health consequences were completely changed as a result of being alienated from their children and (b) physical ailments participants experienced as a result of PA. Many participants were brought to tears as they expressed the feelings, they experienced associated with being alienated from their child. These findings appear to illustrate the bond and attachment shared between these fathers and their children, which they identified as the root cause of the turmoil they felt.

When the participants shared their experiences with the legal system, participants identified several issues that caused them to feel the judicial system failed them and enabled PA to progress. The fathers spoke of frequent delays in the court system and the frequent continuations of hearings or postponements or time to create documentation extended the time they were unable to see their children. Participants discussed how the relationships with their children diminished due to the time lapse. Participants described the difficulty they experienced in court feeling they had to prove they were worthy of fatherhood and a place in their child's life. The participants indicated that, in their perception, the mothers were not required to prove their quality as a parent. The participants expressed frustration at this feeling, as they desperately wanted to be a part of their children's lives.

Participants described the judicial system as corrupt and indicated they believe the system does not look out for the best interests of the children. The theoretical orientation for the study was rooted in attachment theory, as this is a commonly sought-after theoretical perspective when judicial arguments are presented in determining if a child should or should not have contact with a given parent, and to whom custody is awarded (Lowenstein, 2013).

To further elaborate on why the study yielded the findings that it did, fathers were continually expressing the unfairness of the judicial system, the overwhelming emotional turmoil they would be undergoing due to the alienation, the unfair treatment and the significant change in their life and mental health. These were common expressions, but

they also expressed how they did not feel their thoughts and feelings mattered and, therefore, the outcome would not change. An example, their voice was not heard in the courts, in the judicial system, and when applying for government resources and support. This void was reinforced when reviewing the literature as well, as hardly any scholarly research existed specifically targeting this population, and this phenomenon as it relates to the targeted parent. Fortunately, this research provided the platform for these fathers to have an opportunity, in a scholarly medium, to express themselves, and to have their lived experiences heard and understood.

Limitations of the Study

There were limitations which might have affected this study. One limitation to deliberate is the sample size of the participants. Only 10 fathers were interviewed which might be considered a weakness, due to not having a large sample size that shared their paradigm. Another limitation could be that the results were left to the inference of this researcher, who may have inferred different meanings from the data that was gathered. In addition, the results that were yielded from this research study was data provided by participants that were not currently in a counseling relationship, since this was one of the requirements of this study.

This research can help establish best practices to help treat this population, in addition to create prevention techniques. It can help, in the right hands with the right intention; it will help. In summary, the results were eye opening and delved deep into the experiences the alienated fathers were undergoing. Because this research is one of few

that has been done in the area of PA and fathers, more can be discovered and further explored. In the meantime, this research does begin to trail blaze the way to creating a voice for these fathers who have otherwise remained silenced.

Recommendations

The findings from this study suggest that further research would be valuable with this population of fathers who report being alienated from their children. Current research is scarce and primarily only focusing on the alienated children, or custodial parent. Harman et al. (2016) discuss the impact of PA and alienating behaviors on targeted parents, further affirming those professionals in the helping fields, such as counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and pediatricians have biased opinions that often side with the custodial parent, whom most often happens to be the mother, and research on the fathers' experience is minimal.

Further research could reference the delimitation involving researching only fathers and their experience with being alienated from their children. It would be interesting to research alienated parents and see what the frequency of responding would be, if more fathers than mothers would want to participate in the study. In addition, it would be interesting to observe the responses and how they would be different compared to their experiences. Perhaps this type of future research can offer a different perspective that was not captured with the current research. Another area that needs significant illumination is the judicial system. It was striking to hear the experience these fathers endured and how the government fostered an environment that is not in the best interest

of the child. Additionally, further research needs to occur to determine what the judicial system is doing to foster separation in families.

Using different variables, possible research in future studies could bring about change by focusing on promoting PA. Specific areas to investigate would be the knowledge people have about PA, the effects of mental and physical health on family members of PA, the knowledge the judicial system has about PA, the knowledge that religious persons have about PA and how best to prevent PA through family counseling, how best to treat and manage PA in a fair and equitable way for all family members. Additionally, how best to deal with existing traumatic situations that have currently been overlooked.

Implications

This research study attempted to provide insight and understanding of the phenomenon experienced by these fathers that had been alienated from their children. The findings from this study centered on four emergent themes: legal issues, physical ailments, mental health consequences, and financial consequences. These results can be valuable when exploring the needs of these fathers, and how to best support them.

Templer et al. (2017) created a systematic review of literature related to all aspects of PA to determine the best practice for therapists and legal practitioners. It was discussed within the review how there was minimal research and long-term outcome studies that analyzed the impact of how a child adjusts to a change in family arrangements, often change in residential arrangement. In addition, many legal

professionals struggle without guidance in an attempt to make a decision that carries an extensive amount of weight, as they determine a change of custody or residential arrangement and how these changes will hurt or help the child.

Practical implications of this study could be to create a larger scope of understanding for researchers, clinicians, the judicial system, and social services with regards to PA and divorce outcomes. Additionally, the perceived biases that exists towards fathers seeking custody of their children in family courts and responses in custody disputes may be better understood. An example, due to the perceived injustice dealt in the judicial system, this research can provide insight on how the judicial system is not set up in a way that is in the best interest of the child. This research can help educate and inform lawyers who seek to represent this population. These fathers may have the potential of gaining fair representation and the legal professionals who advocate on their behalf may approach the case with a degree of empathy, understanding, and resourcefulness.

Nielsen (2017), argued available evidence demonstrated that systemic family therapy tailored to the needs of families experiencing PA is essential when families are undergoing custody change or residential transitions. Ideally, the best approach to address PA would be therapeutically to work with the family as a cohesive unit, although this may not be the desire of the alienating parent. This research can help in segueing an intervention that requires accountability on all parts to work towards the greater good.

Templer et al. (2017) discussed how therapeutic goals may be contrary to the wishes of the alienating parent; therefore, it is necessary that the motivation to participate be externally driven. Because both parents may not comply with therapeutic treatment, thus, it is essential that courts adopt a strategy for managing non-compliance with therapeutic efforts that reflect a cohesive legal psychological management approach. Rejecting court directions that are aimed at improving the child's circumstances should be met with clearly defined and consistently implemented sanctions.

The outcome of this study could assist in expanding the scope of literature related to PA to include the ones that are impacted the most, this includes parents and children. Literature increases the knowledge base available, increasing awareness and establishing an increased potential for further research. Within the counseling community, the results from this research can serve as a foundation of knowledge for clinicians to have a discernment of the impact the PA experience has on their clients, and the children of their clients. The topic may be taboo in some circles, but perhaps because of this research these fathers had their experience heard, their voice mattered and, therefore, they may have access to resources, validation, and treatment that they may not have otherwise had access to.

Conclusion

In conclusion, 10 divorced or separated fathers were individually interviewed to capture their lived experience of being alienated from their children. The research study was directly focused on fathers, as much literature does not exist that looks specifically at

divorced or separated fathers, who have been alienated from their children. This was recognized in Chapter 2 by various authors and fellow researchers discussing how there is scarce literature that specifically targets fathers as the alienated parent (Baker, 2007; Lowenstein, 2013; Sher, 2015), despite fathers being the parents who are most likely to be alienated and most often not awarded custody of their children (U.S. Census, 2016b).

As Warshak (2015a) discussed, the alienated or targeted parent often goes unheard or disbelieved, and the alienating parent is the voice that is most heard and represented and therefore benefits. The participants identified a unique form of stress associated with their strained or lost relationships with children from whom they had been alienated during high-conflict separation or divorce. This stress impacted these fathers' physical and mental health and was connected to protracted custody battles and accompanying financial hardship.

All participants throughout the interview process echoed this sentiment. The findings fit with the previous literature as the results from the participants agreed that they did not feel supported or understood, and that there was no awareness as to what PA is and how it has influenced their life. If more literature existed, then there may be a greater likelihood that this population will be studied, and resources, supports, or changes can follow from whatever findings surfaced from the research. Within all the shared experiences, many similarities were expressed that it often sounded as one resounding voice. All the experiences shared reflected the sentiment that there was no recourse for participants and what they were undergoing; all the participants expressed that no one

understood. They frequently would express how the hurt they felt was not validated and being alienated from their children was a pain that was indescribable, making it more difficult that they were not believed and were branded as a bad father. Many participants had hopes that this research, and research like it could begin to give voice to their pain and help other fathers, expressing that perhaps one father could be helped and be spared the pain they were enduring. Prior to being alienated from their children, these fathers had no background or knowledge base related to PA and it was not until it happened to them, that they began to discover what PA was and how it impacted their life and the life of other fathers. This study and the literature on attachment support that the role of the father in the parent-child bond may be underappreciated or less well known than the role of the mother. What is the impact on the alienated father in terms of his psychological functioning and that of his child? Perhaps the findings from this study can lead to more extensive mixed method and quantitative research. Empirical research could support the construct of PA and may lead to the recognition of PA as a diagnosable condition within future versions of the DSM. These findings may lend support to changing case law by better understanding the plight of fathers who are the targets of PA. There is also the possibility that it may help in offering a successful therapeutic outcome for fathers and their families. This research can serve so many, and do so much, but only if one takes the opportunity to read it, to understand it, and to value the magnitude of what PA is to fathers that have undergone these challenging life experiences.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study about the experiences of fathers who are no longer able to have a good relationship with their child or children. The researcher is inviting fathers who are isolated from their child or children to be in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to find out the experiences a father lives with when he has gone through a divorce and no longer has a good relationship with his child or children.

Procedures:

This study involves the following steps:

- Take part in a confidential, audio recorded, verbal interview using Zoom on phone or computer.
- Each interview may take one to two hours depending on each father’s responses.
- Review a typed transcript of your interview to make corrections if needed (10 minutes).

- Speak with the researcher one more time after the interview to hear the researcher's interpretations and share your feedback, phone option available (20-10 minutes).

Here are some sample questions:

Describe in as much detail as possible a situation in which you experience alienation from your child/children

How has your life been impacted as a result of experiencing parent alienation?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So, everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. You will be treated the same at Walden University whether you join the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. The researcher seeks 10 volunteers for this study. Please note that not all volunteers will be contacted to take part in this study. The researcher will follow up with all volunteers to let them know whether they were selected for the study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress or revealing things that are personal. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing. Note that this

study may involve sensitive topics that could trigger depression or minor distress. If you become distressed and need to speak with a professional, please contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline number 1-800-237-8255.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by providing information that will lead to helping other fathers affected by the alienation of their children.

Payment:

A \$10 gift card to Walmart will be mailed to the participants when the interview is complete.

Privacy:

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court ordered (very rare). The researcher is a mandated reporter. Be aware that the researcher's professional role as a counselor requires him to report any possible instances of abuse or neglect to the authorities.

The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the researcher is required to remove all names and identifying details before sharing; this would not involve another round of obtaining

informed consent. Data will be kept secure by use of codes in place of names, storing names separately from the data and discarding names with necessary. Data will also be password protected in a locked facility. Recordings will be destroyed immediately after research is completed and information is compiled. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You can ask questions of the researcher by email. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-29-21-0355750 and it expires on March 28, 2022.

You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

Obtaining Your Consent

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words, "I consent."

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Describe in as much detail as possible a situation in which you Experienced alienation from your child/children?
2. How has your life been impacted as a result of experiencing parent alienation?
3. What feelings arose due to the experience of being alienated from your child/children?
4. Depending on how the participant answered the above-mentioned questions, follow up questions include: Please tell me more about what that experience was like for you? When you say _____ what do you mean by that? I would like for you to share more about that. Is there anything more you want to share about your experience? These questions will allow the participants to share their lived experience, while ensuring the research question(s) will be answered and the participant will not be led in any direction. Participants will share to their desire, and in the event the researcher believes he needs additional information, or needs the participant to elaborate, he will ask them to say more about whatever it is they were sharing.

Appendix C: Screening Questions

Screening questions include:

- Do you speak English?
- Are you a father between the ages of 21 and 70?
- Have you been divorced or separated from the mother of your children?
- Do you feel you have been alienated from your child/children?
- Are you willing to participate in an audio-recorded interview?
- Are you in the middle of a custody or divorce dispute?
- Have you undergone your divorce or separation within the past year?
- Do you have any alleged litigations against you, either founded or unfounded?
- Are you currently in therapy?
- Would doing the interview in a private conference room compromise your privacy?

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

Call for Research Participants

You are invited to take part in a research study to help understand parental alienation of fathers and the impacts it has on fathers and their children. This research is being conducted in partial fulfillment of a doctorate in psychology.

Qualifications:

- Fathers
- Speak English.
- Have personally been alienated from your child(ren)

You will be asked to participate in an interview about your experiences with parental alienation.

- Verify transcriptions of the interview.
- Possibly be contacted again to verify any changes to the transcript.

Due to COVID-19, interviews will be done electronically, via an internet platform that works for both the participant and the interviewer.

Any Information provided will be kept confidential.

The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project.

A \$10 Wal-Mart gift card will be given for your time and inconvenience.