

Targeted parents' perspective on the development of Parental Alienation: A
grounded theory study

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Abstract

Parental alienation (PA) is a child's unjustified rejection of a previously loved parent in the context of high-conflict divorce and child custody disputes. PA remains a significant problem for clinicians and judiciaries in the UK, due to definitional controversies and limited available research. Research on PA from the perspective of targeted parents has just started providing some insight on people's experiences but has not adequately explored the psychological underpinnings of PA. The concept still stands outside developmental theory, thus impeding the provision of appropriate guidelines and interventions to support families that experience PA. PA can have devastating effects on both children and targeted parents and it is, therefore, important to shed more light on its mechanisms.

The current study intended to fill this gap and explored the process of development of PA from the perspective of targeted parents. Nine parents, who self-identified as targeted parents participated in the study. Parents were recruited mainly from organisations and community groups, known to provide advocacy and support to targeted parents. One-off interviews were conducted with participants. Some of them were contacted again at a later point to provide additional written data. Constructive Grounded Theory was utilised for the data collection and analysis. The analysis was conducted following an iterative process of constant comparison, which led to the construction of a theoretical model, grounded in the data. The model integrates multiple interconnected intrapersonal, relational, intergenerational, and systemic factors that contribute to the development and perpetuation of PA. Findings are considered in relation to existing literature and implications for future research and clinical practice are discussed. It is hoped that the theoretical model suggested can contribute to prompt identification and assessment of families that are experiencing or are at risk of developing PA, as well as inform the clinical and socio-legal management of PA.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

Although much controversy exists on the definition of “parental alienation” (PA), the term has been explained as a child’s denigration and rejection of a previously loved parent, which usually occurs in the context of high-conflict separation and divorce, and child custody disputes. The child’s rejection is persistent, unjustified, and partly instigated by the strong alignment of the child with the other parent (alienating parent/AP). One of the defining characteristics of PA is the alienating parent’s attempts to eliminate the relationship between the child and the other parent (alienated or targeted parent/TP) by engaging the child in a series of tactics and indoctrination (Warshak, 2002; Bernet *et al.*, 2010; Bernet & Baker, 2013).

This study examines the process of development of PA from the perspective of TPs. The chapter summarises the history and previous conceptualisations of PA, the redefinitions of the phenomenon, and recent multi-factorial theories on PA. It also provides an overview of the current research in the field. A review of studies, examining specifically the experiences of TPs is included. Before presenting the rationale and aims of this study, the UK socio-legal context is briefly discussed.

1.2. History & critique of “Parental Alienation Syndrome”

1.2.1. Gardner’s “Parental Alienation Syndrome”

Most children, after their parents separate, wish to retain their relationship with both parents, although they may be wounded by loyalty conflicts, and at times be angry at their parents. However, a small proportion of children develop strong negative attitudes toward one of their parents and fervently resist or refuse visitation, thus rejecting that parent. Although early descriptions of such behaviours in children of divorcing parents can be found in the literature

(e.g., Reich, 1949), it was not until 1985 that Richard Gardner, a forensic child psychiatrist, coined the term “parental alienation syndrome” (PAS). According to Gardner (1985, p.61), PAS is “a disorder, which results from the combination of indoctrination by the alienating parent (usually the custodial parent) and the child’s own contributions to the vilification of the alienated parent”. Following observations that he carried out in child custody evaluations, Gardner defined eight general criteria or symptomatic behaviours that are common in cases of parental alienation (1992). These criteria are: 1) Campaign of denigration of a previously loved parent, 2) the child’s reliance on weak, frivolous, and absurd rationalizations for the depreciation of the TP, 3) lack of ambivalence towards parents, 4) the “independent thinker” phenomenon (i.e., children strongly asserting that the decision to reject the TP are their own), 5) reflexive, automatic and idealised support for the AP in parental conflict, 6) absence of guilt about the treatment of the rejected parent, 7) the presence of borrowed scenarios (i.e., children accusing the TP, utilising phrases adopted from the AP), 8) generalisations of animosity to the extended family of the TP (Gardner, 1992, as cited in Gardner, 1998b, p.3).

Gardner distinguished between three types of alienation: mild, moderate and severe. In the mild PAS category, the least amount of the eight symptoms are present and, when they are, the effects are minimal. The child still cooperates with the AP regarding visitations, although these can be intermittent or disgruntled (Gardner, 1987; Rand, 1997a). In the moderate category, the child’s relationship with the TP begins to deteriorate, as denigration intensifies. The child demonstrates more resistance to visitation, due to the AP’s programming and manipulation becoming formidable. Finally, in the severe PAS category, the child displays most or all of the eight proposed symptoms and presents with extreme unjustified hatred for the TP, collaborating with the AP. Visitation refusals are intensified, and false allegations of abuse or neglect are common (Cartwright, 1993; Rand, 1997b). In most severe cases, the child will threaten to run away or commit suicide, if they are forced to visit the AP (Rand, 1997a).

PAS has been met with controversy within the mental health and legal profession. Although some researchers supported Gardner's views (Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Nicholas, 1997; Kopetski, 1998a & 1998b; Rueda, 2004; Morrison, 2006; Baker & Darnall, 2007), others have criticised PAS. The main areas of criticism are that PAS oversimplifies the causes of alienation (Warshak, 2001; 2003; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2005) and that it lacks an adequate scientific foundation (Bruch, 2001; Warshak, 2003; Walker *et al.*, 2004; Meier, 2009). Moreover, PAS is often misused in courts, and it has been raised, as well as attacked, in cases involving allegations of child sexual abuse, parental substance abuse and domestic violence, polarising mental health professionals and judiciaries (Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Warshak, 2002; Gardner, 2002; Walker *et al.*, 2004; Meier, 2009). Advocacy groups for abused mothers and children, as well as activist groups for fathers have been involved in the controversy, thus turning PAS in a gendered debate (Gardner, 2002; Clarkson & Clarkson, 2007). Gardner and his proponents have also been criticised for the validity of PAS classification as mild, moderate and severe and for the suggested remedies (Bruch, 2001; Walker *et al.*, 2004; Meier, 2009). Prior to proceeding to a description of the studies supporting Gardner's PAS, a discussion on the critical issues surrounding PAS will follow.

1.2.2. Critique around PAS types

Gardner does not specify how many symptoms are necessary to be observed, and over what period of time, for a diagnosis of mild, moderate or severe PAS to be made (Walker, Brantley & Rigsbee, 2004). In addition to this, Gardner has been accused of contradicting himself, since he indicated that in the mild PAS category the AP's programming towards the child will be reduced, following the end of the custody battle (Gardner, 2001). Such a statement raises questions about the validity of PAS in mild cases, since most mental health syndromes do not simply disappear when the situation changes (Walker *et al.*, 2004). On similar grounds, it has

been postulated that some of the PAS signs and symptoms displayed by children, may be a normative, temporary reaction to a difficult and prolonged divorce, particularly for older children (Wallerstein *et al.*, 2000; Bruch, 2001; Warshak, 2002). In these cases, alienation will typically resolve naturally over time (Wallerstein *et al.*, 2000) and usually within a couple of years after the divorce (Bruch, 2001).

1.2.3. PAS remedies

In cases of severe PAS and on those moderate cases that programming by the AP is likely to continue, Gardner (2001) recommended that custody be transferred to the TP. Moreover, in severe cases, due to children's frequent resistance to move to the TP's home, he suggested children to be removed from the AP and placed in a "transitional-site program", until they are ready to be transferred to the home of the TP. These PAS remedies have been criticised for being unsupported and extreme, and for endangering children's relationship with the parent they trust, especially when the child is functioning well in his/her current home environment (Bruch, 2001; Meier, 2009). Johnston and Kelly (2004a) added that these "tyrannical" proposals can be more traumatic than the ills they profess to cure. The premise that children need access to both parents at this time in their life to have a healthy development, is contentious and not found on empirical grounds (Walker *et al.*, 2004). Furthermore, Gardner (2001) has been accused of his recommendations for court-mandated treatment and enforced contact between the children and the rejected parent, as these approaches remove the children's decision-making rights (Walker *et al.*, 2004).

1.2.4. Oversimplification of the causes of alienation

It has been suggested that Gardner's sole focus on the AP as primarily responsible for the child's alienation underemphasises the significance of multiple contributing factors (Warshak, 2001;

Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2003). Researchers on high-conflict custody disputes argue that whilst many parents engage in alienating behaviours, only a small number of children become alienated. Even when the AP is absent, children have been found to present with alienating behaviours (Walker *et al.*, 2004; Johnston & Kelly, 2004b). Moreover, it is possible that both parents behave in ways to damage the child's relationship with the other parent, sometimes inadvertently (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Placing the child's rejection exclusively on the AP and, particularly, on his/her mental health problems, shifts the focus from a clinically useful description to that of a pathological syndrome (Johnston, 2005). More recently, the Task Force Committee of the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) stated that parental alienation (without referring to it as a syndrome) is a relational problem rather than one located in the pathology of an individual within the family.

1.2.5. PAS: gendered debate

Gardner (1985, 1987) initially suggested that, in most PAS cases, the alienating parent was the mother. Although he later affirmed a more equal split of alienating behaviours in mothers and fathers (Gardner, 2002), he has been heavily criticised for his initial PAS application to mothers (Bruch, 2001; Walker *et al.*, 2004; Meier, 2009). Walker, Brantley and Rigsbee (2004) proposed that Gardner did not consider sufficiently the role of gender role socialisation and resulting behaviour between males and females, before excluding it as a contributing factor. Because of Gardner's initial suggestion, PAS generated strongly conflicting gendered positions, and moved family relationships and custody disputes into the spotlight of national politics (Clarkson & Clarkson, 2007). Groups representing fathers have acclaimed PAS while groups representing mothers have denounced the concept.

Specifically, fathers' activist groups argue that mothers alienate their children, as a revenge strategy for the shame experienced due to divorce/separation from their ex-partners. They also

claim that malicious, false allegations of abuse are frequently involved in the alienation process. Some fathers also believe that courts are gender-biased in child custody issues, more so in parental alienation cases (Fidler & Bala, 2010). On the contrary, advocates for abused women and children completely dismiss the existence of PAS and suggest that children's rejection towards their fathers is usually justifiable, referring to abusive/battering fathers or the witnessing of violence (Faller, 1998; Bruch, 2001; Walker *et al.*, 2004). Walker and Shapiro (2010) state that in these cases children's rejection is an adaptive coping mechanism, and the so-called "parental alienating behaviours" are justifiable behaviours, aiming to protect children from their abusive fathers. Related to this, is the argument that PAS was constructed to disprove child sexual abuse and domestic violence, and to enable the denial of such behaviour in the court arena (Walker *et al.*, 2004). The assumption that mothers make abuse allegations against their ex-partners with the aim to impede and damage their child's relationship with their father, has caused valid child abuse claims not to be seriously investigated; instead, these claims are usually turned against the mother who alleges them (Meier, 2009). Responding to allegations of abuse and violence, male perpetrators may counter-allege the presence of PAS (Walker *et al.*, 2004). Caplan (2004) indicated that PAS use in courts can frequently shift the focus from the child's needs to the AP's rights, and abuse allegations may be minimised or dismissed.

1.3. PAS validity as a syndrome

Although there is consensus that PA occurs (e.g., Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Warshak, 2001; Meier, 2009; Walker & Shapiro, 2010), some mental health and legal professionals and researchers debate the existence of PA as a syndrome. Researchers have challenged PAS, suggesting that it lacks solid grounding in psychological theory or research, and that there is no data to support labelling alienation a "syndrome" (Bruch, 2001; Meier, 2009, Kelly & Johnston, 2004a; Walker *et al.*, 2004; Emery, 2005; Bond, 2007). One concern is that the term "syndrome" conveys to judiciaries an established prominence and may increase faith in the

empirical basis of PAS, consequently providing more value in the witness' testimony (Warshak, 2003). It has been suggested that the term “syndrome” would be more suitable following rigorous empirical and systematic research in the field (Warshak, 2001, 2003). Bernet and Baker (2013) disagree that there is a lack of empirical studies. They emphasise the wealth of descriptive and qualitative research in PAS, although they recognise the need for additional quantitative research.

The validity of PAS as a syndrome has also been challenged on the basis that it is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV & DSM-V) or in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). Kelly and Johnston (2001) stated that PAS does not meet the DSM definition of having a common underlying pathogenesis, course, familial pattern, or treatment. However, Warshak (2003) argued that a syndrome does not require to include conclusive statements about causes, incidence, prognosis or treatment. He added that the recognition of a syndrome should not be challenged by disputes about causal mechanisms. Others have claimed that PA is more about family dynamics than diagnosis and this can be incompatible with its inclusion as a syndrome in the DSM or ICD (Garber, 2020).

The American Psychological Association (APA) does not support a diagnosable PAS (Bernet *et al.*, 2010; Bernet & Baker, 2013). However, the APA's Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Divorce Proceedings (1994) have in the past provided an index of the value of PAS to child custody evaluators. Walker and Shapiro (2010) opposed the inclusion of PAS or PA in DSM-5, due to ethical considerations of labelling a child with a mental disorder, when the cause of the child's behaviour and disturbances are not fully understood. However, a similar criticism could be applied to other childhood disorders included in DSM-V (Whitcombe, 2014).

It has been suggested that PA is incorporated into other DSM-V diagnoses, such as “child affected by parental relationship distress”, “problems relating to family upbringing”, “disruption of family by separation or divorce” and “child psychological abuse” (von Boch-Galhau, 2018; Kruk, 2018). These diagnoses allow court experts and mental health professionals to identify PA in children and apply differential diagnosis (von Boch-Galhau, 2018; Bernet *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, since June 2018, the ICD-11 refers to “parental alienation” under the category “caregiver-child relationship problem”.

1.3.1. PAS validity studies

A few studies have examined Gardner’s eight symptomatic behaviours, providing some empirical support, and preliminary face and content validity for PAS (Saini *et al.*, 2016). Clawar and Rivlin’s large-scale study (1991) was commissioned by the American Bar Association Section of Family Law, due to increased concern that parental programming of children was influencing the outcome of court disputes. The study included the analysis of data from 700 families that went through custody evaluation, in a twelve-year period. Multiple sources were used as data (e.g., court/forensic transcripts, therapy notes, interviews, videotapes of parent-children interactions, observations, etc.). It was found that in about 80 percent of divorcing parents, there was some element of parental programming, with the intention of turning the child against the other parent. Waldron and Joanis’s (1996) clinical description of alienated children, who had been exposed to APs’ efforts to disrupt their relationship with the other parent, was consistent with Gardner’s behavioural descriptions. Dunne and Hedrick (1994) identified 16 cases in which children presented with behavioural characteristics similar to those described by Gardner in severe PAS cases. They proposed that PAS has distinctive features, which make it different from other high-conflict divorce forms. Similarly, Kopetski’s custody evaluation team in Colorado, unaware of Gardner’s work, identified 84 cases of severe

alienation in a sample of 413 court-ordered custody evaluations cases from 1975 to 1990 (Kopetski, 1998a, 1998b). Their conclusions were remarkably similar to Gardner's PAS characteristics (Warshak, 2003, Bernet & Baker, 2013). Warshak (2003) suggests that independent identification of symptoms can be considered strong support for the validity of a newly proposed syndrome.

Burril-O'Donnell (2001) concluded that PAS is a distinctive form of child abuse after assessing parents' and children's behaviours to determine the presence or absence of PAS in 30 custody dispute cases. Parents and children were placed separately in three categories (mild, moderate, severe) based on their symptoms and behaviours. The researcher found that the more negative the behaviour a child demonstrates towards an alienated parent, the more severe their parents' symptoms and behaviours were. Baker & Darnall (2007) conducted a survey of 92 self-reported non-custodial parents, whose children were severely alienated from them, and attempted to determine whether Gardner's eight symptoms of PAS were experienced. Their study found that, in most cases, Gardner's eight PAS symptoms were reported by the parents to be present in their children.

Although the above studies provide a detailed analysis of PAS, they are mainly descriptive and have major methodological flaws. The majority do not clarify exactly how the data were analysed and what procedures were used to ensure reliability (e.g., Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Waldron & Joanis, 1996; Kopetski, 1998a, 1998b). In Baker and Darnall (2007) most of the basic psychometric information needed to assure validity are missing and there is no reported reliability of measures (O'Donohue *et al.*, 2016). The studies presented so far did not include sophisticated statistical analyses nor they assessed for more complex methods of validity testing (Saini *et al.*, 2016). However, the three studies described

below used quantitative methodologies and two of them (Rueda, 2004; Morrison, 2006) examined inter-rater reliability regarding diagnosing PAS.

Nicholas's (1997) survey of custody evaluators found significant correlations between children's alienation symptoms and APs' behaviours, but few links between the children's symptoms and the TPs' behaviours. Although the interpretation of this finding needs caution, due to the study's methodological limitations (e.g., small sample size), it reinforces the argument that in pathological alienation the main problem is between the AP and the child (Warshak, 2003).

Rueda (2004) and Morrison (2006) conducted two inter-rater reliability studies on PAS. Rueda's evaluators (doctoral level mental health professionals) were asked to independently examine real-life scenarios vignettes, which were related to PAS, using evaluation instruments designed by a panel of experts. Rueda examined whether the evaluators agreed on: a) the presence/absence of PAS and its degree, and b) the presence or absence of the eight symptoms of PAS. The results showed a high rate of agreement among the evaluators regarding presence and degree of PAS, both for test and retest (Kendall's W Values above 0.88). A high rate of agreement was also found about the PAS diagnostic criteria. Morrison's study (2006) is an exact replication of Rueda (2004), using the same vignettes and PAS test instrument. The only difference is that Morrison's participants were mental health and child custody practitioners. Morrison's study conveyed similar findings with Rueda. Both studies indicated reliability for the PAS test instrument in determining the presence and degree of PAS, based on Gardner's eight defined symptoms. Although some researchers (e.g., Bernet & Baker, 2013) consider these studies to provide evidence of the validity of PA as a syndrome, others (e.g., Houchin *et al.*, 2012) have disputed their quality, due to small sample sizes and other methodological concerns.

1.4. PA redefinitions and alternative conceptualisations

1.4.1. Terminologies related to PA

Various researchers have used the term PAS after Gardner (e.g., Rand, 1997a, 1997b; Rand, Rand & Kopetski, 2005). Wallerstein's and Blakeslee's (1989) introduced the term "Medea syndrome" to describe symptomatic behaviours in children similar to PAS, but this term has not generated much interest (Warshak, 2003). Other researchers have suggested varying redefinitions and overlapping concepts to describe children from separated/divorced families, who unjustifiably reject and are alienated from a previously loved parent. Terms such as "pathological alignment" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976, 1980), "visitation resistance" (Stoltz & Ney, 2002), "unjustified rejection" (Fidler *et al.*, 2012), "pathological alienation" (Warshak, 2003, 2006) and "resist/refuse dynamic" (Walters & Friedlander, 2016) have been used. Bernet (2008) and Bernet *et al.* (2010) prefer the terms "parental alienation disorder" and "parental alienation". Kelly and Johnston (2001) talk about child alienation rather than parental alienation and coined the term "the alienated child". However, in later publications, Saini and Johnston avoid the use of PA terms altogether and employ behavioural descriptors of the problem (e.g., "strained parent-child relationships", children who "resist/refuse visitation"), citing a conceptual association of PA with a single cause (AP's behaviours), which oversimplifies the complex dynamics of PA (Saini *et al.*, 2016). In the UK, practitioners in the legal field prefer the term "implacable hostility" (Munby, as cited in Clarkson & Clarkson, 2006), as this is seen as less provocative for the AP (Lowenstein, 2008a, 2008b). Nevertheless, the operating framework of Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) makes clear reference to PA since 2012 (Cafcass, 2012).

It is also important to note that different researchers and theorists have given different meanings to the terms "PA" and "PAS". Bernet and colleagues (2010) distinguished the two terms,

defining PA as the “child’s strong alliance with one parent and rejection of a relationship with the other parent without legitimate justification” (p.79) and noted that PAS refers to a child who displays some or all of Gardner’s eight behavioural characteristics. Bernet clarified that children who experience PA “are almost exactly the same children who manifest PAS” but saw PAS as a subset of the more general term PA. Darnall (1997, 1998) conceptualised the two terms in a different way. He claimed that PAS focuses on the child’s reaction while PA, the term he prefers, focuses on the AP’s behaviour. Darnall suggested that the AP’s conscious or unconscious behaviours might stimulate rejecting behaviour in the child, although some children may not be affected by these alienating behaviours.

Darnall (1999) classified the APs in three different types: naïve, active and obsessed. Naïve refers to parents who strive to maintain a relationship between the other parent and the child post-separation but, occasionally, might communicate to the child that the other parent is flawed in some way. Active alienators were described as those who manifest alienating behaviours, but these are seen as a way to cope with the separation and are a consequence of their own poor impulse control and emotional vulnerability. Obsessed alienators persist in their attempts to destroy the other parent and the parent-child relationship and do not show insight in their actions. They have a strong need to control and lack empathy. Their intentional alienating behaviours may stem from genuine irrational beliefs that the other parent is dangerous to the child, believing that their behaviours protect the child. Mental health problems, mainly personality disorders, are contributing factors to the parent’s delusional thinking. Norwin-Allen (2017) matched these three types proposed by Darnall with Gardner’s mild, moderate and severe alienation categories.

In the research literature, the parent with whom the child resides most of the time (custodial) is referred to as “aligned,” “preferred,” “favoured,” or “alienating” parent. The parent with

whom the child does not reside (non-custodial) or has less parenting time with, is referred to as the “non-preferred,” “targeted,” “rejected,” or “alienated” parent. These terms are often used interchangeably in the literature (Polak & Saini, 2015) and in this study too.

The different terminologies pose significant challenges in terms of identifying the problem, conducting research, and choosing appropriate interventions. In this study, the term “PA” is used, as this is the term that most appeared in scientific articles and demonstrated a high degree of consensus amongst legal and mental health professionals in a recent study (Bernet *et al.*, 2021). However, the use of this term has no intention to reduce or minimise the diversity and complexity of the phenomenon, as Saini and colleagues suggested (2016). The researcher approaches PA in a way similar to Warshak’s PA definition (2001), who identified three components that must be present for a “bona fide” identification of PA: 1) A persistent, not occasional, rejection or denigration of a parent that reaches the level of a “relentless campaign”, 2) an unjustified (unreasonable) or irrational rejection by the child, 3) the child’s rejection is at least a partial result of the AP’s influence. In later publications Warshak (2010) identified a couple of other aspects critical to PA. He emphasised that there should be a change from a previously warm and healthy attachment with a parent, and he acknowledged the possibility that the child’s rejection might be applied not only to parents but others too (e.g., grandparents, other family members).

1.4.2. Reformulated multifactorial models of PA

1.4.2.1. Kelly & Johnston’s model

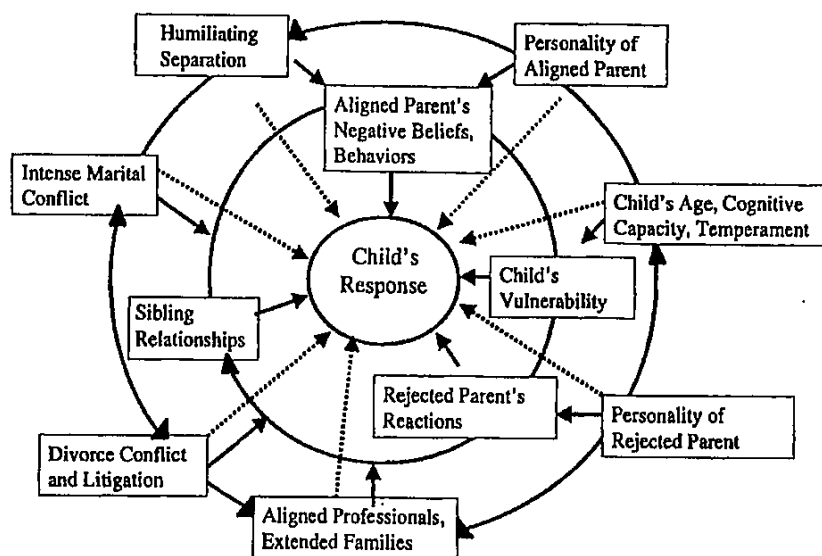
Kelly and Johnston (2001) suggested that Gardner’s conceptualisation places too much emphasis on the personality and behaviours of the AP. For them, parents’ alienating behaviours are neither sufficient nor a necessary condition for children to become alienated. They focus instead on the alienated children’s behaviours and define the alienated child as “one who

expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection and/or fear) toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent" (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, p. 251).

Using a family systems multifactor model, they propose a variety of interrelated factors that can influence a child's response during and after separation and divorce and, consequently lead to alienation (Figure 1). These factors include: 1) a history of intense marital conflict, 2) a humiliating separation, usually perceived as a narcissistic injury and abandonment by the AP, 3) a highly conflicted divorce and litigation, 4) contributions of extended families, aligned professionals and new partners of the rejected parent, 5) the AP's personality, 6) the rejected parent's personality and reactions towards the alienation, and 7) the child's background (e.g., age, cognitive capacity, personality vulnerabilities, siblings relationships). As the child is affected by these factors, his/her responses affect, in turn, many of these factors in a systemic feedback loop (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2003).

Figure 1

Kelly's and Johnston (2001) systems-based multifactorial model on alienation (p.255)

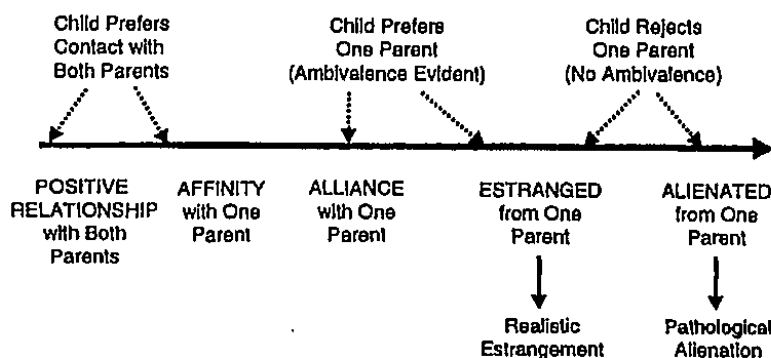


Similar to other researchers (e.g., Gardner 1992; Warshak, 2002), Kelly and Johnston highlighted the need to differentiate between the alienated child and the child who resists/refuses contact with a parent, for reasons not primarily due to an AP's (overt or covert) campaign against the other parent. These reasons include resistance ingrained in normal developmental processes; resistance in response to a parent's parenting style; adjustment difficulties during divorce transition or as a response to remarriage/stepfamily formation; and resistance because of the child's worries about an emotionally frail custodial parent (Johnston, 2003; Kelly & Johnston, 2001, Johnston & Sullivan, 2020).

To help elucidate the differences between alienated children and other children, who may demonstrate some resistance after parental separation and/or divorce, Kelly and Johnston (2001) conceptualised child-parent relationships as existing on a continuum, which includes at one end the child's positive relationships with both parents, and at the other end the alienated child, who expresses strident, unjustified and unambivalent rejection of a parent, and presents with a severe distortion of the previous parent-child relationship (Figure 2). In between the two ends they identify affinity, alliance, and estrangement. Subsequent developments of this continuum are included in the work of Drozd and Olesen (2004, 2010), Friedlander and Walters (2010) and Polak and Saini (2015).

Figure 2

Continuum of parent-child relationships after separation and divorce (Kelly & Johnston, 2001, p. 252)

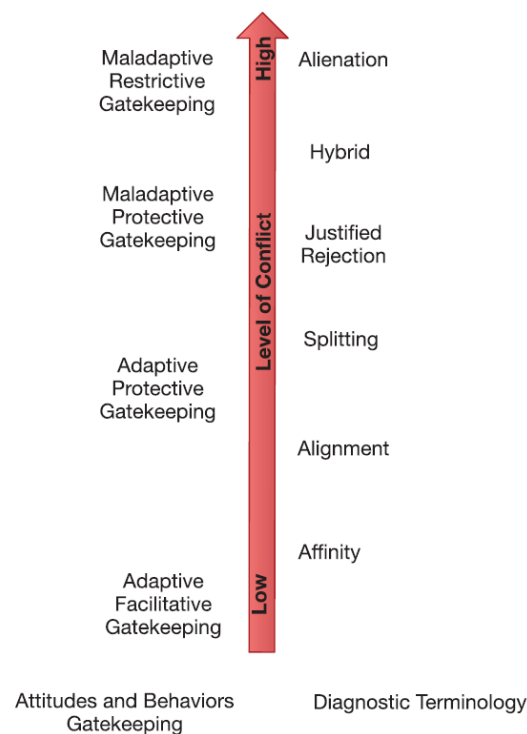


1.4.2.2. Polak and Saini’s continuum & ecological systems framework

Polak and Saini (2015) further adapted Kelly and Johnston’s continuum of parent–child relationships (Figure 3). They incorporated the gatekeeping continuum developed by Austin and colleagues (2013) and included the level of conflict as a factor. Polak and Saini use the term “alignment” instead of “alliance”, preferred by Kelly and Johnston (2001). They also use the terms “justified rejection” and “realistic estrangement” interchangeably. Their continuum includes two extra categories, “splitting” and “ hybrid”. The diagnostic terminologies and gatekeeping continuum are described below.

Figure 3

Polak and Saini’s (2015) continuum of strained parent-child relationships (p.223)



“Affinity” is described as a normal and developmentally expected preference towards one parent that can be due to gender, age, temperament, shared interests and familiarity with a parent (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Drozd & Olesen, 2004, 2010; Friedlander & Walters, 2010;

Polak & Saini, 2015). “Alignment” is a consistent preference for one parent, which can be evident during parental marriage/partnership, and leads to post-separation limited contact with the non-preferred parent. Aligned children show ambivalence towards the non-preferred parent and do not completely reject them (Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Polak & Saini, 2015). If the child manages to process the separation, alignments are temporary. However, children can also transition to alienation in the context of high-conflict divorce with protracted litigation (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Drozd & Olesen, 2010). “High-conflict splitting” occurs when children are triangulated in parental disputes, and, possibly pressurised to take a side (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Emery, 2012). Children are faced with overwhelming adaptation demands between two emotional environments and might keep the relationship with each parent separate from the other. Splitting is for children a way to cope and remove themselves from the high parental conflict (Johnston & Roseby, 1997). Despite their description about high-conflict splitting, Polak and Saini (2015) did not provide an explanation of how high-conflict splitting might be different as a separate terminological category from alienation that is also characterised by a high-level of splitting (e.g., Bernet *et al.*, 2017).

“Justified rejection” or “realistic estrangement” is characterised by a child’s justified anger and rejection towards a parent. Children are estranged from one of their parents, because of that parent’s history of domestic violence, abuse, neglect, or extreme parenting deficiencies. (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Drozd & Olesen, 2004; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Fidler *et al.*, 2013). Children may have been victims themselves or may have been traumatised by witnessing family violence (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Johnston, 2005). This distinction has also been made by Baker and Darnall (2007), as well as Gardner (1992), who demonstrated how PAS is not applicable when the child has a legitimate justification of fear, hostility, or rejection because of abuse or neglect. In these cases, children may demonstrate PTSD symptoms rather than a disproportionate or unjustified reaction to the rejected parent (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Drozd

& Olesen, 2004; Fidler & Bala, 2010). However, determining whether a child's rejection is justified or unjustified can be difficult in certain cases, due to the subjective nature of a child's feelings (Fidler, Bala & Saini, 2013). Labelling a rejection as justified or unjustified is a contentious issue, particularly in cases of justified rejection, where the reactions of the favoured parent are disproportionate to the situation and even emotionally abusive to the child. The rejected parent's behaviour towards a child, who exhibits alienating behaviours, has also to be considered. The differentiation between rejected parents' inappropriate causal behaviours (e.g., pre-existing pattern of abuse) or reactive behaviours (e.g., isolated abusive incident or uncharacteristic behaviour) plays a role in determining whether a rejection is justified or not (Fidler *et al.*, 2013).

In Polak and Saini's continuum, alienation occurs when children completely refuse contact with a parent and express rejection without ambivalence or guilt. Children demonstrate overt or covert alienating behaviours influenced by the favoured parent. Contrary to estrangement, rejected parents are considered "good enough", without any history of abuse or neglect, and the relationship between the rejected parent and child was excellent, good or good enough prior to the alienation. The presence of any parenting deficiency or personality weakness in the rejected parent is insufficient in itself to provoke a cut-off in the relationship.

PA and estrangement are not mutually exclusive and can be overlapping phenomena in the same family (Johnston & Sullivan, 2020; Bernet *et al.*, 2021). "Hybrid" or "mixed" cases refer to those that include a combination of parental alienating behaviours on the part of the favoured parent or child, enmeshed relationship between the child and the favoured parent and compromised parenting by the rejected parent that lends itself to a justified or proportional resistance by the child. In hybrid family cases both the favoured and the rejected parent

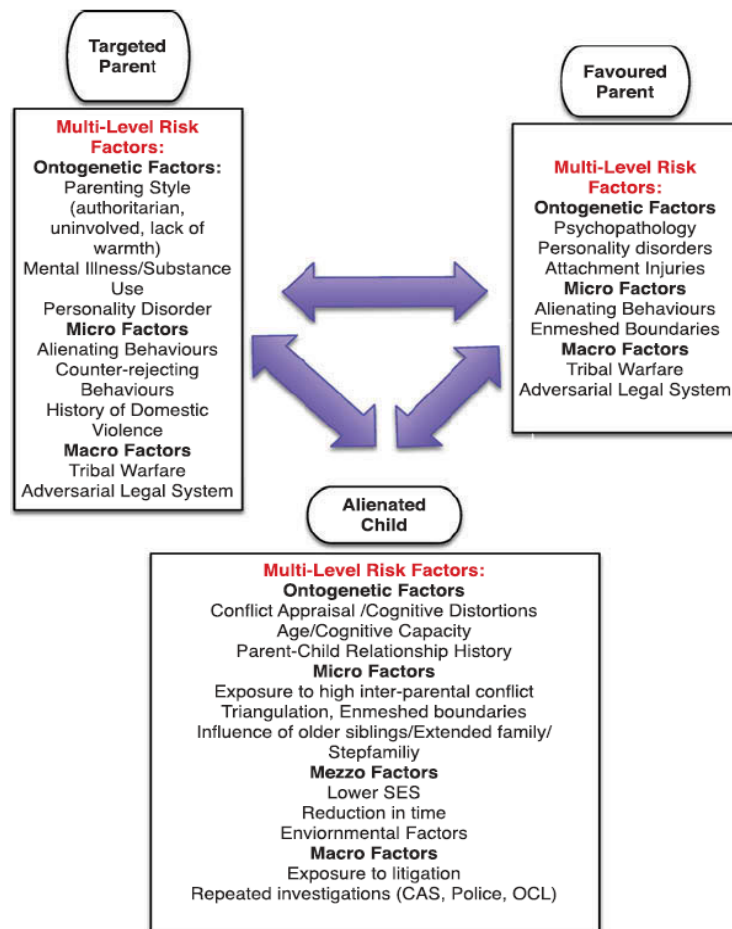
contribute to the child's rejection (Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Fidler *et al.*, 2013). Friedlander and Walters (2010) commented that 85% of cases in their study were hybrid.

The "gatekeeping" continuum, incorporated in Polak and Saini's figure, refers to parental attitudes and behaviours that could impact the quality of the other parent's involvement and relationship with the child. Gatekeeping can be adaptive or maladaptive. The former describe behaviours that promote the parent-child relationship and put the child's needs first. The latter does not consider the child's needs, rather is based on the parent's needs and includes non-protective and dangerous behaviour. When a parent behaves in a way that prevents the other parent's involvement in order to shield the child from risk of "harm, emotional distress, behavioural problems, adjustment difficulties, or negative developmental impact", then gatekeeping is protective or justified (Drozd *et al.*, 2014, as cited in Polak & Saini, 2015). This might be adaptive and reasonable in cases where there are incidents of neglect or abuse but can be maladaptive and unjustified when the causes of concerns are not supported by evidence. Restrictive gatekeeping occurs when parents obstruct and interfere with the other parent's involvement and relationship with the child (Polak & Saini, 2015).

Polak and Saini (2015) used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) transactional ecological systems framework to illustrate the interaction of the multiple multilevel risk factors involved in strained parent-child relationships. The model suggested (Figure 4) incorporates ontogenetic, micro-factors and meso-factors for the favoured parent, the rejected parent, the child, as well as the parent-child and interparental relationship. It also considers macro-system factors (e.g., litigious adversarial system).

Figure 4

Polak & Saini's (2015) ecological framework on strained parent-child relationships (p. 239)

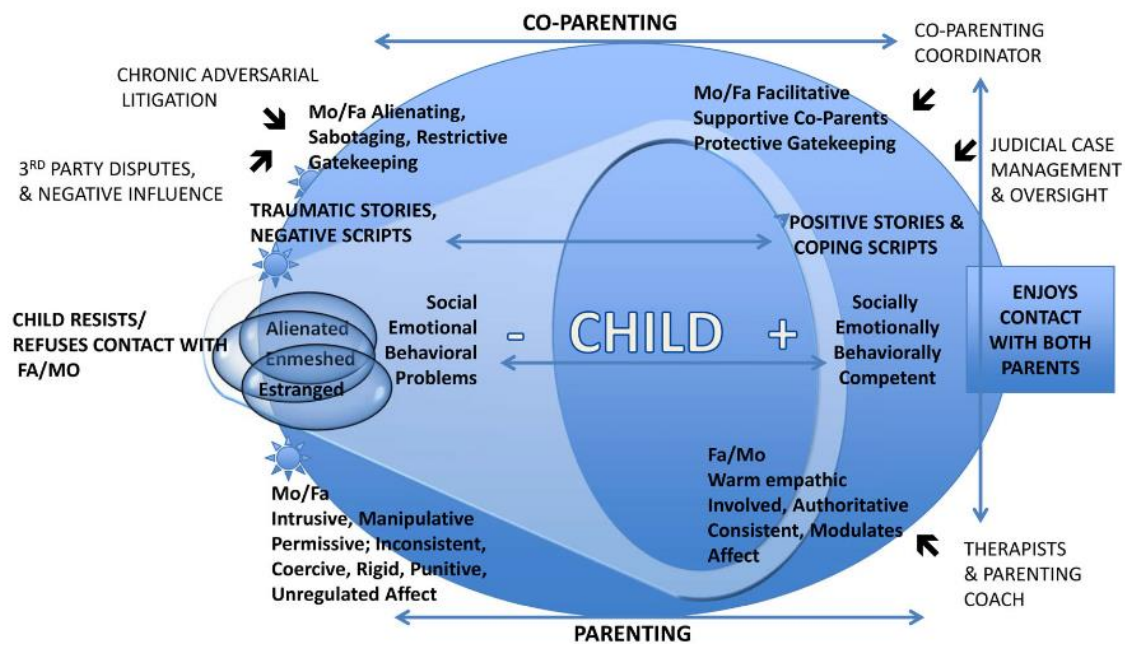


1.4.2.3. Johnston & Sullivan's prediction model

Johnston and Sullivan (2020) refined the original model of Kelly and Johnston (2001). Based on a multifactorial theory of PA, an intervention-focused prediction model was recently developed for children resisting or refusing contact with a parent (Figure 5). The researchers argue that this resistance/refusal is predicted by four factors: 1) traumatic stories/negative scripts in the family, 2) co-parental alienating and restrictive gatekeeping behaviour, 3) inadequate or pathogenic parenting practices of one or both parents, and 4) child vulnerability/resilience as manifested by deficits in social, emotional and behavioural competence.

Figure 5

The prediction model of Johnston & Sullivan (2020) for children refusing/resisting contact with a parent (p.284)



1.4.3. Attachment & family system-based theories on PA

Garber (2004, 2011) grounded PA in the conceptual framework of attachment theory (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Bowlby, 1969) and structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1974). He defined alienation as “the dynamic in force when any party (actor) presents information (message) which causes a child to accommodate his/her mental schema of a caregiver (target) such that the child becomes less secure with that caregiver” (Garber, 2007, p. 589). Garber also emphasised multiple factors that contribute to the assimilation or accommodation of a message to the child’s mental schema. These factors can be the socio-emotional and cognitive maturity of the child, the quality of parent-child relationship, the context in which the message occurs, the content of the message and its emotional impact.

Garber (2011) explained the detrimental power that the enmeshed parent-child relationship can have on the child's rejection of a parent. Role reversal and poor boundaries were previously suggested by others (e.g., Johnston *et al.*, 2005a). However, Garber argued that the term "role reversal" fails to encapsulate the destructive power of parent-child relationship in PA and used the term "role corruption". He described the enmeshed dyadic dynamics that complement PA: adultification (where a child becomes the parent's friend, confidante and ally), parentification (where a child serves as a caregiver to their parent) and infantilisation (where a child's development is inhibited by a parent who needs to be needed). These are terms that have been previously used in the field of family therapy by Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark (1973) and Minuchin (1974).

Similar to Garber, Childress (2015) founded his work on existing psychological principles from the domain of family therapy (e.g., "role reversal", "inverted hierarchies", "triangulation", etc.) and attachment theory. In his proposed model of "Attachment-Based Parental Alienation", Childress conceptualises PA as always originating from the psychopathology of the AP and his/her resulting pathogenic parenting practices, and used pre-defined psychopathologies listed in the DSM-V (narcissistic, borderline and delusional personality disorders) to describe the AP. Childress also based his ideas on research related to the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns (e.g., Bretherton, 1990; Fonagy & Target, 2005) in his attempt to conceptualise PA. However, Childress's ideas have not yet been empirically validated.

1.5. Prevalence of PA

Most peer reviewed studies on the prevalence of PA were conducted in US and fewer in Canada and Australia. In the UK, there are no estimates of the rate of alienation, because there is a lack of national data on reasons for contact disputes (Doughty, Maxwell & Slater, 2020). Although Doughty et al. (2020) argued that there is no evidence that PA cases have increased in the UK,

Fidler, Bala and Saini (2013) reported that in surveys of UK court decisions that dealt with PA, significant increases have been noted, since approximately 2005. The authors claimed that this increase can be due to multiple reasons, such as the rise of divorce rates, fathers becoming more involved in parenting post-separation, and/or due to a greater awareness of PA by parents and legal and mental health professionals (Fidler *et al.*, 2013).

The prevalence of PA significantly varies in existing (non-UK) studies depending on its conceptualisation and terminology, the way it is measured, the sample settings, the sample strategy and the different methodologies used. Bernet (2010) claimed that about 1% of children and adolescents in the US experience PA. However, Fidler, Bala and Saini (2013) argued that this percentage does not seem to be based on population-based empirical evidence, and estimated that, based on a review of the literature, PA is found in about 10% of high-conflict cases. In studies with divorcing and custody disputing families, as well as those that included custody evaluators and other legal professionals, the prevalence of PA is estimated to be between 11% to 60% (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Kopetski, 1998a; Baker, 2007, 2010; Johnston, 2003; Johnston *et al.*, 2005a; Steinberger, 2006a; Bow *et al.*, 2009; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Hands & Warshak, 2011). More conservative studies reported that PA is found in approximately 10% to 20% of litigation cases (Johnston *et al.*, 2005a). Considering the prevalence of cases presenting with severe alienation, has also been challenging, due to operational definitions of the severity continuum, and has ranged between 6% to 27% (Johnston *et al.*, 2005a).

Despite Gardner's initial claims that mothers are more likely to engage in PAS than fathers (Gardner 2002), mothers and fathers can equally be APs (Bow *et al.*, 2006, as cited in Fidler *et al.*, 2013). However, custody (parenting time) are strong predictors of PA, with the AP being more likely the one with custody or primary care of children (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Harman

et al., 2018). Since mothers are more frequently given custody than fathers, PA has been more commonly associated with mothers (Lowenstein, 2013). In Bow, Gould and Flens (2009) study of legal and mental health professionals, 66% of the APs were mothers and in Rand & Rand's (2006) study, this figure was 58%. However, in 84% of the cases in the Rand and Rand study, mothers had sole custody. Parents with limited parenting time can also be alienators (Bala, Hunt, & McCarney, 2010). Both mothers and fathers are at risk of becoming alienated by their children, and boys and girls can equally experience PA (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Baker, 2009; Bow *et al.*, 2009), although there is some evidence that girls are more likely to be severely alienated compared to boys (Baker & Darnall, 2006). Children on the pre-adolescent and adolescent stage are more likely to become alienated (Johnson, 2003; Johnston *et al.*, 2005a; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Summer & Summer, 2006; Bow *et al.*, 2009). PA can be found across all demographic and socio-economic indicators (Harman *et al.*, 2016).

1.6. PA in the context of high-conflict separation & litigation

Although PA may occur in intact families (Baker, 2006; Moné & Biringen, 2006; Hands & Warshak, 2011), it is most frequently observed in the context of high-conflict separation/divorce, child custody disputes and litigation (e.g., Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Baker & Verrocchio, 2015; Harman *et al.*, 2019). Studying children of divorced parents, Johnston and Roseby (1997) maintained that alignment with one parent and alienation from the other occurred in cases where the children had become enmeshed in the parental conflict. According to Polak and Saini (2015), the prevalence of PA in high-conflict separation couples may suggest that a combination of parental conflict, post-separation parenting dynamics and children's personality vulnerabilities can predict the refusal of parental contact. In a survey of an Italian community adult sample about their recollection of childhood exposure to alienating behaviours of a parent, Baker and Verrocchio (2015) found that PA can start prior to or after the parents' separation. Moreover, it has been argued that parental disagreements on matters

other than custody (e.g., financial matters, division of property, child support) may be precipitating factors of PA (Cartwright, 1993) and that conflict may escalate if parents engage in new romantic relationships, and have more children (Harman *et al.*, 2016).

Children, who experience inter- and intra-psychic pressure in the post-separation environment, may not be able to make the psychological transition and maintain their attachment bond with each of their parents. Woodall & Woodall (2017) coined this as “crossing the transition bridge” and argued that an alienation reaction may develop as part of this transition. In the past researchers have found strong association between highly conflictual parental communications post-divorce and insecure parent-child attachments (e.g., Beckwith *et al.*, 1999, Clarke-Stewart *et al.*, 2000).

Regarding parents’ involvement in litigation, it has been asserted that court proceedings and an adversarial legal system can intensify the parental conflict and exacerbate PA (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Stoltz & Ney, 2002; Darnall, 2008). Cartwright (1993) suggested that court postponements allow PA to strengthen, and that the longer children remain in AP’s custody, the more they alienate themselves from the non-custodial parent. Comparing a community sample of separated families with families referred to family court, Johnston and Kelly (2004a) found that children of divorced families had higher rates of PA. Kopetski (1998a) suggested that legal proceedings can reinforce the APs’ pathological defences, which are used to avoid the experience of internal conflict and psychological pain. Research from the perspective of TPs demonstrated that the legal system is slow, uncaring and ineffective, and that it contributes to PA (Poustie *et al.*, 2018). However, Fidler, Bala and Saini (2013) postulated that it is far from clear that legal proceedings exacerbate PA, due to selection biases in the existing studies, as parents in cases with alienation allegations are more likely to turn to family courts than parents without such allegations.

1.6.1. Allegations in PA

False or fabricated allegations are a hallmark of PA. Allegations of physical or sexual child abuse, domestic violence, alcohol-drug addiction or neglect to gain the custody of children commonly appear in litigation cases of highly conflicted separated parents (Turkat, 1997; Johnston *et al.*, 2005a; Meier, 2009). In addition to gaining children's custody, these allegations may serve to obtain financial benefits or take revenge against the other parent (Gardner, 2002; Summer & Summer, 2006). False allegations are usually raised from the resident/custodial parent against the non-resident/non-custodial parent (Turkat, 1997) and are evident in the more moderate and severe PA cases (Gardner, 1998a; Fidler *et al.*, 2012). When allegations of abuse or neglect are made, the court may immediately restrict the accused parents' access to the children and refuse visitation rights, without assessing the validity of the allegation claims, to protect the children's welfare (Wakefield & Underwager, 1991).

Various reasons are suggested in the literature for the occurrence of false allegations. Rand (1997b) suggested that they function as an alienating technique. Leonoff and Montague (1996) argued that they demonstrate the accuser parents' mistrust and hatred for the separation, and their wish to humiliate and punish the other parent. They also claimed that false allegations are based on thought distortions by mentally vulnerable parents. Others suggested that allegations serve as an avoidance of feelings of rejection (Sturge & Glaser, 2000) and are a product of misinterpretations, exacerbated by separating parents' hostility and subsequent distorted perceptions (Bala *et al.*, 2001; Johnston *et al.*, 2009).

Differentiating child abuse and domestic violence from false allegations can be a difficult and complex task in custody evaluations (Turkat, 1997). Children from separated families in custody disputes can also be at heightened risk of abuse or neglect (Fidler *et al.*, 2013). Distinguishing between abuse and PA poses significant challenges to researchers and

policymakers too, making it difficult to lead to reforms in the legal framework and established PA therapeutic interventions (Drozd & Olesen, 2004). Researchers have argued against the binary question of whether allegations constitute PA or abuse, as it is known that domestic violence perpetrators are more likely to be abusive parents and can manipulate their children's thoughts and feelings to maintain coercive control over their victim partner (Johnston & Sullivan, 2020). Others claimed that alienation "is not equivalent to a denial of child abuse or intimate partner violence" (Fidler & Bala, 2010, p. 11).

With regards to the prevalence of false allegations, Gardner (1998a) reported that 10% to 20% of alienation cases included these allegations, despite his initial claims that this percentage is much higher. Literature shows that in custody dispute cases where abuse allegations were raised, these were found to be false, unsubstantiated or unfounded in between 9% and 54% of cases (Faller & DeVoe, 1995; Trocme & Bala, 2005; Kopetski *et al.*, 2006). Prevalence variations are due to different methodologies used, the study populations and the type of abuse. Bow *et al.* (2009) suggested that in cases of PA, child sexual abuse and domestic violence allegations were rarely found to be substantiated. It has been reported that mothers and fathers are equally likely to raise false allegations (Bala *et al.*, 2007), but alienating mothers are more likely to raise child sexual abuse allegations whilst alienating fathers made more allegations of neglect (Kopetski, Rand & Rand, 2006; Bala *et al.*, 2007).

1.7. PA as a form of child abuse and family violence

PA has been conceptualised by some researchers and experts as a form of child abuse (Kruk, 2018; Templar *et al.*, 2017; von Boch-Galhau, 2018; Johnston & Sullivan, 2020) and family violence (Baker, 2007, 2009; Verrochio *et al.*, 2016; Harman *et al.*, 2018; Poustie, Matthewson, & Balmer, 2018; Haines *et al.*, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021). Harman, Kruk and Hines (2018) suggested that PA is an "unacknowledged" or societally denied form of family violence

and parallelised PA with the historical socio-political denial of child abuse throughout the 20th century. Lee-Maturana, Matthewson and Dwan (2021) compared severe PA behaviours with family violence acts, as stated in the Australian Family Law Act, 1975.

Controlling coercive behaviours and psychological aggression (e.g., threats, intimidation, emotional and financial abuse, gatekeeping, etc.) have been emphasised as main components of PA and as tools used by APs to alter or terminate the TPs' relationship with their child (Harman *et al.*, 2018; Haines *et al.*, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021; Baker, 2020). Alienating parents use their children as weapons to maintain control and power over TPs (Baker, 2020; Harman, Maniotes & Grubb, 2021). Johnston, Walters and Olesen (2005a) linked PA with psychologically controlling or intrusive parenting and Johnston & Sullivan (2020) defined alienated children as synonymous to abused children. The latter drew on known elements of reactions of abused children or children who witnessed family violence by a parent, arguing that it is common for some children to defend the abusive parent and blame the other parent, who is usually also a victim of the same abuser.

In this context, TPs are viewed as survivors of intimate partner violence (Harman *et al.*, 2018; Haines *et al.*, 2020; Harman & Matthewson, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020, 2021). They find themselves entangled in situations of asymmetric dependence (Harman *et al.*, 2021) and lack power in the family system (Warshak, 2015; Whitcombe, 2017; Harman, Bernet, *et al.*, 2019). Targeted parents' options are limited, as they are fearful that if they act, they may lose their children or have other repercussions. Based on this conceptualisation, Harman, Kruk and Hines (2018) disagreed with naming PA as a conflictual situation where both parents are contributing. Harman and Matthewson (2020) mapped PA behaviours onto several gender-adapted Power and Control Wheels of the Duluth Model, a framework used in batterer intervention programs

to understand abusive behavioural patterns. The same research groups have emphasised the need that cases of alienation are treated as child protection cases rather than child custody cases.

It has been suggested that parental power imbalances can be exacerbated by court-ordered custody allocation, which provide unequal parenting time to one parent over the other. In Harman et al. study (2021) asymmetries in power were found to be highest when AP had primary or sole custody of the children. In such cases, APs have more opportunities to control the TPs' access to the children (Saini *et al.*, 2017) and can better exercise their decision-making authority (Ogolsky *et al.*, 2019).

1.8. Research studies on PA

1.8.1. Studies on factors of development of PA

Despite the conceptualisation of many theories about the development of PA, research on the causal or predictive factors on PA is limited. Existing studies mainly use cross-sectional designs that cannot test for directionality of effects, have rarely used control/comparison groups and relied on non-random samples with small numbers of participants. Generalisability of findings is, therefore, compromised. The different definitions of PA further limit any findings, since PA cannot be reliably distinguished from other type of contact refusals and strained parent-child relationships (Fidler *et al.*, 2013; Saini *et al.*, 2016). Most studies examined single aetiological factors in isolation, with very few focusing on interparental factors, family dynamics and the intersection between those and individual characteristics. Upon reviewing the literature, only one study was found that focused specifically on the family processes of development of PAS (not PA) from the perspective of TPs (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). This study's findings with its limitations will be discussed later, as part of the literature review conducted on the TPs' experiences of PA (see section 1.9).

Johnston's research group conducted four exploratory, cross-sectional studies to investigate the processes involved in children's post-divorce resistance/refusal of a parent (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston, 1992, as cited in Johnston, 1993; Johnston, 2003; Johnston, Walters & Olesen, 2005a). Overall, their studies supported a multi-factorial explanation of children's rejection. Alongside developmentally appropriate responses to parental divorce (e.g., separation anxiety), other factors were reported as explanatory themes for children's visitation reluctance/resistance, such as the longevity and intensity of parental disputes, the children's enmeshment with a distressed parent, and their exposure to emotional abuse and family violence. Children's counter-rejection by the rejected parent was also reported (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston, 1992, as cited in Johnston, 1993; Johnston *et al.*, 2005a). An association was found between a child's rejection and lack of warm involved parenting from the rejected parent (Johnston, 2003). Johnston hypothesised that parenting deficits might be related to powerlessness felt by the rejected parent, due to the other parent-child alliance against them. A high correlation between role reversal and alienating behaviours was also found, as well as reciprocal alienation by both parents to some extent (Johnston *et al.*, 2005a). Children, who were older, had emotional and social difficulties and low self-esteem were more likely to be affected by the family dynamics and reject a parent. The chronic litigation also contributed to rejection (Johnston, 2003). However, these findings need to be interpreted with caution, because data were based on archival databases of custody litigating families (therefore, not coming from interviews with families), and samples consisted of families, experiencing estrangement, PA and other parent-child strained relationships.

1.8.2. Other areas of research on PA

This section discusses research on personality characteristics of APs, TPs and alienated children, on parental alienating behaviours, and the impact of PA. Studies that focused on

identifying the personality traits of APs, found that they have difficulties separating their needs from those of their children, can misinterpret reality and may have a personality disorder (e.g., Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Baker, 2007; Baker & Ben Ami, 2011). Studies that used the MMPI-2, suggested that APs have the tendency to use primitive defences (e.g., splitting, projection, denial, devaluation/idealisation), whilst at the same time falsely present themselves as psychologically and socially adaptive, and demonstrate excessive sensitivity and thought rigidity (Siegel & Langford, 1998; Gordon *et al.*, 2008; Roma, Marchetti, Mazza, Burla & Verrocchio, 2021; Roma, Marchetti, Mazza, Ricci *et al.*, 2021). Johnston and colleagues (2005c), using the Rorschach in parents undergoing custody evaluations, had similar findings. Most of these studies used control groups and had sufficient sample power.

Research regarding the personality characteristics of TPs is more inconclusive. Findings from clinical observational studies reported deficits in TPs' parenting skills (Turkat, 1994; Warshak, 2003), and characterised TPs as passive in the face of conflict (Kopetski, 1998a; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Fidler & Bala, 2010), overly accommodative and emotionally repressed (Kopetski, 1998a). However, recent research from TPs' perspective indicated confidence in their ability to discipline and set boundaries (Balmer *et al.*, 2017), and remaining active in trying to keep their relationship with their children, despite the difficulties posed by APs (Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021). Findings from studies that used the MMPI-2 reported that TPs did not present with psychopathological traits (Gordon *et al.*, 2008), but showed adaptations to chronic depressive states and high levels of interpersonal conflict, limited energy to cope with problems, and a tendency to engage in fantasy and avoid reality (Roma, Marchetti, Mazza, Ricci *et al.*, 2021).

Personality predispositions of children is also believed to play its part in PA. The few existing studies have significant methodological limitations (Saini *et al.*, 2016), therefore conclusions

cannot be reliably drawn. Children, who are anxious, passive or have low self-esteem, and those facing developmental needs, might be less resilient to cope with parental conflict, custody disputes and alienating behaviours (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Steinberger, 2006b). However, this has not been empirically evidenced. Stoner-Moskowitz (1998), who compared children from intact, divorced, high-conflict and alienated families using standard tests of children's self-concept, did not find significant differences between the groups. It has also been postulated that alienated children are more emotionally troubled than non-alienated children (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Johnston *et al.*, 2005b), but other studies did not support this finding (Johnston & Goldman, 2010; Baker & Chambers, 2011). A recent study by Bernet and colleagues (2017), using the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire to compare children in intact, divorced, neglected and alienated families, found a high level of splitting in severely alienated children, which was not found in the other groups. However, their study could not differentiate between alienated and estranged children.

With regards to studies on parental alienating behaviours (PABs), associations have been found between children's exposure to PABs by one parent with their rejection of the other parent (e.g., Baker & Fine, 2014; Baker & Eichler, 2016; Verrochio *et al.*, 2016). However, studies that have demonstrated this association have not used observations of the TPs' behaviours or standardised measures to identify PA in children (Marques *et al.*, 2020). PA literature shows consistency in the PABs that can be perpetrated by one parent and limit or destroy the other parent-child relationship (Saini *et al.*, 2016; Templar *et al.*, 2017). Various PABs are identified in the literature, such as denigrating and belittling the parent to the child, intercepting calls and limiting contact, giving the child the choice to decide whether they want to see the other parent, undermining the parent's authority, forcing the child to reject the other parent, and instilling fear to the child about the parent (Bone & Walsh, 1999; Baker, 2005a; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Baker & Chambers, 2011).

Damaging effects of PA have been reported for both children and TPs. With regards to children, greater exposure to PABs has been associated with low self-esteem and declines in academic performance (Baker, 2007; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Verrochio *et al.*, 2016), high levels of depression and anxiety, and long-term mental health difficulties (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Verrochio *et al.*, 2019), as well as relationship difficulties and insecure attachment styles in adulthood (Baker, 2005b, 2009; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Bentley & Matthewson, 2020). These studies are limited by their cross-sectional design and their reliance on retrospective self-reports. Meier (2009) noted that long-term predictions are speculative, since longitudinal studies comparing the well-being of alienated with non-alienated children do not exist. Regarding the effect of PA on TPs, emotional, physical, social and financial consequences have been reported by TPs (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Whitcombe, 2014, 2017; Balmer *et al.*, 2017; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020; Tavares *et al.*, 2020; Torun *et al.*, 2021; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a, 2021b). The impact of PA on TPs will be discussed further in the section below, as part of the literature review.

1.9. The targeted parents' perspective: a systematic literature review

Research studies that included TPs as participants are limited. A systematic literature review was carried out to identify studies pertaining to the experiences of TPs. Five electronic databases were searched (CINAHL, Medline, PsycArticles, PsycInfo, Web of Science) from inception to November 2021, using the following key terms: (divorc* OR 'parental conflict' OR high conflict OR 'parental separation' OR 'parental dispute' OR non-custod* OR noncustod*) AND (parent* OR mother* OR father* OR target* OR alienated OR rejected) AND ('parental alienation' OR 'parental alienation syndrome' OR 'visitation resistance' OR 'visitation refusal' OR 'unjustified rejection' OR align* OR 'pathological alignment' OR 'implacable hostility') AND (experience* OR perception* OR view OR opinion OR belief* OR attitude* OR meaning OR recall OR recollection OR characteristics OR understand* OR

feel* OR know*). Studies were included if they met the following criteria: 1) participants were TPs, experiencing PA, 2) used qualitative and mixed methodologies, 3) were published in academic journals, 4) were written in English. Studies were excluded if: 1) participants were both alienated and estranged parents, 2) they used quantitative methodologies only, 3) examined PA from other people's perspectives (e.g., adults, who were alienated from their parents as children, mental health professionals, etc.). Figure 6 illustrates a PRISMA flow diagram with the different phases of the search strategy (Moher *et al.*, 2009).

Nine studies were identified that met these criteria (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan, Goldblatt & Cohen-Masica, 2012; Whitcombe, 2017; Poustie, Matthewson & Balmer, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2020; Lee-Maturana, Matthewson & Dwan, 2020; Tavares, Crespo & Ribeiro, 2021; Lee-Maturana, Matthewson & Dwan, 2021a; Harman, Maniotes & Grubb, 2021). Three of these studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan, *et al.*, 2012; Poustie, *et al.*, 2018) were included in a systematic literature review with different inclusion/exclusion criteria (Lee-Maturana, Matthewson, Dwan & Norris, 2019). The studies of Scharp, Kubler and Wang (2020) and Scharp, Hansen, Kubler and Wang (2021) were excluded, despite stating in their titles that explored the perspectives of TPs, as they later mention that they included estranged parents too. Table 1 demonstrates the characteristics of the nine studies, included in this review.

Figure 6

PRISMA flow diagram of included studies (Moher et al., 2009)

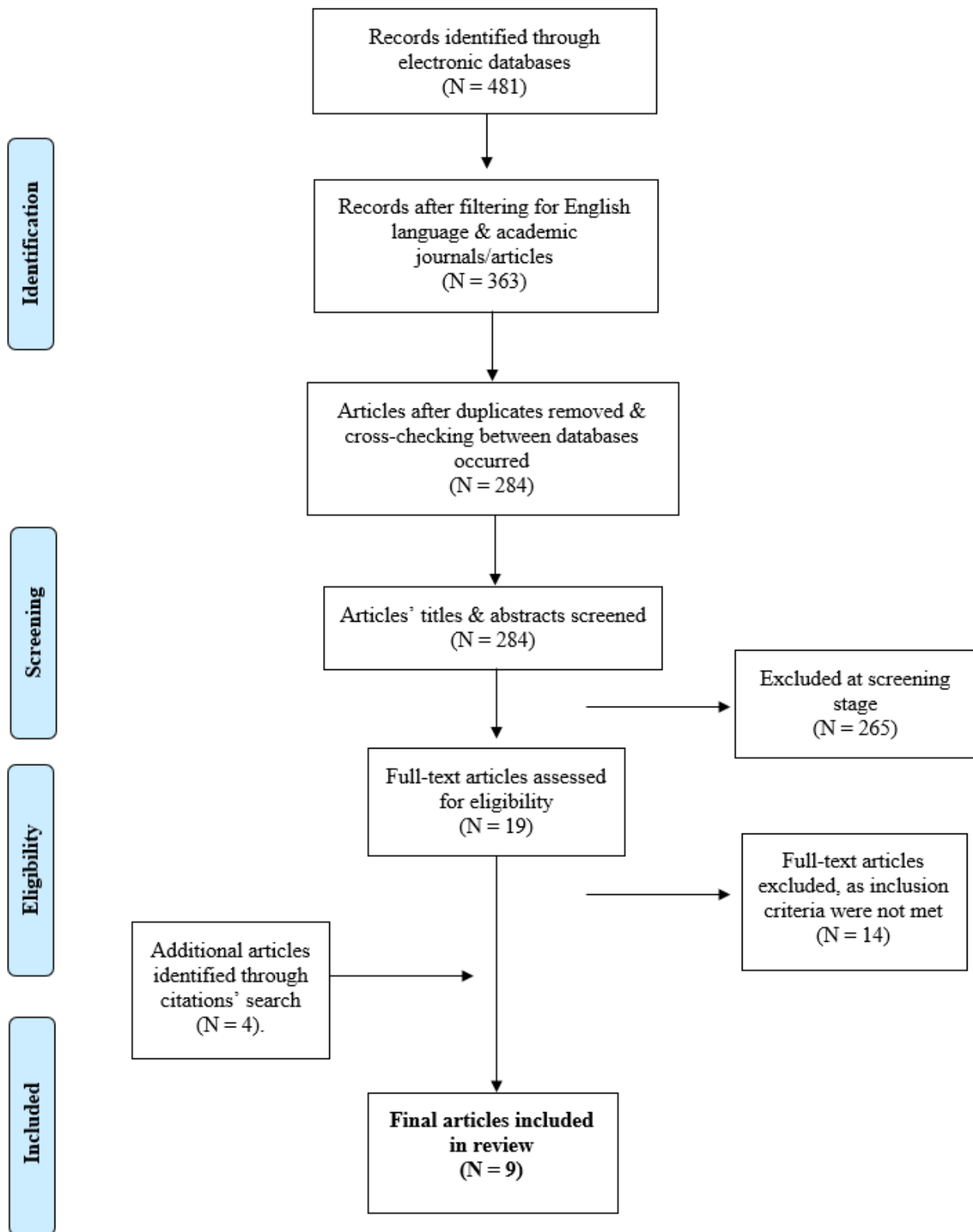


Table 1

Characteristics of the 9 studies included in the review

Study & journal	Country	Research objective	Sample & recruitment	Data collection & analyses
1. Finzi-Dottan, Goldblatt & Cohen-Masica (2012) Child & Family Social Work	Israel	To examine the experience of motherhood for alienated mothers	10 mothers whose children refused contact with them Defined themselves as experiencing PAS Participants were clients of court social workers.	Semi-structured interviews. Used Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological paradigm & thematic content analysis.
2. Harman, Maniotes & Grubb (2021) Personal relationships	US	To understand the power dynamics in families affected by PA.	79 participants (50 fathers & 29 mothers) Recruited by PA special interest groups on social media.	Semi-structured interviews with 5 different interviewers Template analysis (Brooks <i>et al.</i> , 2015) that utilises a top-down approach. Researchers used a coding system based on interdependence situations, as described in Atlas of Interpersonal Situations (Kelley <i>et al.</i> , 2003) to test their hypotheses.

Table 1 (continued)

<p>3. Lee-Maturana, Matthewson & Dwan (2020)</p> <p>Journal of Child & Family Studies</p>	<p>Australia</p>	<p>To investigate the consequences of PA & identify coping strategies used by TPs.</p>	<p>54 self-referred TPs (28 fathers & 26 mothers). 70% of sample were from Australia. Recruited from media advertisements, psychology & legal private practices & online support groups. Screening tool used to ascertain interview eligibility (participants' rating their exposure to 13 parental alienating behaviours).</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Used qualitative descriptive methods (Sandelowski 2000) to describe the codes & analyse frequencies of themes/subthemes.</p>
<p>4. Lee-Maturana, Matthewson & Dwan (2021a)</p> <p>The American Journal of Family Therapy</p>	<p>Australia</p>	<p>To describe targeted parents' experience of PA</p>	<p>Same as above</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews Qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000). Used inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Four Dimensions Criteria (Forero <i>et al.</i>, 2018) used to enhance scientific rigour.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

<p>5. O’Sullivan (2020)</p> <p>The Irish Journal of Family Law</p>	<p>Ireland</p>	<p>To illuminate the lived experiences of TPs</p>	<p>5 self-identified TPs (4 fathers, 1 mother)</p> <p>Recruited by the researcher at the International Parental Alienation Awareness Conference in April 2015 in Dublin.</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews</p> <p>Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith <i>et al.</i>, 2009).</p>
<p>6. Poustie, Matthewson & Balmer (2018)</p> <p>Journal of Family Issues</p>	<p>Australia</p>	<p>To investigate the TPs experience of PA and alienating behaviours.</p>	<p>126 respondents (59 fathers & 67 mothers), located in various countries (mainly US, Australia & Canada)</p> <p>Recruited via private psychology & legal practices, NGOs and an international Facebook support group for PA</p> <p>Participants self-identified as TPs.</p>	<p>Participants replied to an open-ended question as part of a larger (quantitative) survey (Balmer <i>et al.</i>, 2017). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse participants’ responses.</p>

Table 1 (continued)

<p>7. Tavares, Crespo & Ribeiro (2021)</p> <p>Journal of Child & Family Studies</p>	<p>Portugal</p>	<p>To examine TPs experience of PA, from their own perspective.</p>	<p>8 self-identified TPs (5 fathers, 3 mothers) Recruited through social media & parents' associations</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews</p> <p>Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)</p>
<p>8. Vassiliou & Cartwright (2001)</p> <p>The American Journal of Family Therapy</p>	<p>US & Canada</p>	<p>a) TPs' perceptions of their own experience of PAS b) factors that result in an intact family becoming an alienated one.</p>	<p>6 participants (5 fathers & 1 mother). Self-identified as having experienced alienation. Recruited with flyers, e-mails, and letters.</p>	<p>Semi-structured open-ended interview (via telephone). A description of steps followed was included, but no mention of specific qualitative methodology.</p>
<p>9. Whitcombe (2017)</p> <p>Maltrattamento e abuso all'infanzia</p>	<p>UK</p>	<p>To gain an understanding of the subjective and intersubjective experiences of TPs.</p>	<p>54 participants (47 fathers & 7 mothers). Recruitment through 3 charitable organisations & social media. Examples of alienating behaviours were presented to potential participants.</p>	<p>TPs comments on Q-sort (conducted previously) & narrative free text. "Non-specific phenomenological analysis".</p>

An assessment of the studies' quality took place, using a structured appraisal method of qualitative research and following the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination guidance (2008). Specifically, the Critical Appraisal Skills Program checklist was used (CASP; Public Health Resource Unit, 2006). The CASP checklist along with a quality appraisal of the nine studies can be found in Appendix 1. The quality appraisal provided an indication of each study's strengths and limitations.

The rationale and aims were clearly presented in all studies. The main goal was to understand the experience of PA for TPs, although Vassiliou & Cartwright (2001) also focused on exploring the factors that contribute to PA, and Harman et al. (2021) specifically examined the power dynamics in families affected by PA. The choice of a qualitative design was appropriate for addressing their goals; however, a detailed justification for their choice is missing from a few studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2020). Purposeful sampling was used in all studies. The sample in these studies may not be representative, as they rely on self-identification; there is, therefore, the risk that estranged parents were included. However, the studies of Whitcombe (2017), Harman et al. (2021) and Maturana et al. (2020, 2021a) screened participants prior to the interviews, using measures to assess the presence of PABs and screening questionnaires, which added to the studies' credibility. Selection criteria were somewhat unclear in the study of Vassiliou & Cartwright (2001).

Data collection or analyses were not explicitly presented and/or lacked rigour in a few studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Whitcombe, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2020). Semi-structured interviews were used by all studies except from Whitcombe (2017), whose data collection method is not explicit. Poustie and colleagues (2018) relied only on written accounts of participants, which might compromise the study's credibility, due to the omission of potentially important utterances, visual and non-verbal material. Recall bias, stemming from the studies' reliance onto retrospective interviews and social desirability bias may limit the credibility of

the studies. Reflexivity is generally lacking; only Harman et al. (2021) critically examined their influence on data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Ethical issues were sufficiently mentioned in most studies. The findings were adequately discussed and linked to the original research aims. Transferability (or the limitations around it) was discussed in most studies. Implications for clinical/legal practice, as well as for further research are made by all researchers to some extent. Transferability of findings can also be an issue, due to small sample sizes in a few studies and the cultural contexts of the studies (e.g., Israel, Portugal). Despite these limitations, these studies are the first ones who ever explored PA in a qualitative manner from the perspective of TPs. Conclusions or causal inferences cannot be made, still the information provided can be useful for understanding the phenomenon of PA.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed for synthesising the findings of the nine studies. Thematic analysis is a recognised method for synthesising qualitative studies in systematic reviews (Dixon-Woods *et al.*, 2005). An inductive approach was used; the themes generated were data-driven rather than theoretically driven, as there was no pre-existing theoretical framework that data would fit. A semantic approach was also followed, in which themes were based on explicit rather than interpretative level of meaning. With regards to the methodological process, Braun and Clarke's steps were followed: Familiarisation with the data set occurred and initial codes were, then, generated based on salient features in the data. Data relevant to each code were systematically collected. Codes were, subsequently, collated into potential themes, continuing to gather the relevant data systematically. Themes were, then, reviewed and provided further definition and refinement. The final step of the process was the generation of higher-order themes that were deemed appropriate for the themes' categorisation.

It has to be noted that a limitation of this systematic review is that it was completed by the researcher alone and it is not peer-reviewed.

The thematic analysis identified six higher-order themes with a number of subthemes each (Table 2). The higher-order themes were: a) Family characteristics and dynamics, b) alienating behaviours, c) negative perceptions of services and systems, d) effects of PA, e) coping and f) perceived causes of PA. The contribution of each study to the analysis is presented in Table 2. The findings from the thematic analysis are further discussed below.

Table 2*Findings of thematic analysis & cross-comparison of studies by theme*

Themes	Finzi-Dottan et al. (2012)	Harman et al. (2021)	Lee-Maturana et al. (2020)	Lee-Maturana et al. (2021a)	O'Sullivan (2020)	Poustie et al. (2018)	Tavares et al. (2021)	Vassiliou & Cartwright (2001)	Whitcombe (2017)
Family characteristics & dynamics									
Power & control	*	*		*	*	*		*	
Involvement of extended families	*			*		*		*	
Blurred parent-child boundaries	*	*			*	*		*	
Conflict					*			*	
History of alienation, abuse or abandonment	*					*	*		
Alienating behaviours									
Emotional manipulation	*	*		*		*	*	*	*
Gatekeeping	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	
False allegations		*			*	*	*	*	*
Denigration/humiliation	*	*		*	*	*		*	
Alienation from TPs' extended families				*	*		*		*
Negative perceptions of services & systems									
Lack of Consequences or alignment with APs		*		*	*	*	*	*	*
Lack of knowledge on PA				*	*	*		*	
Slow & ineffective system					*	*	*	*	*
Effects of PA									
Emotional/psychological	*		*		*	*	*	*	*
Impact on finances/employment			*		*	*		*	
Physical			*				*		

Table 2 (continued)

Impact on social life			*		*				
Coping									
Coping strategies			*	*		*	*	*	
Coping struggles			*	*	*				
Perceived causes of PA									
Seeking revenge				*				*	
Mental health issues				*		*			

a) Family characteristics and dynamics

With regards to family characteristics and dynamics, common subthemes were reported in the studies. The most common subtheme was APs' *power and control* over TPs, which mainly took the form of coercion, but in some cases physical abuse too (Harman *et al.*, 2021; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a). Abuse and intimate partner violence was also present prior to separation (Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Maturana *et al.*, 2021a), with 30% of respondents in Lee-Maturana *et al.* (2021a) reporting controlling behaviours:

They reported being controlled emotionally, financially and socially by the alienating parent. They reported being isolated from their family and friends. They also described how the alienating parent controlled their day-to-day activities, their future goals, mail, e-mail accounts, social media accounts, money, phone calls and access to their children. (p. 504-505)

Using children as weapons post-separation was one of AP's strategies to maintain power & control over TPs. Coercive controlling behaviours and abuse perpetrated by the APs towards their children were also reported (Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Harman *et al.*, 2021; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021). Harman and colleagues (2021) using a coding system based on interdependence situations found that APs exclusively held the power and/or directly challenged TPs to gain control over them and the children. Asymmetries in power were higher when APs had primary or sole custody of children. Targeted parents were placed in a "no win" situation, as described by O'Sullivan (2020): "Participants described feeling being trapped in a boxing ring that they could not get out of. They spoke of their stark choice of staying in the boxing ring or walking away from their children" (p. 5).

The *involvement of extended families* in PA was another common subtheme. In Maturana *et al.* (2021a), 22% of respondents reported that members from either the APs' or TPs' families were

the alienators or were contributing to PA. Participants in Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001) and Finzi-Dottan et al. (2012) reported that the APs' close family members also tended to alienate: "The father's family-of origin denied her (the mother's) natural mother-baby closeness and intimacy, and criticized her motherhood, to the extent of taking control" (Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012, p. 321-322).

Blurred parent-child boundaries, role reversal and APs giving power to children to make decisions was a subtheme observed in a few studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2020; Harman *et al.*, 2021).

In many cases, the adultification took the form of allowing the children to choose whether they wanted to have their parenting time with the targeted parent or by sharing inappropriate information with the child that only adults should know (e.g., details about the divorce; information about court proceedings). Targeted parents often recounted indicators of such adultification, especially in how alienated children communicated. (Harman *et al.*, 2021, p.14)

In Finzi-Dottan et al. (2012) targeted mothers reported that they saw the birth of their child as a compensation of their own abusive childhood, and some saw their children as extensions of themselves (enmeshment).

Conflict appeared as a subtheme in two studies. The participants in Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001) reported various levels of conflict at the time of separation (from no conflict to high conflict) but, as time progressed, the conflict became more intense. This is similar to the experiences of TPs in O'Sullivan's (2020) study, who reported feeling like they are in "a constant war zone" (p.5).

Histories of alienation, abuse or abandonment in the APs background was a subtheme in a couple of studies (Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Tavares *et al.*, 2021): "A number of the targeted parents

mentioned psychological disorders affecting the alienating parent such as personality disorders or their own history of alienation or abuse” (Poustie *et al.*, 2018, p. 3309). It also has to be acknowledged that the targeted mothers in Finzi-Dottan *et al.* (2012) disclosed past experiences of rejection, abuse and detachment in their families-of-origin and getting married to escape an abusive home. They also reported enmeshed relationships between their husbands and mothers-in-law. Although this finding has to be interpreted with caution, due to the study’s methodological limitations and the specific cultural context, it is noted that no other study has explored relationship dynamics in TPs’ families-of-origin; therefore, it may be worth to explore this further in different cultural contexts, as it could inform the conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

b) Alienating behaviours

Alienating behaviours were another higher-order theme identified from the analysis, with five subthemes. *Emotional manipulation* was commonly reported in the studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Whitcombe, 2017; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Harman *et al.*, 2021; Tavares *et al.*, 2021; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021). This included indoctrinating techniques, encouraging children to act as spies, eliciting fear to the children, using threats, as well as other direct and indirect coercive behaviours to pressurise the children to reject the TP. *Gatekeeping* and disrupting the TPs’ time with children was another common subtheme (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2020; Harman *et al.*, 2021; Tavares *et al.*, 2021; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021):

The results suggest that all of the participants perceived a general "sabotage" of their relationships with their children by the alienators. The lost parents reported that they perceived their relationship with their children as being "eroded" often by not being

informed of a child's activities (e.g., soccer game schedule) that the lost parent may have wished to attend. (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001, p. 185)

The use of *denigration and humiliation* by the APs towards the TPs was reported in most studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021; Harman *et al.*, 2021), as did the presence of *false allegations* (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2020; Harman *et al.*, 2021; Tavares *et al.*, 2021):

Participants described how their ex-partners had made several allegations to a number of agencies and professionals numerous times in order to portray them as abusive, dangerous and irresponsible parents. The participants described humiliation and loss of dignity when false allegations were made against them. (O'Sullivan, 2020, p.4)

Children were also *alienated from the TPs' extended family* (Whitcombe, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2020; Tavares *et al.*, 2021; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a):

Parents reported the child's distance from the targeted parent's family of origin as the ex-partner behaved in a way that distanced the child from the side of the family that was subject to parental alienation. This sequence of events created pain, not only to the parent, but to the entire family that had lived through a non-normative adverse situation which had brought about major changes in their web of relationships. (Tavares *et al.*, 2021, p. 1376)

c) Negative perception of services and systems

Dissatisfaction with the legal and mental health system was reported in seven studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Whitcombe, 2017; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a; Tavares *et al.*, 2021; Harman *et al.*, 2021). *Lack of legal consequences* for the APs, when they were breaching court orders, as well as *alignment of professionals with APs*

was a common subtheme in the studies. As a result, TPs reported feeling powerless and unsupported (Whitcombe, 2017; O’Sullivan, 2020). In addition, targeted parents perceived the legal and mental health systems as having *insufficient knowledge on PA* (O’Sullivan, 2020; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a) and PAS (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001) and described the legal system as slow and ineffective (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; O’Sullivan, 2020; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Whitcombe, 2017; Tavares *et al.*, 2021):

Many expressed a view that the Court failed to ensure that its own orders were complied with, either in a timely manner or in some cases, at all. There was a sense of frustration, even anger, that the other parent seemed to be above the Law. There is an implied belief that the Court was complicit in maintaining a forced separation between parent and child. (Whitcombe, 2017, p. 56)

d) Effects of PA

Almost all studies emphasised the *emotional and psychological impact* of PA on TPs, who described feelings of isolation, anger, despair, guilt, depression and anxiety (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Whitcombe, 2017; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Lee-Maturana *et al.* 2020; O’Sullivan, 2020; Tavares *et al.*, 2021); suicidal ideation and attempts (Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020); and loss of parental role and disempowerment (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Whitcombe, 2017). Disempowerment emanated from the APs’ abusive and alienating behaviours against them (Harman *et al.*, 2021), and their inability to protect their children from harm (Whitcombe, 2017). The latter was reinforced by the TPs’ dissatisfaction with the legal, social and mental health systems (Whitcombe, 2017). Feelings of ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief were also reported (O’Sullivan, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020): “Parental alienation is described by targeted parents as the worst thing that ever happened to them. It was described as grieving

for a child who is still alive. They described grieving with no help or understanding from others” (Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020).

The *financial effects of PA*, as well as its *impact on employment* was a common subtheme identified in four studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020). Targeted parents talked about “being destroyed financially”, due to debts and the financial burden of the litigation. Some of them lost their jobs, due to the stress involved and/or the time they had to spend in court.

The *physical impact* of PA was also emphasised in a couple of studies (Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020; Tavares *et al.*, 2021), with participants reporting weight loss or gain, headaches, nightmares and sleep disturbances. The *impact on social life* and self-isolation was another subtheme. Shame was also reported, which was linked to social stigma and negative judgements from other people (O’Sullivan, 2020; Maturana *et al.*, 2020).

e) Coping

Targeted parents reported using various *coping strategies*, such as mental activities, social activities, seeking professional help, being busy, having support from family, reading and researching about PA, physical activities, faith, and hobbies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a; Tavares *et al.*, 2021). Targeted parents were actively trying to maintain the relationship with their children post-separation (Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a) and had hopes for reunification (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Nevertheless, *coping struggles* were also reported, as well as suicidal ideation and/or attempts in a few cases (Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a; O’Sullivan, 2020).

Some participants reflected on the experience of feeling suicidal due to their despair and hopelessness at the lack of contact with their children. The participants described how they

had become so broken that suicide seemed to be the only viable option left open to them. (O'Sullivan, 2020, p. 8).

f) Perceived causes of PA

The APs' *revenge* towards the TPs was deemed by some participants as the main cause for PAS (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001) and PA (Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a). The revenge was related to the initiation of separation, having an affair and/or taking legal action against the AP. *Mental health issues* were identified as another cause of PA (Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a):

Many statements suggested that targeted parents often view the process of parental alienation as a behavioral manifestation of personality and psychosocial troubles in the alienating parent. The frequency with which narcissism was mentioned is particularly noteworthy. (Poustie *et al.*, 2018, p. 3310)

1.10. The UK context

For the last thirty years, PA has been a contentious topic in the UK (Whitcombe, 2014). In 2018, Cafcass published the Child Impact Assessment Framework (CIAF). The CIAF brought together existing and new guidance for assessing the impact of different factors on children, who experience parental separation. Under this framework, alienating behaviours were incorporated as a possible factor in the overall impact on a child. Specifically, four guides were developed for use by Cafcass practitioners: domestic abuse (including coercive control), harmful conflict (e.g., mutual parental hostility), justified or unjustified child refusal/resistance, and other harmful parenting (e.g., substance misuse, parental mental health; Cafcass, 2018). Similar legislation was introduced in Cafcass Cymru.

Since the publication of the CIAF framework, a shift has been observed and the term PA has started to be recognised more frequently in the UK courts (e.g., HHJ Clifford Bellamy in his

fact-finding judgement in *Re D* [2018] EWFC B64; the Transparency Project, 2018). Sir Andrew McFarlane (president of the family division) clarified through guidance in 2018 that the process of early fact-finding (PD12J), which is applied to domestic violence cases, should also be applied to allegations of emotional harm through PA, before making any decision about the child's welfare (*Re J* [2018] EWCA Civ 115, as cited in Doughty *et al.*, 2020). However, it is a frequent occurrence that, due to systemic delays, the courts fail to recognise and resolve factual issues early enough. In lower courts, fact-finding on claims of PA do not tend to take place, despite the existing guidance (Doughty *et al.*, 2020). There is also evident hesitation to enforce sanctions, if a parent fails to follow court orders (Whitcombe, 2017).

Another important consideration with regards to the UK context is the restrictions on the receipt of legal aid, which came to effect in April 2014, following the publication of the Norgrove Report (2011). This had as a result an increase in the number of parents self-representing in court, as well as a reduction in the appointment of psychologists, which, subsequently led the court to rely more on Cafcass advisers than specialists in the field (Whitcombe 2014; Doughty *et al.*, 2020). These changes have placed extra pressures on Cafcass, who may be placed in the position to provide expert advice without having the appropriate knowledge and expertise.

1.11. Rationale & aims of this research

Parental alienation is a complex phenomenon that still stands outside developmental theory and without firm empirical support. The PA conceptualisations that have been suggested so far, have not considered family members' experiences and most knowledge derives from other sources, mainly clinical case studies, legal reviews and expert opinions. Johnston's research group (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston, 1992, as cited in Johnston, 1993; Johnston, 2003; Johnston, Walters & Olesen, 2005a) conducted research focusing on family processes

involved in PA but their sample included PA and estrangement cases and was taken from archival databases rather than directly from parents.

Despite the recent focus of the scientific community on the experiences of TPs, studies including TPs are still very limited, and among those less than a handful have robust methodologies. The aim of these studies was more to explore TPs' experience and less to understand the process of development of PA from their perspective. One exception is the study of Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001), which aimed specifically at examining the relational processes and individual factors involved in PA, but it lacks methodological clarity and rigour. Most qualitative studies utilised thematic or phenomenological analysis, exactly because their aim was to either describe or gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and were not concerned with processes.

Furthermore, only one study has been conducted so far in the UK with TPs as participants (Whitcombe, 2017). The lack of studies in the British context and the prevalence of North American studies poses difficulties in the applicability of study findings in the UK legal systems (Doughty *et al.*, 2020). Despite the different legal and health contexts in US and UK, Cafcass have mainly based their CIAF framework on US-based studies, due to the lack of research in the UK. The limited understanding of PA might lead to inappropriate and unsafe legal decisions, which can remain unacknowledged, given the lack of transparency in UK family court cases (Whitcombe, 2017).

Considering the devastating effects that PA can have on children and TPs, it is important to shed more light in the family processes and factors that contribute to the development of PA. Moreover, there is a call for early identification of families, who may be at risk of PA, since families frequently reach services (e.g., child protection services) when PA is already established, and much damage has already occurred (Whitcombe, 2017). A better

understanding of PA can also guide appropriate legal and therapeutic interventions and can help modify or evaluate the application of US-based interventions in the UK context, with the intention to improve family members' psychological well-being and restore parent-child relationships.

Considering the limited existing research from the TPs' perspective (Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2019) and the pressing need for a more accurate map of PA (Marques *et al.*, 2020), this study aimed to explore the process of development of PA from the perspective of TPs and contribute to the conceptualisation of the phenomenon. Constructive grounded theory was used (Charmaz, 2014) to help develop a theoretical understanding of the individual and relational factors and processes involved in PA. This understanding is grounded in the data emerged from the participants' narratives and, therefore, reflects their immediate experiences.

1.12. Chapter summary

This chapter provided an overview of the history surrounding PA, its definitional controversies, and conceptualisations. Research in the field was critically discussed, focusing on studies pertaining to factors and processes of the development of PA; studies on personality characteristics of family members; on parental alienating behaviours; and on the impact of PA. A literature review of studies exploring TPs' experiences of PA was included. This study sought to build a grounded theory to illuminate the process of development of PA from the perspective of TPs, aiming to fill the gap in research and inform clinical practice.

Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1. Chapter overview

The chapter starts by acknowledging the ontological and epistemological positioning of the researcher before proceeding to a description of the research design. The researcher's rationale about selecting grounded theory over other qualitative methods is, then, provided, along with a presentation of the different strands of grounded theory and the main components of the method. The choice of using constructive grounded theory is also justified. The chapter continues with providing details about the research procedure, the recruitment of participants, and the methods of data collection and analysis. An evaluation of research quality follows. The chapter ends with a section on ethical considerations and plans for research dissemination.

2.2. Philosophical positioning

When conducting qualitative research, the concepts of ontology and epistemology are particularly relevant. Ontology refers to people's assumptions about the nature of social reality (Klakegg, 2015). It has been explained as "a theory of being in that it attempts to elucidate what it means for something to exist" (Willig, 2018, p. 187). Ontological standpoints are viewed in a continuum between two contrasting concepts: realism and relativism. The former refers to a viewpoint that an objective external reality exists and can be known, and this reality is independent of people's own perceptions and constructions (Phillips, 1987; Fletcher, 1996). The latter (extreme relativism) suggests that reality and "truth" is something subjective and does not exist beyond an individual's own thoughts and experience of it (Blaikie, 2007). An ontological position is a starting point, from which

an epistemological viewpoint derives. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge and is concerned with what knowledge is, how we acquire knowledge and the extent to which we can acquire it (Crotty, 1998). As with ontological positions, epistemological positions can also be seen in a continuum from positivism to constructionism. Positivism, which emerges from a realist ontological standpoint, suggests that knowledge can be measured, and researchers are holding a neutral perspective that does not affect what is studied. Constructionism, deriving from a relativist ontological standpoint, views knowledge as co-constructed between participants and researchers within a subjective and transactional process. Through social interaction and language, multiple perspectives and meanings can emerge (Gergen, 1985; Banister *et al.*, 1994).

The researcher in this study embraces a relativist ontological position, assuming that there are multiple subjective “truths” and not a single external reality. From an epistemological position, the researcher holds the view that knowledge is co-constructed through conversations with people and is interested in exploring the processes by which people describe and explain the world in which they live. From that perspective, the researcher contributes to the construction of any theory (Riegler, 2012). The researcher also embraces the view that knowledge is specific to and embedded in social context (Charmaz, 2014).

2.3. Rationale for qualitative methodology

The research question, the philosophical position of the researcher and pragmatic considerations influence the selection of research methodology (Banister *et al.*, 1994). Quantitative research is linked to realist and positivist positions, adopting a deductive approach, and using rigorous experimental methods to test existing hypotheses. The aim of quantitative research is to quantify and obtain from a large number of participants, reliable

data, which are valid and generalisable. It also aims to examine cause and effect (Coolican, 2009). On the contrary, qualitative research usually stems from relativist and constructionist philosophical viewpoints. Qualitative research is concerned with an in-depth exploration of people's lived experiences and understanding how they ascribe meaning to these experiences and how they interpret the social world (Polgar & Thomas, 2013). It can provide insight into conditions, relationships and processes, following an inductive approach, where hypotheses are developed through observations and/or in-depth interviewing procedures with a smaller number of participants (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2015). The questions that quantitative and qualitative research methods attempt to answer are, therefore, different. Whilst quantitative research is concerned with "how much?" or "how many?" in a context-free manner, qualitative research explores questions such as "how", "what" or "why" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Qualitative research methodology is influenced by interpretivist-constructivist thinking, which is consistent with a relativist framework, and places emphasis upon the socially constructed nature of the world. It postulates that meanings are formed through interactions with others (Creswell, 2003). The in-depth interviewing process in qualitative research helps the researcher build trust with participants, something that allows the detailed exploration of participants' experience and the emergence of new or previously undiscovered areas (Charmaz, 2006). The "discovered" reality "arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts" (Charmaz, 2000, p.524). Qualitative methodology also enables researchers to capture the reflective process within which they make sense of participants' responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

A qualitative approach was employed to conduct the current study, which aimed at exploring the process of development of parental alienation from the perspectives and lived experiences of targeted parents. The qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate method of inquiry for various reasons. Firstly, a qualitative approach is useful when the area examined is complex and based on subjective experiences and internal representations of the world (Pope & Mays, 1995). Parental alienation is a complex phenomenon, which may be perceived in a different way by different people, depending on their background, experiences, situations and contexts. Secondly, in-depth interviews with targeted parents could facilitate the exploration of personal experiences and meanings in relation to PA. Qualitative methods are useful for exploring phenomena and can gather thick and rich descriptions (Barker *et al.*, 2015). Thirdly, PA is a field of study in its infancy, and it is argued that qualitative methods are best suited when there is a lack of existing literature (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). Fourthly, a qualitative approach is consistent with the researcher's philosophical standpoint and ways of understanding the world, described above.

2.4. Choice of grounded theory over other qualitative methods

A range of different qualitative methods exist that allow researchers to delve in an exploration of meanings in people's lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). There are also many different approaches to the analysis of qualitative data (Bernard, 2000). Within the field of psychology, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and grounded theory (GT) are widely used. GT was deemed to be the most appropriate method to explore targeted parents' perspectives on the process of development of PA. The reasons for selecting GT over other methods of analysis is explained below.

GT results in generation of theory that explicates the phenomenon from the perspective and in the context of those who experience it (Charmaz, 2014). Little is known about the process of development of PA from the TPs' perspective. Hence, GT could make a significant contribution to the topic, as an adequate theoretical foundation is lacking in this area. In addition, GT seeks explanation rather than being descriptive. It is particularly suited to the study of processes and journeys through a health condition or social phenomenon (Holloway & Galvin, 2017). It, therefore, provides an appropriate framework for the study of PA. GT was also chosen, because its procedures are described very systematically and explicitly, paying attention to the interpretive steps in the analysis. The constructs in GT, although abstract, are context-specific, detailed, and tightly connected to the data, something that ensures high ecological validity (Charmaz, 2009).

Discourse analysis has evolved from linguistics and focuses on understanding how people use language to shape identities, activities and relationships (Potter, 2004). In discourse analysis language in itself is considered meaningless; meaning is created through the shared, mutually agreed use of language and through the context in which it is used (Starks & Trinidad, 2007) GT was preferred over discourse analysis because participants' experiences are seen through a wider lens, and due to its systematic way of collecting and analysing data, which allows for the development of a theory, emerging from the data.

Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within the data. It is a flexible approach, which means that it can be used across a range of theoretical frameworks and answer different types of research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexibility, though, can be one of its main pitfalls, as it can lead to inconsistency and lack of coherence in the development of themes (Holloway & Todres,

2003). Compared to thematic analysis, grounded theory has specific philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. In addition, GT was preferred, since the aim of this study was to explore the processes involved in the development of PA rather than just identify the most important themes for participants.

IPA focuses on gaining a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon and how participants make sense of these experiences (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). IPA has many similarities with GT, such as the emphasis on participants' lived experience and meaning making. However, IPA's main goal is to describe the essence of these experiences rather than understand the process and develop a theory (Osborne, 1994). This was the main reason for choosing GT over IPA.

2.5. Grounded Theory

2.5.1. Development of different strands in grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) originates from sociology and involves the development of theory, which is closely linked to the data and follows from systematic and meticulous data gathering and analysis. It is used to uncover social processes, relationships and behaviours, studied in the environments in which they take place (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). GT was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), who sought to bring precision and rigour in the application of qualitative methods and to “move qualitative inquiry beyond descriptive studies into the realm of explanatory theoretical frameworks, thereby providing abstract, conceptual understandings of the studied phenomena.” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 8). Glaser and Strauss, known as first-generation GT theorists, wished to move away from a deductive positivist stance and challenge the idea that research is mainly designed to test pre-planned

hypotheses (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). However, they held a realist stance and viewed the researcher as having an objective view in the “discovery” of theory or truth (Birks & Mills, 2011, 2015). This is the feature that distinguishes this strand of GT, which became known as the “classic” or “traditional” GT (Glaser, 1992).

GT evolved in different ways over the years, as Glaser’s and Strauss’s philosophical ideas differed. Glaser’s thinking was influenced by positivism, whereas Strauss embraced the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2014). Symbolic interactionism posits that meaning is understood through human interactions in social processes, and that language and symbols play a key role in forming people’s meanings and actions (Blumer, 1969; Dey, 1999). These differences led Strauss to develop his own strand of GT in collaboration with Corbin, which became known as “evolved” GT (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Strauss’s and Corbin’s approach moved over the years towards a relativist pragmatist position, recognising subjectivity, multiple realities, and the importance of context in theory development (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). More recently, Corbin and Strauss acknowledged that researchers cannot be impartial and play a role in the interpretation of data and theory development, thus moving towards a more constructivist position (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The second generation of GT theorists, such as Charmaz (2006, 2014), Bowers and Schatzman (2009), and Clarke (2005) embraced a more post-modernist stance. Charmaz, who is a leading figure of this movement, developed the “constructivist” strand of GT, which considers that research and theory are not discovered but constructed (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz applies the principles of GT methodology but, contrary to Glaser and Strauss (1967), recognises the involvement of researchers in the construction and

interpretation of data. Charmaz suggests that researchers bring their own subjective experience to research and that GT is constructed “through our past and present involvements, and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Her approach is in part founded in symbolic interactionism and is in line with social constructionism. The importance of social context in research is underlined (Charmaz, 2014).

The main differences between constructivist GT and the other GT strands is that in the former experiences are co-constructed between researchers and participants and, therefore, the GT developed is not only a construction of a given reality but also an interpretation of this reality. The analysis in constructivist GT also considers the situational context (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). Charmaz viewed Glaser’s and Strauss’s GT methods as a useful set of principles and practices but not as prescriptive package and, subsequently, offered more flexible guidelines for research. Differences also exist in the way open codes are developed into more abstract categories and the terms used to describe the coding process (Kelle, 2005). Charmaz uses focused coding, which is more interpretative and allows synthesising large amounts of data.

2.5.2. Grounded theory method techniques

Despite their different philosophical underpinnings, there are some techniques of GT that are fundamental in all GT strands, and these are theoretical sampling, concurrent data collection and analysis, coding, constant comparative analysis, memos, as well as theoretical sensitivity. These techniques are briefly explained below.

GT is an iterative or recursive approach, which means that data collection and analysis proceed in tandem, repeatedly referring back to each other. This is a distinctive feature of GT. In other qualitative methods, such as IPA or thematic analysis, the analysis follows the data collection (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). The concurrent data collection and analysis also makes possible the theoretical sampling and the constant comparative analysis. In the initial phase of participants' recruitment, purposive sampling occurs, so that data relevant to the research question and specified criteria is collected. Theoretical sampling, then, follows, and participants are selected according to the needs of the emerging concepts and the researcher's increasing understanding of the developing theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, the researcher makes strategic decisions about who may provide the richest sources of data (Morse, 2007). The researcher continues sampling theoretically until saturation is achieved (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical saturation occurs when "gathering more data, sheds no further light on the properties of their theoretical category" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 167).

Constant comparison is the process of comparing instances of data (codes to codes, codes to categories, and categories to categories) throughout the process of analysing data until a grounded theory is fully integrated (Birks & Mills, 2011). Induction of theory is achieved through successive comparative analyses. Moreover, abductive reasoning, which is characteristic of constructivist GT, occurs mainly through the constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2014). Abductive reasoning is a logical process where the researcher arrives at the most plausible interpretation of the data, after considering all possible theoretical accounts, and forming and checking hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006, 2008).

Coding is the basic link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain this data. It is the process of attaching conceptual labels to a piece of data, line by line, occasionally word by word (Urquhart, 2013). Initial coding sticks closely to the data and is provisional. Engaging in this type of coding, the researcher identifies areas where the collected data have gaps and decides how to proceed with collecting extra data to fill these gaps (Charmaz, 2014). Intermediate coding (or focused coding according to Charmaz, 2014) is the phase, where the researcher uses the codes that appear more frequently among the initial codes or have more significance than other. This type of coding starts in a descriptive level but becomes more analytic, as it highlights the important themes and results in the development of categories. Theoretical integration is achieved through advance coding (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Memo-writing is an important feature of GT methods. Memos are written records of the researcher's thinking about the study. The researcher is involved in the analysis by constructing analytic notes to explicate the data, the codes and the categories emerging (Charmaz, 2014). Writing memos takes place throughout the process of GT. In constructivist GT particularly, memo writing starts even before the data collection, at the point where the researcher has decided about the area intended to study (Urquhart, 2013). The advantages of using memos are noteworthy: the level of abstraction of the researcher's ideas is increased; memos give space and place for making comparisons within and between data; the work becomes more concrete and manageable; and the researcher's critical reflexivity is enhanced (Charmaz, 2014). According to Glaser (1992), memo-writing is the 'bedrock of theory generation'.

Theoretical sensitivity is the researchers' "level of insight into the research area, how attuned they are to the nuances and complexity of the participant's words and actions, their ability to reconstruct meaning from the data generated with the participant, and a capacity to separate the pertinent from that which isn't" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 44). Researchers' preconceived ideas should not be preferential or hinder the analysis (Kelle, 2007). Immersion in the data increases the level of theoretical sensitivity (Birks & Mills, 2011).

2.5.3. Rationale for choosing constructivist grounded theory

This study utilised the constructivist strand of GT (Charmaz, 2014) to explore the process of development of parental alienation from the targeted parents' perspective. GT leads to the development of a theory that seeks to provide a theoretical framework to help understand how PA develops in certain families, its underpinnings, and mechanisms. Constructivist GT assumes multiple realities and multiple perspectives on these realities. Data are mutually constructed through interaction and are not separate from either the viewer or the viewed. Constructivist GT postulates that the researchers explicate their standpoints and own experiences that may have influenced their analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

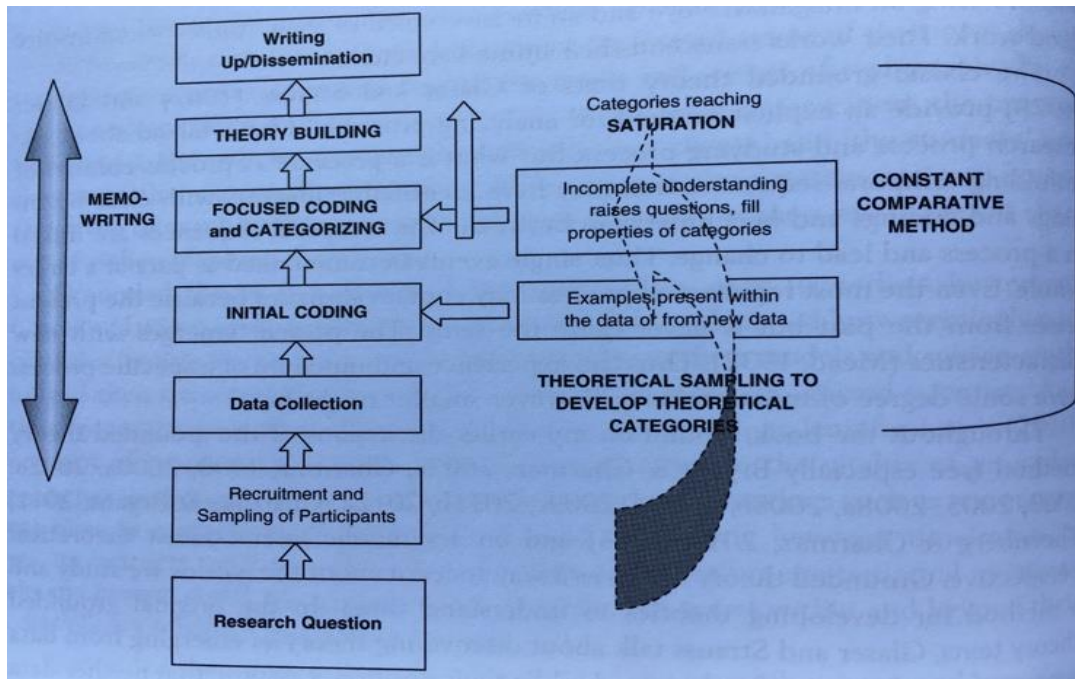
It is known that the researcher's philosophical perceptions influence the research design (Urquhart, 2013; Charmaz, 2009). Charmaz's constructivist GT is most closely aligned to the researcher's ontological and epistemological positions and most appropriate to meet the research aims. The researcher in this study recognises the influence of constructivist views upon her thinking, since her background knowledge and previous studies are related to social constructionism. Given the researcher's current role as a trainee clinical

psychologist and her previous role as a trainee family therapist, it was considered practically impossible to maintain objectivity. Taking all these into account, a GT approach that emphasises the co-construction of meaning and acknowledges the researcher's subjective interpretations was deemed more appropriate for this study.

Constructivist grounded theory provides a less rigid and restrictive framework in comparison to other GT approaches, such as Glaser's and Strauss's. It allows the researcher more flexibility in data gathering and analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Rieger, 2018). A visual representation of GT as conceptualised by Tweed and Charmaz (2011) is presented below.

Figure 7

A visual representation of grounded theory (Tweed & Charmaz, 2011, p. 133)



2.6. Procedure

2.6.1. Participants & recruitment

The study was advertised through different charities and organisations, known to provide advocacy and support to parents who experience PA. The following organisations were contacted: Mothers Apart from their Children, Cornerstone Alliance, Parental Alienation UK, Families Need Fathers, Dads Unlimited, and Action against Abduction. A private psychological centre in London, specialising in family separation and parental alienation was also contacted. In addition, information about the study was shared at the second European Parental Alienation Conference in London in 2018. The inclusion criteria for recruitment were:

a) Mothers and fathers, who had experienced PA for more than six months. This time limit was set to enhance the sample's representativeness. As child's rejection can sometimes be attributed to other reasons, such as developmentally appropriate responses and emotional adjustment to parental separation, the researcher set this time limit to minimise the recruitment of participants, who could have interpreted their child's appropriate response as PA. Given the lack of research and guidance in this matter, conversations were held with the research supervisors and this time limit was deemed as reasonable and appropriate.

b) Alienation would either be ongoing at the time of study participation, or (in cases where children were now adults) would have been ongoing until the child reached 18 years of age.

c) Participants should not have been convicted of child abuse or neglect, or of violence towards the other parent, as these cases would be considered as justified estrangement rather than PA. This was a necessary criterion to ensure sample representativeness.

d) Following Baker's and Darnall's (2007), as well as Warshak's (2001) terminological suggestions of PA, at least three elements of PA had to be present for study participation. These were: a) a child's rejection and denigration of a parent that is/was persistent, b) the child's rejection must be unjustified and c) the rejection is/was partly the result of the alienating parent's influence and behaviours, e.g., through denial of visitation rights.

A study information sheet was produced and shared with interested parents through the avenues described above (Appendix 2). This sheet explained the concept of PA, provided information about the purpose of the study and the inclusion criteria, as well as about the benefits and potential risks of participation. The study procedures, the researcher's role and confidentiality issues were also clearly explained. The email address of the researcher was provided for interested parents to make contact. Parents, who expressed interest in participating, were sent a consent form to sign and return via email or post (Appendix 3). Those, who returned the signed consent form, were sent a brief screening questionnaire (Appendix 4). This was developed to enhance the sample's representativeness and make sure that the inclusion criteria apply to all participants. The questionnaire asked participants to answer specific questions related to PA, based on the inclusion criteria, specifically on the PA-related characteristics as defined by Warshak (2001) and Baker and Darnall (2007). Information was also sought about the gender and age of children, parenting time arrangements, length of the relationship with the other parent and time since separation (if separated). The questionnaire also asked participants to name the perceived severity of PA

(mild, moderate, severe). Demographic information was also obtained. Participants that returned the questionnaire were, then, contacted by the researcher to make arrangements about the interview. Given the information provided in the screening questionnaire, the researcher did not have any concerns or reasons to exclude parents from interview participation.

Nine parents (8 fathers and 1 mother) were eventually recruited for this study. The researcher was contacted at least by 5 more parents, who either decided not to participate for personal reasons or, following phone conversations with the researcher, it became evident that there were justifiable reasons for their child's rejection (e.g., attempt to seriously injure the other parent in front of the child).

2.6.2. Sampling method

Initial purposive sampling was used for the recruitment of participants, which was then followed by theoretical sampling. Consistent with the constructivist GT approach (Charmaz, 2014), data was collected and analysed concurrently. Initial purposive sample included four participants, following the inclusion criteria described above. Initial codes were generated from these four first interviews and focused codes were developed. Purposive sampling continued with the recruitment of five more participants. Due to time constraints, there were limitations in recruiting selectively more participants and, consequently, theoretical sampling could not be achieved this way. It should also be noted that the only female participant recruited was part of the initial purposive sample (amongst the first four participants). Theory generation rather than widening the sample's demographic variety was the sampling priority.

Theoretical sampling was pursued by selecting six of the participants, who had already been interviewed, to ask them further specific questions. These questions were guided by data analysis to fill gaps in the development of the emergent theoretical categories. These participants were selected because they had not provided information about their family-of-origin background, or the other parent's family-of-origin background, or both. The researcher wished to explore this further to address gaps in certain theoretical categories, as other interviewees had recounted a repetition in the roles that they and/or the other parent played in their family-of-origin and family-of-procreation. This could help to better understand thoughts, feelings and behaviours related to PA and explore underpinnings of family dynamics across generations. The six participants were approached through email and were asked if they would be willing to answer in writing a couple of questions. Four participants agreed and provided responses via email. One participant's email was no longer valid, and the other participant did not respond. In addition to participants providing further insights, theoretical sampling was achieved by adapting the interview schedule according to the codes and categories that emerged from participants' perspectives.

Data collection stops at the point when the researcher considers that data saturation has been reached. However, the notion of saturation has been challenged by some theorists and is considered problematic, as it implies completeness and a fixed point that has to be reached (Dey, 1999; Nelson 2016). In addition, it contradicts constructive GT's philosophical position that realities can never be truly known, since they are co-constructed. Nelson (2016) has argued that "conceptual depth" may be a more appropriate term, at least from a grounded theory perspective. This is similar to Dey's notion of "theoretical sufficiency", which means that the researcher examines whether sufficient

depth of understanding has been attained in relation to emergent theoretical categories. Conceptual depth was chosen in this study as a benchmark for data generation, instead of data saturation. This was chosen for two reasons: a) primarily because conceptual depth is more in accordance with constructivist GT, and b) because situational factors, such as resources and timeframes of this study, meant that data saturation was an unrealistic achievement.

2.6.3. Interviews

Data was mainly gathered through semi-structured interviews, with additional responses provided in writing, as described above. Semi-structured interviews are the most common method for data collection in GT (Birks & Mills, 2011), and it was selected because it is suitable for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, particularly in under-researched topics. The parents, who agreed to participate, were interviewed by the researcher over a period of nine months. The interviews lasted between 71 and 137 minutes and took place either face-to-face (2 interviews) or online through Skype (6 interviews). One interview had to be conducted over the phone, due to participant's difficulty to access online means of communication. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in mutually agreed locations, one took place in a library room and another one in participant's home. Participants were based in different places all over the UK and Northern Ireland.

During the early stages of data collection, interviews were less structured to allow participants to express their experiences freely. An interview topic guide was developed to keep conversations more focused on the process of development of alienation rather than generally on people's experiences of PA (Appendix 5). Following the first three interviews,

the initial interview guide was amended and used for the subsequent six interviews, aiming to provide more structure (Appendix 6). The last section of the initial topic guide was slightly amended, following the concepts emerging through preliminary analysis, and taking into account the long duration of the initial interviews. As interviews became more structured, their duration was reduced and, therefore, subsequent interviews were shorter. The interview guides developed are in line with Charmaz's suggestions, who advises to "initially devise broad, open-ended questions" and then "focus your interview questions to invite detailed discussion of the topic." (Charmaz, 2014, p.65).

In the beginning of each interview, the researcher reminded to participants the aims of the study and informed them about confidentiality and anonymity. Time limitations were also discussed. The researcher confirmed that participants were still in agreement to record the interview and reminded them their right to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any point. At the end of the interview, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask further questions. Furthermore, they were asked if the researcher could contact them again in the future for additional questions.

Interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Five interviews were transcribed by the researcher and four by an external transcriber, following a confidentiality agreement (Appendix 7). The researcher verified the accuracy of all transcripts.

2.7. Data analysis

2.7.1. Coding, memo-writing & theory building

Transcribed data was transferred to the Qualitative Data Analysis Software NVivo 12 for coding. Initial line-by-line coding was conducted (Appendix 8), using coding with gerunds as much as possible, to ensure that coding remained close to the data, as Charmaz (2014) suggests. Through continuous interaction with the data, this type of coding helped the researcher define implicit meanings and actions and make comparisons between the data. The initial codes were provisional, and the researcher remained as open as she could, and refrained from forcing data into preconceived categories (Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding directed further analysis by proposing emergent links between processes in the data, which were pursued further by engaging in focused coding (Appendix 9). Focused coding occurs by using the most significant, pertinent and/or frequent initial codes to synthesise, integrate and analyse large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2014). The comparison of codes with codes can lead to the emergence of broader and new concepts, which might have not been apparent from the initial coding process. Focused coding becomes the basis for constructing more analytical codes, with the researcher identifying categories and subcategories to help in theory development. Theoretical coding is the last and most advanced coding in GT (Appendix 10), which moves the analytic focused codes into higher order conceptual categories, thus facilitating the integration of the final GT (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015). It has to be noted that coding did not happen in a linear way; coding is an iterative process of constant comparison between the data. The researcher returned to the data multiple times and applied and re-applied new levels of codes onto the data.

Memo-writing (Appendix 11) assisted the researcher to document her thoughts, feelings, and decision making throughout the process, from before the data collection until the development of theory (Birks & Mills, 2011). Memos were used as a tool to generate codes, categorise and compare the data, and helped the researcher document her reasoning and the process behind her work (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memos were written with complete freedom, as advised by grounded theorists, as they help create “an intellectual workplace for the researcher” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014, p. 14). The content of memos differed, including for example initial reactions and reflections to the interviews, ideas about how to amend the interview guide, analytic thoughts about the data and the emergent categories, links between data, and ideas on how to move forward.

The results of GT are “communicated as a set of concepts, related to each other in an interrelated whole, and expressed in the production of a substantive theory” (Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019; p. 7). According to Charmaz (2014), this theory, or model, grounded in the data “offer[s] accounts for what happens, how it ensues, and may aim to account for why it happened” (p. 228). A substantial theory is the final product of GT research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Birks & Mills, 2015). Through coding and memo-writing, conceptual categories and subcategories were identified and drawn together into a theoretical model, elucidating the interactional relationship between the categories. The categories, subcategories and the theoretical model developed are presented in the next chapter.

2.7.2. Quality assurance

Different criteria are used to assess quality in quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, due to their distinct ontological and epistemological underpinnings (Willig,

2008). Glaser and Strauss (as cited in Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020) asserted that qualitative research “must be evaluated on its own canons” (p.6) and argued that theorising would be hindered if researchers adhered to the rules of reliability, validity, objectivity and replicability, which are applied to quantitative studies. The evaluation of qualitative research in general, and of quality in GT specifically, is a debatable topic, with grounded theorists from different strands assuming different criteria to evaluate quality according to their philosophical positioning (Barbour, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015). From a constructivist point of view, Charmaz’s GT emphasises theory interpretation and “gives abstract understanding greater priority than explanation” or explanatory power, which is a significant quality criterion in Glaser’s and Strauss’s GT strands (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). Charmaz (2014) suggests four criteria for assessing quality in GT studies: credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. The quality of this study was assessed by the researcher based on these suggested criteria. In the section that follows, these criteria are explained along with some of the steps taken to ensure that these are met.

Credibility refers to the process of rigour in a study and is manifested through data collection and analysis, as well as in evidencing how the theory emerged. In GT rigour is achieved through its systematic processes and the set of tools that are used to conduct the research (Charmaz, 2014). Specifically, theoretical sampling, theoretical sufficiency, a strong fit between the gathered data and the resulting theory, as well as the systematic coding and constant comparative analysis method are all ways with which credibility and rigour are enhanced. Further, the researcher’s reflexivity and transparency, with which data collection and analysis is undertaken, is imperative to ensure the credibility of the study. Charmaz (2017) states that researchers must gain methodological self-consciousness and

explain their predispositions and taken-for-granted assumptions. This requires the researchers to be open to scrutinising who they are. Both reflexivity and transparency are demonstrated through memo-writing. Memos are used to maintain an “audit trail of the procedural aspects of undertaking a grounded theory study” and as “a mechanism for tracing (the researcher’s) interactions with both participants and the data” (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 52). An account of the researcher’s reflexivity and position in relation to the study is provided in Chapter 4 (see 4.6).

Originality is the second criterion according to Charmaz (2014). Having an original GT study means that the categories and emergent theory “offer new insights, provide a fresh conceptualization of a recognized problem, and establish the significance of the analysis” (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p.12). To assess originality, the researcher can ask questions such as “does your analysis provide a new conceptual rendering of the data?” and “how does your grounded theory challenge, extend, or refine current ideas, concepts, and practices?” (Charmaz, 2014, p.337).

The criterion of resonance is about the importance of the study and means that the concepts constructed not only portray the participants’ experience, but also provide insight to other individuals for which the theory would be relevant. Questions to determine resonance can be “do the categories portray the fullness of the studied experience?” and “does your grounded theory make sense to your participants or people who share their circumstances?” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 337-338).

Examining the usefulness of a study is another criterion to evaluate constructivist GT. This can be achieved through “clarifying research participants’ understanding of their everyday

lives, forming a foundation for policy and practice applications, contributing to creating new lines of research, as well as revealing pervasive processes and practices” (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020, p.12-13). Further discussion around how the study meets these criteria is included in Chapter 4 (see 4.4.1).

2.8. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the School of Health and Social Care’s Ethics Committee at the University of Essex (Appendix 12). The Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) produced by the British Psychological Society was considered when planning and conducting this piece of research. This Code includes issues around informed consent, confidentiality, data storage and security, and risks of harm to the participants and researcher. The section below addresses these ethical issues in relation to the current research.

2.8.1. Informed consent

The purpose and procedures of the research were clearly explained to the participants in the information sheet provided (see Appendix 2). Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary. Potential risks and discomforts were also made explicit, such as the emotional impact through the disclosure of sensitive data. Prior to conducting the interviews, written informed consent was sought for research participation and use of audio recordings (see Appendix 3). Due to the emotional nature of conversations, informed consent was not a single event but an ongoing matter, obtained orally as well during the interviews. Participants’ right to withdraw themselves or their data at any time was made explicit both in the information sheet and at the start of the interview.

2.8.2. Confidentiality

Participants were informed that their participation in the study was confidential, and that data would remain anonymous. They were notified that their and their family members' identifiable information (e.g., names, locations, workplaces and school names, etc.) would be removed from the transcripts and from any publications. Their names have been replaced in this study by pseudonyms. Participants were also informed as to how their data would be used, as well as about data access and storage (please see below). This information was included in the study sheet and was communicated to participants at the beginning of the interview. As participants' words could be used anonymously as quotes, this was made explicit to them, and written consent was sought specifically for this in the consent form. Quotes have been used in such way that individuals taking part in the study cannot be identified. In addition, the limits of confidentiality were explained to participants. They were informed that if any disclosure was made that involved imminent harm to them or others, the researcher would have to break confidentiality. Under these circumstances, necessary steps would have to be taken to ensure their or the other person's safety (see management of risk section below). Participants were advised at the information sheet to ask questions or discuss such issues with the researcher before agreeing to participate in the study.

2.8.3. Data access, storage & security

The data provided by participants were anonymised as soon as they were collected. The signed consent forms were kept separately from the data in a locked cabinet. The questionnaires, as well as the audio and transcribed recordings, were saved in a password-

protected computer drive on the server of the University of Essex. Access to the data was restricted to the researcher, the researcher's two supervisors and her thesis examiners, if required. The external transcriber, after signing a confidentiality agreement (see Appendix 7), also had access to half of the data for the transcription to take place. The data is stored securely for a couple of years after the end of the study to allow for amendments in the write-up and for any publications to take place. The storage of data was in line with the Data Protection Act (2018).

2.8.4. Management of risk

At the beginning of the interviews, participants were reminded that the topic may evoke difficult emotions and that they should share only information they feel comfortable to. They were informed that they could stop the interview, or take a break, at any point they wished and that they did not have to answer all questions. Informed consent was an ongoing matter throughout the interview process to ensure that participants were feeling at ease to carry on. To ensure safeguarding of participants, they were also notified that information on services offering psychological support would be available, upon request. This was requested by one participant at the end of the interview, who recognised that further support could be beneficial in relation to the emotional upheaval they were experiencing as a result of PA. The participant clarified that the interview was cathartic and made them recognise the need for professional support. The participant was, then, signposted to the websites of the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP), which incorporate lists of clinical psychologists and psychotherapists.

The researcher also clarified the steps that would have to be taken if the interviewee, members of their family or someone else known to them was at imminent risk. If this was the case, the researcher would follow the University of Essex safeguarding policy, and would inform the relevant authorities (e.g., Police, social services) in the interests of safeguarding. Moreover, it was made explicit that if participants made disclosures that their children are at risk of abuse and/or neglect, the researcher would first establish whether social services, the court and/or Cafcass were involved. The researcher would act upon safeguarding the participants' children only in cases that protection from abuse and/or neglect was not already taking place. In such circumstances, social services and/or Cafcass would be contacted. This, however, was not necessary in any of the interviews, since participants and their children had already involvement with social services, Cafcass and/or the legal system.

The degree of risk to the researcher for interviewing participants on her own in their homes was considered and was in line with the Lone Working Policy of Essex Partnership University Trust.

2.9. Dissemination

A summary of the current study's findings will be provided to participants via email. In addition, the charities and organisations that helped in the recruitment of participants will be sent a copy of the summary. Upon submission, this doctoral thesis will be available at the University of Essex thesis repository, therefore, trainees, students and staff will have access to read it and make use of it. It is also envisaged that the results from this study will be submitted to scientific, peer-reviewed, journals for publication. Journals that have

published research in similar topics include the *Journal of Family Therapy*, the *Family Court Review* and the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*. These journals will be contacted to discuss publication of findings. Any opportunities for dissemination of findings through conferences will be considered, such as the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) Conference. PASG is an international non-profit organisation comprised by psychology experts, researchers and advocates, whose goal is to educate clinicians and the public about PA.

2.10. Chapter summary

This chapter provided an overview of the researcher's philosophical positioning with regards to this piece of research and discussed the rationale for choosing constructivist grounded theory over other GT strands and qualitative methodologies. The main components of constructive grounded theory were presented before proceeding to a detailed description of the research procedure and data collection. The chapter also discussed ethical considerations and issues about the study's quality. The following chapter presents the results from the analysis of data, derived from the interviews with participants.

Chapter Three: Results

3.1. Chapter overview

This chapter begins with a description of participant's characteristics and their responses in the pre-screening questionnaire. Data from interviews were synthesised in a theoretical model, following the systematic GT procedures. A presentation of the model follows, before proceeding to an explication of the model's conceptual categories and subcategories. Participants' quotes are included to illuminate their experiences and demonstrate the model's grounding in the data.

3.2. Analysis of participants' characteristics

In this section participants' demographic characteristics are presented, as well as their responses in the pre-screening questionnaire. Pseudonyms were given to participants to protect their anonymity. Eight participants were male and one female. All participants were identified as White (White British, White N. Irish, White European or just White). The majority (6 out of 9) were residing in England, two in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. Participants' age range was between 42 and 66 ($M=51.2$). Four participants were currently single, two were cohabiting, two were in a relationship and one was re-married.

Six participants had been married to the mother or father of their children and three had been in a relationship with them. The length of their relationship was from 5 to 15 years, with an average of $M=9.9$. The time that had passed since the initiation of separation varied from 2 to 20 years ($M=7.9$). Participants characterised the relationship with their ex-partners or ex-spouses as "non-existent/no contact", "high conflict/very hostile", "very difficult" and "fragile/no trust".

Participants had between 1 and 5 biological children. Two participants had children from previous marriages/partnerships, who were now adults. These children had not been alienated from them, and are, therefore, not included in the data presented below. Two participants had stepchildren from their ex-partners' previous relationships. The ages of participants' children and stepchildren varied from 6 to 17 years ($M=11.4$, $N=16$), with two participants having adult children and one having an adult stepchild ($M=25.2$, $N=6$). Six participants experienced alienation from all their children (including stepchildren) and three had only the eldest child alienated from them, although alienating behaviours were taking place with their youngest children too. With regards to the gender of the children/stepchildren (including those, who were now adults), participants had in total 12 female and 10 male children, of whom 9 female and 8 male were identified as alienated. All participants, apart from one, reported that their oldest child was alienated first. During the interviews, participants reported the ages of their children, when the alienation started. This varied from shortly after birth to 18 years of age; however, in 6 out of 9 cases, the alienation of the oldest (biological) child started between the ages of 10 and 14, with 4 of these cases starting approximately when the children became 12 years of age. All, but one, participants considered the alienation as severe; the other participant marked it as moderate. Among those parents, whose children were still below 18 years of age ($N=7$), four were parents with visitation/parenting time arrangements, one was parent with supervised visitation, one had shared residency arrangements for the alienated child, and one had no caring responsibility. None of the identified as alienated children, were living with the participants at the time of the interview. Participants reported not seeing their children,

apart from one, who, had a couple of hours supervised contact. Participants' responses in the screening questionnaire can be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' responses in pre-screening questionnaire

Questions	Answers		
	Yes	No	Not sure
Do your child/children persistently reject you, unfairly criticise you or belittle you without any justification?	9	0	0
Has your child stopped wanting to meet with you or speak to you without any justification?	9	0	0
Is your child's rejecting behaviour towards you initiated by or resulting from your ex-partner's/spouse's influence?	9	0	0
Do you think your ex-partner/spouse give the impression to your child/children that you are dangerous or psychologically unwell?	9	0	0
Do you think your ex-partner/spouse say to your child/children that you don't love them?	6	0	3
Do you think your ex-partner/spouse limit or interfere with your visitation/parenting time with your child/children?	9	0	0
Have there been any false allegations of violence from your ex-partner/spouse towards you or your child/children?	8	1	0
Have there been any false allegations of neglect from your ex-partner/spouse towards your child/children?	7	2	0

3.3. Theoretical model

The theoretical model illustrated in Figure 8 draws together the conceptual categories and subcategories, identified through the systematic analysis of data (explained in detail in Chapter 3). Table 4 demonstrates which participants discussed each category and subcategory. The model, grounded in the data, describes the participants' perceptions on the development of PA, and indicates the various individual factors and relational processes involved in PA, as well as the relationships between those. The model is based on seven main conceptual categories (in *italics*), which are presented below. Participants' accounts suggested that there was an *intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns*, with disengaged, volatile and/or enmeshed relationships between APs, TPs or both, and their families-of-origin. These relational dynamics were played over in participants' families-of-procreation. Participants described their and their ex-partners' *personality characteristics* and how these may contribute to PA. Participants also talked about the *couple relationship and ways of parenting* before and after separating. The *APs' control over TPs and their children*, with reportedly abusive behaviours and pre- and post-separation alienating behaviours, was another category. In addition, participants talked about some of their *reactions to APs' control and to PA*, which may have involuntarily reinforced PA. Factors pertaining to the *alienated child* were also involved to the development of PA (e.g., showing loyalty to AP vs rejection towards TP), with participants reporting certain susceptibility characteristics. Finally, participants talked about *the role of the "system"* involved in PA (i.e., courts, social services, Cafcass, schools).

Figure 8

Theoretical framework of the process of development of Parental Alienation (PA) from the perspective of Targeted Parents (Note: TP stands for Targeted Parent; AP for Alienating Parent)

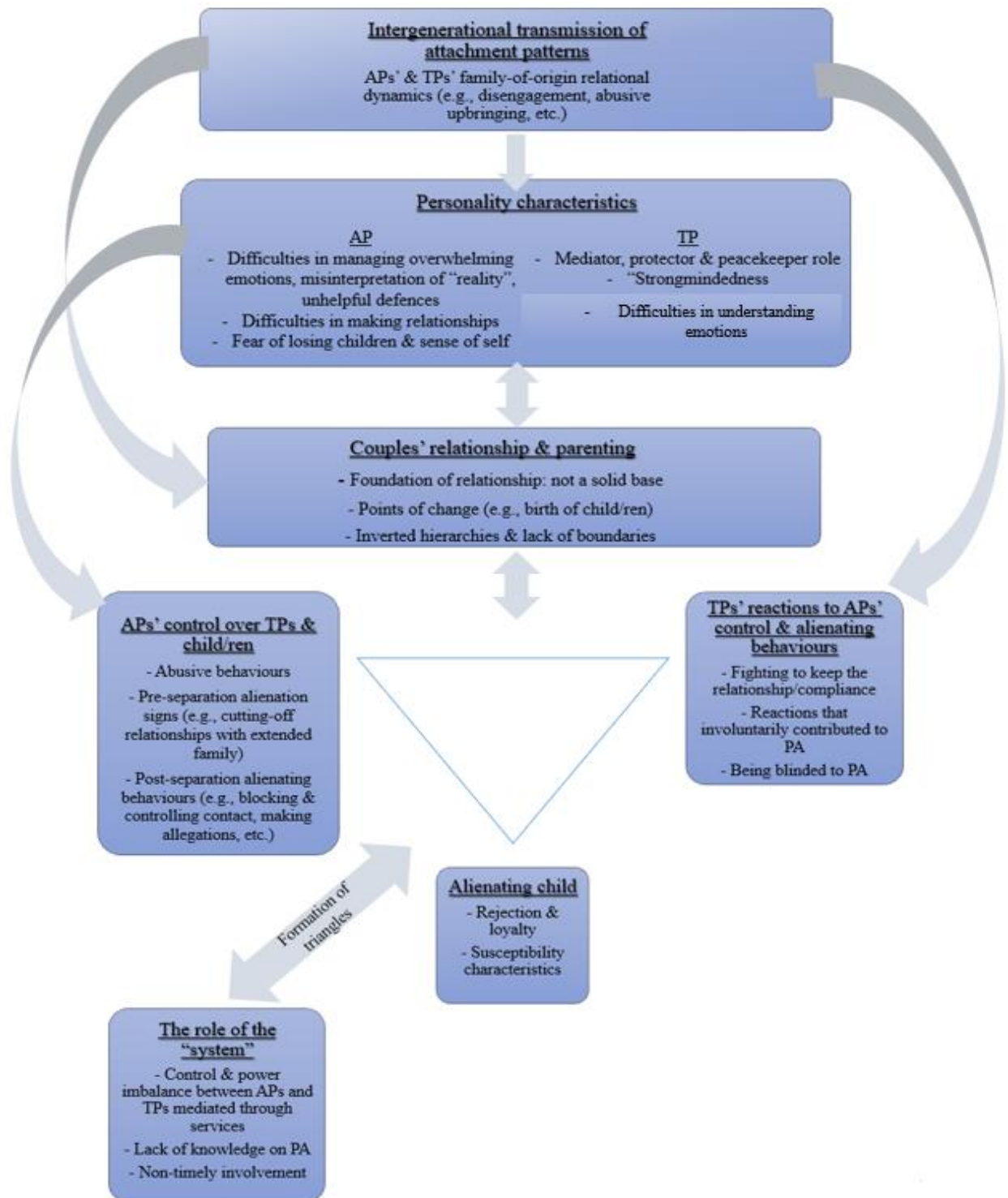


Table 4*Categories and subcategories*

Categories	Subcategories	Frequency (participant number)
Intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns	APs' & TPs' family-of-origin relational dynamics (disengagement/enmeshment/volatile relationships)	N=9 (when referring to APs' families-of-origin) N=3 (when referring to their families-of-origin; 4, 8, 9).
	Personality characteristics of APs & TPs	N=9
	APs' difficulties in managing overwhelming emotions	N=5 (1, 3, 4, 5, 6)
	APs' difficulties in making relationships	N=5 (3, 4, 5, 6, 8)
	APs' fear of losing their children & sense of self	N=7 (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)
	TPs' protector/mediator role	N=4 (2, 4, 5, 6)
	Strongmindedness in TPs	N=2 (2, 5)
	TPs' difficulties in understanding emotions	N=7 (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)
Couples' relationships & parenting	Foundation of relationship (Not having a solid base/disregarding signs)	N=9
	Points of change in relationship (entries & exits in relationships)	N=9
	Inverted hierarchies and lack of parental boundaries	N=9
APs' control over TPs and children	Abusive behaviours	N=7 (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)
	Pre-separation alienating signs (alienating family-of-origin/planning the separation beforehand)	

Table 4 (continued)

	Post-separation alienating strategies	N=9
TPs' reactions to APs' control and alienating behaviours	Compliance/condoning	N=7 (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9)
	TPs' reactions contributing to PA	N=6 (2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9)
	Being blinded to PA	N=6 (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8)
The alienated child	Rejection & loyalty	N=9
	Susceptibility & protective characteristics	Susceptibility characteristics N=4 (1, 3, 6, 7) Protective characteristics N=5 (1, 2, 3, 6, 7)
Role of the "system"	Control & power imbalance mediated through services	N=9

3.4. Category: Intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns

3.4.1. APs' and TPs' family-of-origin relational dynamics

All participants reported attachment difficulties in their ex-partners' relationships with their families-of-origin. The difficulties described, mainly included disengaged and enmeshed relationships with their families, as well as patterns of continuous volatile engagement and disengagement. Similar relational patterns were observed or implied in some but not all families-of-origin of the TPs. However, not all participants seemed to be aware of these patterns, and how these may have shaped the way they behaved and the roles they played in their family-of-procreation.

Seven APs and three TPs had either become alienated or estranged as children from one of their parents. From the remaining APs, one was described as having an enmeshed relationship with his mother and the other one described a relationship characterised by volatility. Three TPs reported good enough or healthy relationships with their own families-of-origin, one reported a close relationship but “devoid of warmth”, and the remaining two TPs did not provide information on the relationship with their families-of-origin.

Accounts from participants explain how their ex-partners disengaged from their families-of-origin, when emotional and/or physical closeness was perceived as threatening or brought up past fears of loss and rejection.

I think that she has a lot of attachment problems, because her father was alcoholic, and they lost their home when she was a little girl. And there's some issues that she cannot breach, and she'd go into a very strong defensive mode too. But her defence was very aggressive, to sort of almost pre-empt danger and then she'd cut people off.... As soon as people came too close, she'd cut them off. (Theodore)

An intergenerational transmission of relational patterns was implied or clearly mentioned. Gary, for example, whose ex-partner was abducted by her mother as a child, used to threaten him that if he went out on his own with their daughter, she would accuse him of kidnapping. Gary described a similar alienating process currently happening with his ex-partner and their daughter:

Ex-partner got taken over, literally, her mum came over here and didn't tell her father where she was... Ex was made to think that whilst her dad was in her life, he was no

good for her. So pretty much the same sort of role plays turned out with (daughter). It's literally followed the T.

The story seems to be repeated for some of the targeted parents too, assuming roles they previously held in their families-of-origin. Disengaged relationships and coalitions were noticed between parent-child relationships, with some participants taking the side of one parent over another and colluding with their parent's behaviours. Theodore, for example, recognised that he had assumed similar roles twice before in his life, when, as a child, he helped his mother exclude his abusive stepfather and later, when he helped his ex-wife alienate his stepson from his biological father.

Enmeshment, lack of autonomy and diffused boundaries were evident in the accounts of three participants when talking about their ex-partners' families-of-origin. Transmission of these relational patterns in the relationship with their children was also reported. For example, in Christina's story, her ex-husband was depicted as having a co-dependent and unhealthy relationship with his family. This also seemed to be the case between Christina's ex-husband and their children:

This man had never really expected to marry and have children and when the children came it was almost like they were gods...Everything was revolved around my oldest son, as if he was like demi-god and the enmeshment had started already.

Physical or sexual abuse of their ex-partners by their fathers and/or stepfathers was reported in three cases. Coercive behaviours were also evident in some of the participants accounts when referring to their ex-partners' background. George expressed his opinion that, amongst other signs, an abusive family history is a "red flag" for alienation. Keith also

commented “Ex-wife didn't have a normal childhood. She said her dad were an arse and he used to beat her up...She'd got various stab marks on herself and she says, it were her dad”.

Three participants reported significant power imbalances in the marital relationship between their ex-partners' parents. Their mothers were presented as overpowering, domineering and controlling, whilst their fathers as compliant, timid and polite.

Her father was a very compliant, deferential, mild-mannered man. I would probably best describe him as 'hen-pecked'. Her mother was a domineering and controlling wife. My ex-partner left home at 16 years old due to the conflict she had with her mother. (Simon)

Mental health difficulties, such as narcissistic and antisocial personality traits were also reported in ex-partners' families-of-origin.

My father-in-law was a very angry person. When I went to court, I came out to find that the tyres had been slashed on my car, so that was the length of control that they would go to say that we are the dominant people or you shouldn't have left us...He's done the behaviours to other people that I knew of as well. (Robert)

Domineering-compliant dynamics in participants' families-of-origin were mainly inferred but not directly reported. For example, in Christina's account, it was implied from the descriptions of her parents' personalities, that her mother was overpowering her father. Others characterised their stepfathers as a “narcissist bully” (William) or violent persons (Theodore).

3.5. Category: Personality characteristics of APs and TPs

Participants' descriptions of APs revealed some common characteristics in their personality. These were difficulties in managing overwhelming emotions, difficulties in making relationships and their fear of losing their children, which seemed to mask a fear of losing their sense of self. Participants' accounts of themselves demonstrated that they frequently assumed the mediator or protector role in relationships and that they appeared as strong-minded and dogmatic. A couple of participants reported difficulties to understand other's emotional worlds. The characteristics of APs are presented first.

3.5.1. APs' difficulties in managing overwhelming emotions

All study participants reported mental health difficulties in their ex-partner, whether these were diagnosed or not. Difficulties in emotional regulation and narcissistic traits were evident in their accounts: "My ex-partner seemed to have a lot of the traits of narcissism. The world had to revolve around her, all the problems were about her, like her feelings dominated absolutely everything." (Robert). More than half of participants spoke about their ex-partners tendencies to distort "reality", and dramatise situations. Intolerable emotions of intense fear, anger or threat, prompted the creation of stories, which, then, served as a way to justify their disengagement from family members and the allegations made. Theodore beautifully narrated this process:

Ex-wife progressively got more and more angry with her mother. That's interesting because before every alienation there's a progressive anger that grows from almost nothing and she'd create stories to fill this narrative and then, bang, you know, a sort of violent exit. So, she started making up stories to justify this build up to exclude herself

from the family, in a way that she could blame them for excluding her... very serious stories, allegations of fraud and saying really violent things.

Unhelpful defences, such as splitting, denial and projection were frequently mentioned. Ex-partners were presented as being “double-faced” and unable to hold opposing thoughts in mind.

I would say that they have a lot of the traits of some psychopaths or something along those lines, where they can be very charming, they can draw people in, they can get their confidence there...but there is always a game, there's always something happening.

(George)

Participants’ partners were reportedly not acknowledging their emotional difficulties and the problematic situations they were in. This was explained as a way to protect themselves from increased anxiety and unbearable pain stemming from early childhood traumas. Denial was also preventing their ex-partners from engaging meaningfully in therapy.

The last session was cut short because the counsellor asked her to see her on her own to give her some counselling, and she refused to believe there was anything wrong, cos what she was doing was perfectly fine, and she cut this session short and just walked out. (Gary)

Disowning unacceptable feelings and attributing them to their partners was a common feature of APs. Participants spoke about false allegations being APs’ defensive strategy to conceal or suppress their parenting inefficacy and neglectful or abusing behaviour towards their children.

You've got a parent who is very quick to throw out a lot of allegations about the other parent but doesn't necessarily have the skills to be able to parent. It's your field not mine, but classic projection. There's a lot of things that she says that I've done that actually it doesn't take much digging to find out that that's exactly what she does. (George)

3.5.2. AP's difficulties in making relationships

According to five participants' accounts, their ex-partners had significant difficulties in forming relationships with other people, whether these were friendships or romantic relationships. Ex-partners were characterised as introverted or eccentric and as lacking social skills: "I kept getting sentences like 'I'm billy no mates, you go and do your own thing and I'll just stay here doing nothing'" (Gary).

He was just the most socially inapt person you could have ever possibly met. He had no friends, never had a proper relationship, so his experience of relationships was none. I think he was overwhelmed by the possibility of a family or a relationship that was long term. (Christina)

3.5.3. APs' fear of losing their children & their sense of self

This subcategory indicates alienating parents' fears of losing their children or the relationship with them. However, at a closer examination, this fear appears to mask their fear of losing their own sense of self. Four APs found it reportedly difficult to accept the fact that they had to share their child with the other parent. They assumed all the responsibility for the child's care and did not allow the other parent to have an active role or spend time with the child without them being present.

When I got home, I wanted to spend time with the kids, no he wouldn't let me do it on my own and we either did it together or not and...it was a constant battle...It was all about meeting his needs, building his case, destroying me, getting the boys for himself.

(Christina)

Participants described that the APs were claiming ownership of their children, disregarding the TPs contribution in their upbringing. APs behaviour made them feel like a “functioning birthing person” (Christina) or a “sperm donor” (Simon, Gary). A fear that children would be taken away or that the relationship with them would be lost was also noticeable. This fear seemed to stem from unresolved traumas in the APs' background, which significantly affected their worldview and relationships.

I think that her issue was that she was worried she'd lose her house and she was worried that because my relationship with my children was so strong, she probably was worried that she was going to lose that relationship. I would never have taken that from her.

(Theodore)

Ex didn't want me in the operating theatre. I was to go away and make sure that (the babies) didn't go into another room. She was in fear that they were gonna get taken away and they'd be someone else's. (Gary)

In addition, a few APs struggled to accept the love between their child and the other parent. This was reported by three TPs, whose first child was a daughter and with whom they described having a loving, strong relationship. John, who portrayed his daughter as a “daddy's girl”, mentioned that his ex-wife cannot manage their daughter's love towards him. Linked to this is some participants' accounts of their ex-partners' annoyance or anger

in situations where their role as mothers was perceived as threatened or compromised. Such situations were when the TP formed a romantic relationship, or the grandmother's behaviour was perceived by the AP as intrusive and inappropriate of her role.

My mum said to (daughter) does she want a biscuit. And mummy was, "she's not to have biscuits". Then she's there saying, "your mum's undermining me, I'm the parent she's my daughter, what's she doing?". I said, "that's what grans do, they give children toffees and things, that's normal". But (ex-wife) didn't have a normal childhood. (Keith)

3.5.4. TPs' protector or mediator role

Seven TPs used to take a mediating, protecting or placating role in family relationships. These were reported for relationships in both their families-of-origin and families-of-procreation. Robert, for example, reported that he could see similarities in his father attempting to placate his mother's emotional reactions, in his relationship with his ex-partner.

Others assumed a role where they had to protect their families from abusive behaviours. One of the reasons John stayed in the relationship with his ex-wife was to be the recipient of her violent acts, thus protecting his children from harm. Theodore stayed in the household to protect his mother and sisters from his stepfather's abuse. Others reported assuming the role to look after the family, including their ex-wife: "She was kind of a bit of a party animal and I was kind of, I guess, looking after everyone in the family, and looking after (daughter)" (William).

Assuming the mediator's role in the relationship between their ex-partners' and ex-partners' mothers, or their own mother, was also talked about in three cases. For example,

Gary described: "As soon as (ex-partner's mother) heard that she was pregnant with (daughter), she basically just didn't want to know. So, then I had to go around and say, you know, "your daughter needs you".

3.5.5. Strongmindedness

Four participants described themselves as strongminded, disagreeable or thick-skinned, which might have played a role in their reactions towards the alienating behaviours of their ex-partners (the reactions will be presented further below). One of them acknowledged that his personality characteristics contributed to the alienation:

I can be very dogmatic and I am a very disagreeable person, that's not to say that I am not kind or, but disagreeable...Most people when they separate they have a very fractious feeling, animosity at the start but a couple of years later they get on better with their wife than ever before (laughs) but I don't think that will ever be the case with me, I am not that type of person. (Simon)

3.5.6. TPs' difficulties in understanding emotions

Limited emotional understanding and difficulties in relationships was reported by one participant. This was observed to be the case with one more participant, who seemed to misinterpret people's intentions, although he did not seem to acknowledge this. For example, Simon recognised:

I am fantastic at mathematics and physics but when it comes to human relationships, I am a disaster, really terrible. I have been saying for many decades that I have been successful at everything I have attempted in life, except relationships.

Moreover, from the interview with Keith, it became evident that he also struggled when it came to understanding relationships:

Most of my mates say "oh, we knew this would happen, she only come wanting this, we all knew it were gonna happen". You think, what, I'm not stupid, maybe she did, but could a woman live with somebody for six years and have children with somebody on a plan to get a passport and a house?

These two participants were also the only ones who reported having a distanced relationship with children from previous marriages/partnerships:

I confess that I was very much a male, with usual stoicism, perhaps aloof. I would say that I never really related to my children until they were 12 - 24 months old and could relate back with me. I would also say that when my children became adults, I distanced from them to a degree, certainly the lustre of complete biological love wore off to a degree. (Simon)

3.6. Category: Couples' relationships and parenting

3.6.1. Foundation of relationship

Not having a solid foundation for a long-term relationship was a shared feature in six of the stories. Couples' relationship was based on deceit or exploitation from the very beginning, or the relationship progressed due to pregnancy, without members feeling mature enough to assume the responsibilities related to raising children and having a family. Others reported relationship difficulties and control from their partners from the start. The only mother in the sample suggested cultural pressures to get married.

Looking back now I don't think I ever loved her...She told me she was on the pill and she got pregnant, and she said, "oh, I forgot to take the pill or I stopped it and I forgot to tell you. (Simon)

Signs that the relationship was not going to survive were evident in a few relationships nearly from their start. However, participants talked about disregarding these signs. For example, one participant (John) talked about his ex-partner's discriminatory societal and political views, which he justified, denied, and set aside despite his shock. Participants also referred to their partners' mental health issues and implied that they did not pay so much attention to the impact these could have on them and the family life overall: "There were signs before, but we were younger and I hadn't been through that, you know, I don't suffer from depression." (George). Others did not know their partner's background well: "Her mum wanted to flee (country) for some reason, but we don't know why. And so did (ex-wife)...that was the reason to get to know me. So that's why we got married, so she could get a fiancé visa." (Keith).

3.6.2. Points of change in relationship

Six out of nine participants observed a change in the relationship with their partner during pregnancy or following the birth of a child. This was related with a change in their ex-partners' behaviour and a deterioration in their mental health. Specifically, they spoke about their partner having a sense of threat and referred to the lack of control around birth, which brought up previous unresolved traumas. It was mentioned that their partner became more controlling towards them and the environment around them, possibly as an attempt to put an "order" in their psychic turbulence.

When she became pregnant with my second daughter she changed and it was almost like she's been a different person up to that point, now her real person had come out.

Gradually over the period of time she got worse and worse in terms of control. (Robert)

Another common characteristic in some of these cases was that the pregnancy was unplanned and having children had not been discussed between the couple. The arrival of non-planned children brought up significant emotional and financial pressures to marriages/partnerships that were already not functioning well and increased the risk of being dissolved.

In addition, more than half of participants talked about having breakups in the relationship with their partners and moving in and out of the family home before the final separation. The breakups were sometimes related to their partner or themselves having an affair. The existence of a third person in the relationship was a "tipping point" for the final separation on some occasions. The existence of a third person sometimes generated a conflict triangle between the AP, the third person (and/or their husband/wife) and the TP. The AP's aggressive behaviour made things escalate, fuelling the couple's disagreements and rendering them unable to move on.

Ex got arrested for breach of the peace and vandalism so there was a whole court process between us (and third person's wife), and I think (ex-wife) stayed with me cos it looked better for her for court to be with her husband. Because it wasn't long after that whole long court process that she moved back with him again. (William)

Significant life events happened in the families that also contributed to the couples' separation or were connected to disengagement from relationships with extended families.

These events were related to life-threatening illnesses, death of close family members and financial insecurity, and added considerable stress in the couples' relationship. Some of these events happened at the same time as unplanned pregnancies and childbirth. These unexpected "entries and exits" seemed to have brought to the surface past unresolved feelings, such as fear, guilt and loss of safety, which were engrained in parents' relationships with their families-of-origin and placed the families under the threat of being dissolved. For example, in Theodore's case his ex-wife's parents both died the same year the couple separated, and this is when his ex-wife started alleging that he was a dangerous, abusive person. Such a behaviour may indicate projection of difficult feelings towards Theodore, given his ex-wife's turbulent background and unresolved emotional issues, particularly with her father.

3.6.3. Parenting: Inverted hierarchies & lack of boundaries

From participants' accounts it became evident that in all cases parent-child boundaries were blurred. Inappropriate information was shared with children, who interfered in matters such as finances or their parents' romantic life.

My youngest daughter came to me and said give mum some extra money so that we can afford to stay in this house. So, she sent my daughter to me to ask me if she could stay living in the house. (Robert)

Children were used by the AP to convey emotionally charged information to the other parent, thus hurting them through hurting the children. For example, John described that following a couple's argument, their mother announced to the children that the couple separates, and their father is leaving. The couple had not agreed this between them. It was

also reported that participants' ex-partners did not take appropriate parental responsibilities, were neglecting children's emotional needs and physical needs (e.g., not having them appropriately dressed) or they were behaving in a "child-like" manner. Another feature of alienation seemed to be giving power to children to make adult decisions or decisions that were inappropriate for their developmental age. Participants reported that their children believed they had made a decision but actually they had not. They had no choice, as they were manipulated by the AP.

He didn't want to come, and my ex was like you only have to go if you want to and he had so empowered the children... at that stage (child1) was nine, (child2) was 6. "It's up to you what you want to do, it's up to you to decide. (Christina)

Such behaviours were mainly reported for APs. However, one TP described leaving it up to his child to make decisions related to their safety, rather than protecting them. In this way, the participant acted in a condoning way to his ex-wife's behaviours without realising it at that time. Moreover, mainly APs but also a couple of TPs acted like their children's friends. Theodore, for example, spoke about his children standing up for him, before contact stopped. George described:

Mum and son are sat outside drinking prosecco. And you know, it's a parent who's trying to be chums with the children, which doesn't seem right to me...Part of the problem is that if you're mates with children, and the other parent is seen as the disciplinarian, then discipline is bad or is at least perceived to be bad.

Participant's children were often portrayed as being too involved with the AP to the point that they were like being the same person or having the same feelings. The AP was also

described as struggling to see the difference between themselves and their children. Parentification was noted in other cases: “Ex-wife’s not caring for the children and, in fact, probably our son is her carer in many respects.” (George).

3.7. Category: APs’ control over TPs and children

Controlling behaviours from APs towards others was reported by all participants. This control was manifested in their relationship with the TP and their children. Controlling behaviour was sometimes evident towards the TPs’ extended family, as well as towards the APs’ network (neighbours, friends, etc.). This category includes three main subcategories: abusive behaviours, pre-separation alienating signs and post-separation alienating strategies.

3.7.1. Abusive behaviours

Coercion, control, and abuse were common features throughout the couples’ marriage/relationship, although they became much more pronounced after separation. Below are a couple of quotes referring to psychologically controlling behaviours from APs towards TPs prior to separation: “My ex just picks the kids up, puts them in the car and drives off...And she has said to me numerous times that if you’ve ever left me, you won’t see the kids again.” (Robert).

Whenever I used to call (daughter) princess, (ex-wife) would turn around and say "that's fake, it's plastic. You're being fake, false". I went "no, she is my princess". "She's not". And I was like, "what I choose to call my daughter in terms of endearment, is because I mean them", and so then (daughter) wouldn't like being called princess or darling.
(Gary)

Physical abuse and/or feeling frightened because of their ex-partners' aggressive behaviour was also reported. John, for example, used the analogy of the frog in the pan of water to vividly describe how his ex-wife's difficulty to control her anger gradually increased, turning from tantrums to violent attacks.

All participants reported that their ex-partners continued controlling them after the separation by using their children and/or by trying to receive financial gains. Robert described PA as "an ongoing process of control by the other parent". Apparently, this control does not end, even when the alienation is well-established. Financial exploitation was reported to be a continuous situation, which carried on for many years after the couples' separation.

Once he got the boys, it was all about money, trying to get as much money out of me, trying to destroy me...If I don't send him the money, I am bad. I have suggested to send me their bank account details so that I send the money directly, otherwise I would have to send a check to his address, I'm trying to control them... so it's a no-win situation.

(Christina)

Participants accounts revealed that APs behaved in an abusive and controlling manner towards their children too. Intimidation, psychological manipulation, and verbal abuse were commonly reported. In a few cases violent acts were also described:

The way she would treat them was horrific. Really dunning them down, screaming at them, telling them that she was the boss and that she had done everything for them and that she was much more intelligent than them, and she really was aggressive with them.

(Theodore)

3.7.2. Pre-separation alienating signs

In addition to excluding TPs from spending time on their own with the children (described previously), some participants, whilst still being in a relationship with the AP, reported attempts to reduce or eliminate their relationships with their families-of-origin.

He wanted us to live in this little cocoon environment originally the two of us, and when the (children) came along the four of us, excluding anybody else... His family were included but excluding all my family, all my friends, he ostracized my family, all my friends. (Christina)

Emotional disengagement occurred whenever the participants made the decision to meet with their extended families. Keith, for example, when he took his brother's wife side in an argument she had with his wife, the latter demanded that he rejected his brother and his family. The demands were of a coercive nature, taking the form of threats "get rid of them or I'm gonna leave ya" (Keith) or ultimatums "he basically gave me an ultimatum that it was either him or my mother at some stage and it was just awful" (Christina). Triangular relationships were formed by the APs, usually placing the TP or someone from their family as the "bad" person and themselves as "good" and attempting to take the TP towards their side. Commonalities existed in three stories about the constant clashes either between TPs and their ex-partner's mother, or between their mothers and ex-partners. Christina reported a "vitriolic" relationship between her ex-husband and her mother, with their conflict being a matter of control. Gary also spoke about his clashes with his ex-partner's mother: "Her mum came into the room to say "you're driving us to the doctor's, but you're to wait outside cos all you are is a taxi driver" [laughs]. So, it's like "yes, OK", so it stems from there".

Although most attempts to alienate the extended family before the separation were initiated by APs, some behaviours were coming from the children:

I once saw (youngest child) pretending to ring Grandma on a toy phone, and she were there chatting away "hey Grandma, are you alright? You want a cup of tea?". (Eldest child) went to her and said, "you're not supposed to talk about Grandma". I went "hang on a minute, what were that?". "We're not supposed to talk about Grandma". But that's the first thing I saw, which looking back, that was the signs of parental alienation.
(Keith)

In addition to attempts to cut-off relationships with extended family, belittling of the TP in front of the children was reported in a few cases before the separation.

I was always portrayed in a negative way towards the children, always, "You're too lazy", "you didn't do this", "you didn't do that", "you don't love mum enough", whatever, I was always portrayed in a negative way, looking back now I could see that.
(Robert)

Nearly half participants spoke about their ex-partners having planned the couples' separation and the alienation in advance. "Knowing exactly which buttons to press" and being able to outsmart, manipulate or trick the "system" was reported.

She has had a lifetime of practice, and she took some of these psychiatry or psychology sessions, as practice to see, you know, could she beat the system...She's very accomplished at spinning a yarn, put it that way...They're very confident at using the system, at playing the victim. They try and get people to like them, and they will say

anything. And it's not somebody who's hiding in the shadows. This is somebody who's in plain sight and is very proficient at what happens. (George)

3.7.3. Post-separation alienating strategies

After the couples' separation, the AP tried to block or control the contact of the other parent with the child/ren through determining the way contact would occur. This was reported in all cases. Some parents reportedly imposed a regimented schedule about the times the TP would pick up or return the children home, which if it was not followed, it would have repercussions. Contact lacked consistency and agreements around the timings of contact were broken by changing the schedule last minute and/or finding various reasons why the children could not meet their parent (e.g., arranging children's playdates during agreed meeting times, claiming they forgot, etc.). Some parents took the children away and did not inform the other parent where they were. This happened especially during important celebrations, like children's birthdays or religious ceremonies.

I was told at the last minute that there was a different address something like 20 miles in a different direction, other times I would be on my way and I would get a text message to say they don't want to see you or they want to do something else today and this went on and on and on for about 2 years. It was literally every single time I was to see them, it just stopped. (Robert)

Participants reported that indirect communication was also controlled by the AP. Their phone calls or emails were not responded, or they were not "allowed" to speak to their children whilst the children were at the APs' home. Calling or texting the child, whilst they were with the TP, was another way APs used to control contact, as well as not passing on

letters or gifts to the children. Gary, for example, reported: “She'd come round and just sit on her phone, chatting. And it would be to her mum. And I'd be like "what are you doing, come downstairs”, "no, no, I'm talking to mum”.

In seven cases, it was reported that APs did not allow the children to see their grandparents and other members and/or they made them believe that their grandparents were abusive. Cutting off the grandparent-grandchild relationship was, sometimes, an act of retaliation (e.g., for extended family supporting the TP in legal proceedings).

Allegations and accusations from the AP towards the TP were frequently used and were reported in all cases. Participants' ex-partners presented them as dangerous and abusive and/or irresponsible, neglectful, and not loving. APs accused TPs of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse towards themselves, their children or both.

I've had now up to 34 police reports filed against me. I have a completely clear criminal history. You know, nobody ever, except for the ex-wife makes these allegations, and they come thick and fast. Even when Cafcass were there, she was saying that he's threatened to kill me, he's threatened to break into my house; and the Cafcass officer said, well, "I've looked at the police reports, and, no, he hasn't. (George)

Allegations were used to stop the parents' contact with their children and gain power over them. They were usually made as a form of retaliation for an action taken by the TP. These actions included: applying for a court application, asking for mediation or financial agreement, accusing the AP of abuse towards the children, starting a new romantic relationship and requesting more contact with children. APs may have perceived these actions as threatening in many different ways (e.g., of their financial stability, relationship

with children, sense of self, fears of being arrested, etc.), thus responding with false allegations.

My solicitor wrote her a letter saying, "could we please meet and discuss the separation and then move forward from then", and she ignored that. And, actually, it was the second time she got the letter that she came out with the accusations. Because it was becoming a situation where if you don't, then we're gonna have become more serious about that. So, then after that, I didn't see (children) again. (Theodore)

The allegations not only blocked the TP-child relationship but also helped the AP earn valuable time with their children in order to further influence their rejection of the other parent.

We went to court, (ex-wife) was ordered to return him, didn't. And by the time that the Cafcass were involved and (son) and I or they got us together, six months had elapsed... You know, I think the biggest weapon that anyone has who is looking to alienate their children, is time. Time with the children. Because that's where the brainwashing, the manipulation really kicks in. By the time that we got together, he was an emotional wreck. (George)

The allegations, alongside the APs' behaviour towards the other parent in the presence of children, served to instil fear of the TP. This was described in a couple of cases, where APs were acting as they were afraid of the other parent.

The lady (in contact centre) witnessed (ex-wife) bringing the children in...She was crouched right down, pushing the children behind her. "Is he here?". And peeping round corners, "ooh he's here, oh", and they were getting frightened. It were ridiculous what

she did, so the lady who runs the place said, "I've never seen anything like that, what she'd done is completely wrong. (Keith)

The allegations that depicted the TPs as neglectful, irresponsible or emotionally abusive had mainly the intention to convince the court that the parent lacks parenting skills and/or to instil into the children the idea that their parent did not love them. Some APs deliberately set up the TP and the children in a way to make the TP present as non-caring.

I was supposed to pick them up at 4 o'clock on Thursday and the phone would ring at 3 or 3.30, "the kids can't come today because..." bla bla bla, they're having a sleepover at their friends' house or there is a problem, or they're doing something else. And then some of the letters I have from the children they said that on a lot of occasions they were sent with their coats on ready to pick them up at 4 o'clock, I didn't arrive. So their mum would set that up deliberately, she would go to the bathroom and phone me "they are having a sleepover, they can't see you today" and she's getting the children ready and I don't arrive. (Simon)

Allegations against the TPs were made from children too. In these situations, the children's behaviour had been influenced by the AP and there was evident manipulation of the child. The change in children's behaviour and parental rejection was sometimes reported to be quite sudden and unexpected, with the children concealing the allegation from the TP for days or weeks. A complete absence of guilt was reported in four cases.

The night before he went, I was sat on the sofa and he was sat in the space between my legs and we were cuddling and didn't really know anything was going to go on. The one thing that he said that was a little bit strange was, "I think today is going to be a really

good day". And he'd never said that before. And then on the next day he left for school and I came downstairs and there was a policeman at the door, and he told me that there had been an allegation made by my son. From that moment, three years ago, he hasn't been home. (George)

Participants commonly reported other situations where APs exhibited controlling and “brainwashing” behaviours towards the children to turn them against the other parent. These were manifested in the language used by children, who were frequently described as “clones” or “puppets” of the AP.

When we first separated my stepson turned on me, and he would use all his mother's language, everything was just like he cloned her. He would say her things, stories that she would make up about me. He wouldn't even have evidence, but he would just throw them at me as if he was like a warrior. (Theodore)

Various other strategies were used to influence the children to reject the other parent, such as having a secret communication with the child via texts, or the child not been allowed to refer to their parent as “dad” or “father”. Persuading the children to act like spies in the TPs’ home and interrogating them, after having visited the targeted parent, were commonly reported alienating strategies.

I know that her mother used (daughter)’s contact with me as a way to find out information about me, so when (daughter) was seeing me every week, certainly she was been briefed, “what happened”, “what did your father say”, “where did you go”, “what did you do”, all of that sort of things went on. (Simon)

Using derogatory names and belittling the TP (and their extended family) were behaviours

presented by the AP and/or the children . As mentioned before, some participants reported this kind of behaviours to occur not only after, but also before the separation. The alienating parents' extended family also played a role in the alienation, mainly through disparaging comments towards the TP.

One night (daughter) said to me something about “oh, you were supposed to have done something and you hadn't done it”, and I said, “yes, that's right”, and she said, “grandma and grandad were laughing at you cause you hadn't done it”, they used some derogatory name, I think the term was shitty or something. (Robert)

A few participants reported withdrawal of love and rejection from the AP towards their child. Participants explained this as a means to exercise power over the child and make the child fearful of losing the relationship with the parent. As a result, the child was indirectly asked to take sides.

The classic that we've seen is this withdrawal of love. And it happened when the court ordered the daughter comes and lives with us, and then mum says to her one day, "you know this isn't working out". She says "you're only here for a couple of hours. So, I think the best thing is you go and live with your dad full time, and you just come round here during the holidays". You know, she was 11 at the time, and she's had this rejection from her mum. (George)

The revelation of family secrets without the knowledge or consent of the other parent was another tool used by APs to prove to their children that the TP does not love them. For example, William talked about his ex-wife revealing to his stepchild that he is not her biological father. This happened shortly after his ex-wife received a letter from his solicitor.

Six participants reported that after their relationship with their first-born child was interrupted and the AP's influence over the child was established, the AP focused on attempting to cut off their relationship with the second child. Recruiting the first child to help them alienate their sibling was frequently reported. The alienated children used similar strategies with their parent. They pressurised their sibling to take a side, acted as spies and made their sibling feel they were traitors when they visited the TP. Coercive behaviours from the oldest to the youngest child also took place to make sure they remain loyal and follow the instructions of the AP. Christina described: "Once him and daddy, you know, were in cahoots together another 2.5 years passed and (youngest child) got to 6, (youngest) finally stopped staying with me. He didn't want to come, he didn't want to know".

Finally, a couple of participants mentioned the AP trying to take by their side the TP's extended family, as well as neighbours and common friends. This "recruitment" was aimed at depicting the TP as bad or dangerous and them as good, and persuading people to testify against the TP at court.

3.8. Category: TPs' reactions to APs' control and alienating behaviours

3.8.1. Compliance

Six TPs reported responding to their ex-partners' controlling behaviours in a compliant way. A domineering-compliant dynamic was evident in some relationships from the very beginning. Under their ex-partners' pressure and coercion, TPs changed professions, became religious, did a vasectomy, ended relationships with their extended families and took the blame for actions they had not done.

"Well, if you don't become Catholic, I won't consider myself married to you anymore". Just like that, you know. I can't suddenly be something that I'm not. But then I was really bad, I said "listen, OK I'll go do it". And I went and became Catholic. (Theodore)

Condoning their ex-partners' actions, such as keeping secrets related to family relationships, was another common characteristic. For example, Keith described that he agreed to his ex-wife's request not to tell their daughters that he had three children from his previous marriage.

Most TPs valued family highly and placed a lot of importance in keeping the family together. This was one of the main reasons they stayed in a dysfunctional and unhappy relationship with their partners. Christina reported: "I remember saying to my sister "this marriage is in desperate stage, but I am prepared to stay together for the sake of the children".

Three participants stated that they did not want to repeat previous scripts in their lives (e.g., not wanting to repeat their father's story that left the family, not wanting to repeat previous scripts of divorce). Three parents said that they sustained their ex-partners' behaviours, due to the fears that they would lose the relationship with their children, if they left the marriage/relationship. John talked about deserving being abused, as a punishment for having feelings for another woman. He described how his fear, which he was able to recognise only after the separation, prevented him from thinking rationally and taking appropriate steps to stop his ex-wife attacking their children.

3.8.2. TPs' reactions contributing to PA

This section includes participants' responses, which either contributed directly to the

alienation taking place or indirectly through their impact on couples' conflict. Not all participants demonstrated awareness of how their behavioural responses might have contributed. A couple of participants described their difficulty to control their emotional responses and their rather straightforward reactions. They appeared remorseful for their actions: "I would say that my reactions didn't cause it, but they helped it along, they greased the wheels of alienation, let me put it that way, they oiled the wheels of the alienation" (Simon).

A few targeted parents reported acting in a controlling way, as a response to the AP's behaviour. For example, Simon described putting pressure onto his non-alienated daughter, when her mother and siblings attempted to take her by their side. Others thought or put in action plans to control finances or stop paying maintenance to pressurise their ex give them access to their children: "If ex was not getting money from me, she would let me see the girls...I think that would stop a lot of contact issues overnight" (William).

Contributing to conflict either during the separation or after was common in a few cases:

I think in the early days of separation, you are part of this conflict. Call it hostility whatever it is that you want to do. I think conflict is an alienator's weapon. They want to create conflict. ...and in the earlier days, I'm sure I contributed to the conflict every bit as much but when the alienation happened, no, I don't think so. (George)

Another common feature amongst participants was their responses when they were put in the difficult position to choose sides. It was observed that they became double-faced as a response (e.g., "Jekyll and Hyde" as Christina reported), keeping in secret relationships with family members or hiding important information. Not betraying people's trust was a

justification for their actions, which was quite paradoxical since it contributed to people not trusting them. William, for example, was put in such position by his stepdaughter, when she asked him not to report to her mother her online harassment. His response contributed to his ex-wife's alienating behaviours, as he reinforced her belief that he is not trustworthy.

3.8.3. Being blinded

Not being able to see the signs of PA was one of the themes reported by six participants. Lack of knowledge and not having guidance on how to respond to their ex-partners' alienating behaviours seemed to be a perpetuating factor of the problem: "I look back thinking of myself as really blind because my stepson is alienated from his father as well...I was negligent, not seeing it coming. I don't really know what I could have done" (Theodore).

Participants also talked about "eye-opening experiences" or "penny-drop" moments, when they came to contact with professionals in the field, who informed them about PA or narcissism.

It was the woman who ran (the contact centre) that said, "the children's mother's a narcissist. Here, I'll write it down. Go to this website and look about it". And it was that write-up which I then realised mummy was a narcissist. (Keith)

3.9. Category: The alienated child

3.9.1. Rejection & loyalty

Rejecting the TP whilst remaining loyal to the AP characterised the alienated children. Children were getting the message that loving both parents was not allowed. TPs reported

that children felt that if they were chosen over the other parent, the children would feel that they have broken the AP's trust: "(Son) turned around to the psychiatrist and said, "I didn't know I could love both mummy and daddy". And he was 4.5-5 and he said that. And I think that's quite profound" (Christina).

Assigning to each parent the roles of "good" and "bad", and splitting was evident in participants' accounts. Splitting might have been the children's way to cope and "resolve" the projections of intolerable emotions by the AP.

One parent is good, and the other is wholly bad, there are no shades of grey. And that's the worry when you've got that, because it's not a healthy position for a 15-year-old to be in, to actually believe that the world is good and bad. It's not Star Wars. (George)

Writing rejecting letters to the TP was a common behaviour presented by the children, particularly in the initial stages of alienation. It seemed that rejecting a parent directly through the use of language was more likely to happen when the alienation was more established. The influence of the AP was evident from participants' descriptions, although children were adamant that their rejecting behaviour had nothing to do with the other parent's influence.

The children said to (social workers) that they want to be able to see me, to have contact with me... but that was on a Friday and on a Monday, a letter was sent from the children to the social workers saying "I don't want to see my father again"... So, the social worker is really getting a really clear picture of this. (Theodore)

Adolescence and the requests for autonomy seemed to fuel the alienation already taking place.

I put some of this down to her age, that she was now 15...I'd send a text to their mum just to say I pick the girls up on Saturday and I just got a text message saying "(oldest) said she is too old, she feels she is too old coming out now". (Robert)

The rejection of the TP by a couple of adolescents was reportedly a decision they made, as they could not tolerate the conflict between their parents or the AP's allegations. For example, John mentioned that his daughter reported to professionals that she made the decision not to see him again, as she could not handle her mother's false allegations of child abuse towards her father. This may imply an attempt to protect not only herself but also her father from her mother's attacking behaviours.

3.9.2. Susceptibility & protective characteristics

A few characteristics that may render the children more prone to alienation emerged from the analysis. Being intelligent and emotionally astute was reported by three participants as a common characteristic. For example, John described his daughter as having an emotional understanding that her parents were vulnerable and co-dependent. He also emphasised his daughter's influencing personality and described her as a leader. Children being sensitive to other people's needs and not wanting to upset them was another characteristic reported by three parents. This was linked to a feeling or responsibility to protect, and compliant personality traits.

My son is more sensitive than my daughter. It was my daughter that was crying (in the transition between mum's and dad's), and big brother was there to look after her. I think he was always a lot more, you know, he's always been a good boy, he's always towed the line, which I think is difficult when he's going through this. The school were saying

as a boy he came across as very protective of both parents. And then it switched off.

(George)

Parents' comparisons between alienated and non-alienated siblings revealed personality characteristics of the non-alienated child, which could be considered as protective factors towards alienation. Four participants noted that their non-alienated children were resilient, resistant, impartial or "easy-going".

Sons' mindset's probably different, they speak differently, they act differently, so, they were less subjected to having their thoughts taken away from them. They were very resilient, even when they were little. They were very much "no, we're seeing dad. (Gary)

Another similarity in non-alienated children was the externalisation of distress. These children were described as very "emotional". Simon, for example, who was alienated by his two older sons but not his daughter explained how the inconsolable and distressing state of his daughter, when she heard her father crying over the phone, prevented his ex-wife from stopping their contact.

3.10. Category: The role of the "system"

3.10.1. Control & power imbalance mediated through services

All participants spoke about the role of the "system" as a contributing factor to the development of PA. They referred to contributions by the legal system, social services and Cafcass, and some of them also included schools' responses. It was felt that PA and the power held by APs was exercised over TPs through the mediation of services. TPs thought of the court as powerless to implement rules or some form of consequence when APs were not following court orders (e.g., refusal to return children to TPs' care). Some parents

reported that their ex-partners had a huge influence on social services and Cafcass, for example believing the allegations against them, taking their side or setting the rules for supervised contact. School staff were also mentioned as taking the side of APs, who had managed to influence staff members' views of the TP.

When (ex) said that I was an alcoholic, it was then "now he's an alcoholic". When they said that I'd abused her, that was binding too. They took all of (ex)'s views and made them gospel... They didn't really take any of my thoughts or feelings into consideration.
(Gary)

In addition, most participants reported non-timely involvement by Cafcass and/or social services, which gave APs time to exercise their alienating behaviours and contributed to emotionally and physically distancing the children from the TP. For example, Keith stated: "In September last year they decided they need to fact find. We've still not had the fact finding, and now is end of June".

Participants reported that one service or another was ignorant and/or blind to PA, and that their case was not handled appropriately due to this "lack of awareness". It is important to note that even in cases, where participants felt that there was some acknowledgement of PA, they still felt that the legal system and social services could not exercise their power to control the AP's behaviour. A few parents also viewed the current legal and framework as inadequate.

I'm seeing the damage that's being done and I'm absolutely powerless. You can't do anything. So where do you go, who do you turn to? And it turns out, the people you think you'd be able to turn to, they don't even know about it. You go to the Police, and

they don't know about it, and social services don't know about it...and Cafcass are becoming trained, but their training is nowhere near good enough. (George)

All these factors, the power of APs over the “system”, the services’ perceived inability to act appropriately, the non-timely involvement and services’ ignorance of PA, made TPs feel powerless to protect their children from the harmful behaviours of the APs. These factors, in conjunction with a reportedly emotionally and financially draining court system, had a significant impact on TPs well-being and sense of self.

3.11. Chapter summary

This chapter included a summary of participants’ characteristics and a description of the study’s findings. A theoretical model of the process of development of PA from the perspective of TPs was introduced, followed by a detailed presentation of its conceptual categories and subcategories. A discussion of the findings in the context of existing literature follows in Chapter 4.

Chapter Four: Discussion

4.1. Chapter overview

The chapter starts with a summary of the theoretical model presented in Chapter 3 and continues with a discussion of the main findings in relation to the research aims and the existing relevant research in PA. Theoretical ideas from the fields of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, family therapy and trauma are employed in explicating some of the findings. A critique of the current research follows, examining its strengths and limitations. Implications for further research and clinical practice are discussed, before concluding with the researcher's self-reflexive account.

4.2. Summary of findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the processes and factors involved in the development of PA from the perspective of TPs and develop a theoretical framework, which could help better understand PA. The data, generated from nine interviews with people identified as TPs, were analysed using constructive grounded theory methods. Participants' accounts led to the construction of seven interrelated conceptual categories. Attachment patterns in families seemed to be transmitted across generations, shaping parents' beliefs, behaviours, and personality characteristics, and influencing couple's relationships and parenting practices. Role-reversal and enmeshment were reported in parent-child relationships. APs exercised control over TPs and their children, through coercive and abusive behaviours before and after the separation. According to TPs, their reactions to APs' control inadvertently strengthened PA. Children, who were alienated, were presented by TPs as having certain characteristics that predisposed them in getting

caught in loyalty conflicts. The role of the “system” around the family also played its role in the perpetuation of PA, acting as a medium through which APs exercised their power. Parental alienation is experienced as a dynamic and relational process, which is influenced by a complex interaction between individual, relational, and systemic factors.

The researcher explored family dynamics pre- and post-separation and examined how relationships changed over time and what factors made this change possible. The exploration of family-of-origin scripts and the roles participants played in their relationships showed that TPs assumed a protective and mediating role in both their families-of-origin and of procreation. This is a novel finding, not reported in previous studies. Co-exploring with TPs the relationship with their ex-partner/spouse, revealed that the relationship lacked a solid foundation, and that the birth of children triggered previous traumas in APs, destabilising the relationship. This has not been previously reported in the literature. TPs’ views on the other parent’s alienating behaviours and on their own responses to PA brought to the surface interesting perspectives. The following section illuminates key aspects of the model within the context of the existing literature base.

4.3. The current model in relation to existing literature

4.3.1. Intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns

The current model suggests that PA can occur in families where there is a history of relational difficulties, such as disengagement, enmeshment and/or patterns of continuous volatile engagement and disengagement. Although these patterns were recalled by TPs for all the APs’ families-of-origin, they were less reported for their own families-of-origin. With regards to APs, these patterns could sometimes be detected two and three generations

before. An abusive, violent and traumatic upbringing (i.e., physical and sexual abuse) was also characteristic of some of the APs' background as reported by TPs. Alienating parents' coercive control and abusive behaviours towards their children were described by the participants, indicating a repetition of traumatic relational patterns.

Mental health difficulties, mainly narcissistic and antisocial personality traits were evident in TPs' descriptions of the APs' families-of-origin, as were unhealthy relational dynamics within their parents' relationship, specifically power imbalances and domineering-compliant relational patterns. Some of these patterns were also evident within the couple relationship of participants' parents. It appeared that there was a replication of these dynamics in participants' families-of-procreation with the APs usually having a domineering, controlling and overpowering role over the TPs and the TPs assuming the role of the protector, placating the AP for fear that the couple relationship or the relationship with their children would be lost. The APs and/or some of the TPs had been placed in the past in the position to take sides, being triangulated into their parents' relationship and sometimes formed coalitions with one against the other. This type of relational dynamic was also repeated in the families that they created. In addition, behaviours demonstrating role reversal and parentification were observed by TPs in APs relationships with one of their parents, as well as in their relationship with the alienated child.

Previous research focusing specifically on the intergenerational transmission of attachment difficulties and trauma in families, where PA is present, is non-existent. However, a few qualitative exploratory studies on PA have reported similar findings. The study of Tavares et al. (2021), who interviewed TPs, reported repetition of attachment difficulties in APs'

families-of-origin, and the study of Finzi-Dottan et al. (2012) found abuse, detachment and rejection in TPs' families-of origin. In addition, the qualitative studies of Baker (2005b) and Bentley and Matthewson (2020) that included adults, alienated as children by one of their parents, have reported repetition of alienating behaviours across generations. Specifically, in Baker's study, half of the sample, who were parents, had experienced alienation from their own children. In Bentley and Matthewson's study, this percentage was 20%. In this study, a history of alienation but also estrangement was found in participants' descriptions of their ex-partners' families-of-origin (78%), and estrangement was reported in 33% of the participants' families-of-origin. It can, therefore, be proposed that a history of justified and/or unjustified rejection, along with other factors, may predispose certain families to experience PA. Haines et al. (2020) and Childress (2015) have also suggested that PA, along with family violence can be transmitted across generations.

Non-PA related attachment research can be helpful when considering the mechanisms through which PA can be transmitted across generations. For example, there is evidence for the transmission of role-reversal (Macfie *et al.*, 2005) and boundary dissolution across generations (Kerig, 2005). Research has shown that difficulties or distortions in the parental attachment system are mediated through parenting practices and transmitted to children (e.g., Benoit & Parker, 1994; Fonagy & Target, 2005; Jacobvitz *et al.*, 1991). Similarly, unresolved trauma, which was reported to be the case with most APs in this study, can also contribute to difficulties with parenting (Riggs, 2010). Parental confusion and detachment, due to re-experiencing trauma, can lead the child in assuming the role of

the parent to comfort them, or can make the child blame themselves for the parent's distress (Hesse & Main, 1999).

Psychoanalytic and family systems theories are also relevant when considering the intergenerational transmission of PA. These are only mentioned here briefly, as they are out of scope of this discussion. Bowen (1966) has used the constructs "family projection process" and "multi-generation transmission process" to describe how undifferentiated family members transmit their lack of differentiation to the next generation. Similarly, Boszormenyi-Nagy's concept of "intergenerational ledger" (1987) and Byng-Hall's family scripts (1985), refer to attachment relationships handed down through the generations and the inheritance of responsibility to reconcile past traumatic family events. Abraham and Torok (1971, as cited in Abraham & Torok, 1994) talked about transgenerational haunting, which is the transmission of unresolved trauma across generations and involves the children carrying unconsciously what their parent could not. The original trauma haunts the family until a resolution is found.

Nevertheless, PA seems to be a multi-dimensional and complex phenomenon, and the above theories may only partially capture it. It is worth mentioning that in this study not all TPs reported disengaged or enmeshed relationships with their own families-of-origin; therefore, it could be that the above theories are not applicable in their case. There is also the possibility that some of the TPs were not aware of these relational dynamics in their families-of-origin.

4.3.2. Parenting: inverted hierarchies, lack of boundaries and abusive relationships

Emotional abuse and/or neglect, as well as coercive and controlling behaviours from the AP towards their children, were reported by TPs in all cases. Verbal abuse and physical violence were also mentioned in a few cases. All participants reported blurred or diffused boundaries between the APs and the children, which were evident whilst the parents were still together. APs involved the children in adult matters (e.g., financial, legal) and used them as a tool to hurt or gain power over the TPs. Children were made to believe that they had the power to make decisions (e.g., to keep contact with the TP), whilst they were manipulated to act according to the APs' wishes. Enmeshment, role reversal and parentification were frequently reported.

According to TPs, abuse of any form did not characterise their relationships with the children. However, two TPs described their children as their "best friend", and two others either sought to receive emotional support from their children, or inappropriately empowered them to make decisions, at a time when they were not able to do so. These behaviours were, at least partially, linked with TPs feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, emanating from the controlling and abusive behaviours of the AP towards them.

These findings suggest that emotionally abusive and controlling behaviours, as well as inverted hierarchies and lack of boundaries are underpinnings for the development of PA. The findings are consistent to previous research with TPs or adults, who were alienated from their parents as children. Controlling coercive behaviours and abuse perpetrated by the APs towards their children have been reported in recent studies (Harman *et al.*, 2018;

Haines *et al.*, 2020; Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020; Baker, 2020). Blurred parent-child boundaries and role reversal has also been observed in previous studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Johnston *et al.*, 2005a; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; O' Sullivan, 2020). Findings are consistent with Garber's (2011) suggestions about "role corruption" in PA. These unhealthy dynamics seem to stem from parental unfulfilled needs and traumatic experiences.

With regards to TPs' parenting practices towards their children, research findings are limited and inconclusive. Only the studies of Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001) and Finzi-Dottan *et al.* (2012) have found enmeshed patterns and role-reversal in the TP-child relationship. In Finzi-Dottan *et al.*'s study, these patterns were present before the separation and participants saw their children as extensions of themselves. However, their finding has to be interpreted with caution, as their sample consisted only of women of Jewish background, hence there are limits to the findings' transferability. Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001) hypothesised that implementation of boundaries by the TPs in their sample may be linked to powerlessness and loss of parental role. Tavares *et al.* (2021) also reported that TPs experienced difficulties in parenting, as a result of the other parents' behaviours. This seems to be the case in this study too. The study of Roma, Marchetti, Mazza, Ricci *et al.* (2021) on TPs' characteristics provides further support, as they found that TPs had adapted to chronic depressive states and high levels of interpersonal conflict and demonstrated limited energy to cope.

4.3.3. Characteristics of TPs & APs

4.3.3.1. Characteristics of TPs: assuming the protective role

An important and novel finding in this study was TPs' descriptions of assuming a protective, mediating and/or placating role (e.g., protecting their mothers/children from abuse, mediating to cease conflicts). This role was evident in most participants' accounts (7 out of 9) for their families-of-origin, families-of-procreation, or both. This seems to be a finding not previously reported in PA studies. A reason for this may be that previous studies mainly examined possible factors for the development of PA in isolation, with only a handful focusing on family dynamics. However, Johnston and Sullivan (2020) in their predictive model on PA have emphasised the importance of incorporating family scripts from both parents when providing support in PA cases. As it was explained before, people assume certain roles in relationships and behave in certain ways according to their mental representations, or scripts. The assumption of protective roles by the TPs before the development of PA (as well as some TPs' previous triangulation in cross-generational coalitions) can indicate predisposition towards being entangled in triangles, and a repetition of previous relational roles.

4.3.3.2. APs: Narcissistic traits, unhelpful defences & fear of loss

Another strong finding in this study was participants' reports that their ex-partners demonstrated narcissistic traits and struggled to regulate overwhelming emotions. Denial, projection and splitting frequently appeared in TPs' descriptions, as well as misinterpretation of "reality". It appeared that the stories told, and allegations made against TPs were the "truth" for APs, whilst "unreal" or "lies" for other people. Assigning the "bad" label to TPs is assumed to help the APs justify the rejection of the other parent and

the use of alienating behaviours to “save” the child from the hands of a “harmful” parent. AP’s defences may serve as a means to protect themselves from intolerable repressed emotions that stem from childhood traumas and seem to be related to fears of rejection, loss and abandonment. These fears were evident in a few cases before the couple’s separation. They were manifested through APs’ fears that their children would be taken away by their partners/spouses, by difficulties to share the children with them or accept the love between them. It appeared that the TP-child relationship posed a threat in their parenting identity, their “ownership” of children and their sense of self. Holding these feelings of threat and fear might have been difficult, thus leading to projecting rejection onto the TP (e.g., “you love daughter more than you love me”) and onto the TPs’ extended family. This is manifested through APs’ attempts to reduce or eliminate TPs’ (and their children’s) relationships with their families-of-origin before and after separating.

AP’s mental health difficulties (personality disorder), narcissistic injury, misinterpretation of reality, and unresolved family-of-origin issues have been reported previously in studies that included TPs (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a) and in studies with adults, who were alienated as children from one of their parents (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Baker, 2007; Baker & Ben Ami, 2011). Studies that used psychological testing (MMPI, Rorschach) with APs, have reported narcissistic traits, primitive defences, as well as thought rigidity and cognitive slippage (Siegel & Langford, 1998; Johnston *et al.*, 2005c; Gordon *et al.*, 2008; Roma Marchetti, Mazza, Ricci *et al.*, 2021).

Attachment and trauma literature can help explain these findings. APs seem to re-enact attachment traumas, which were experienced during their childhood, in their current

relationships (Childress, 2015). Children, who faced disrupted attachments, abuse, neglect, loss, or separation and who felt unprotected during these times, may have struggled to integrate these experiences into consciousness. As adults, their organisation of memory systems and the mental representations of themselves, the others and the world are likely to be affected (Fonagy, 2001; Panksepp, 2005; Van der Kolk, 2014). Patterns of neurological activity can influence people's perception of situations and predispose them to behave in certain ways (Crittenden & Landini, 2011). Thus, people may respond to current situations as though the trauma has returned (Trippany, Helm, & Simpson, 2006) and may demonstrate incompatible responses, such as over- or under-estimation of threat (Damasio, 1994; Panksepp, 2005). Over-estimation of threat can, subsequently, lead to harmful behaviours (Crittenden, 2000) and the creation of a false trauma re-enactment narrative that encompasses all family members (Childress, 2015).

Woodall and Woodall (2019) have configured Haley's perverse triangle (1977) to demonstrate how unresolved trauma from childhood can be re-enacted in the current dynamics of families that experience PA. Family separation triggers trauma re-enactment, and repressed feelings of fear, loss or rejection. To be able to emotionally defend themselves against these feelings, the AP "draw(s) the child into a shared encapsulated delusional belief as a way of validating and upholding the defence". The AP projects the trauma onto the child, as if it was the child who were abused. The child becomes victimised, and the TP is assigned the role of the abuser. This allows the AP to adopt the protective role, that of rescuer to the victimised child.

4.3.4. Targeted parents' relationship with APs

4.3.4.1. Foundation of relationship: not a solid grounding

The exploration of the pre-separation dyadic relationships between TPs and their ex-partners pointed to some interesting findings. Participants described their relationship as not having a solid foundation (e.g., based on deceit, progressing due to pregnancy, not feeling emotionally ready to assume family raising responsibilities). Many described that they disregarded or denied signs (e.g., having different socio-political views, ignoring mental health issues) and some did not know their partners well enough. Others reported control from their partners from the start. Studies on PA so far have not paid much attention on the characteristics of couples' relationships before separation, and how these evolved over time. The emotional, as well as contextual, reasons behind proceeding in such relationships is worth exploring further. In this sample, the researcher observed an attitude of "I can prove to myself and others that I can do this", linked to either correcting scripts from the past, or trying to bring stability in their lives by "settling down". Others felt, due to their values, that they had to commit to their partner for having their child, and the only woman in the sample reported socio-cultural pressures to get married and have a family. The reasons behind the APs decisions to proceed in the relationship should also be understood. Limited information was provided with regards to this, but pregnancy was the reason in two cases.

4.3.4.2. Points of change: birth of children & impact of significant life events

Two-thirds of participants described a change in their ex-partners' behaviour and deterioration in their mental health around the time of childbirth. In some cases, childbirth triggered previous unresolved traumas. A sense of threat was felt by their ex-partners that

took over and jeopardised the relationship. Repetitions of trauma may occur during periods of stress (Van der Kolk, 1987) and childbirth can be considered for some a highly stressful experience (Dekel, Stuebe & Dishy, 2017). Moreover, having children requires emotional adaptations and relational re-organisations, so that the couple and extended families make space for the children (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). These adaptations can also create stress, more so when couples have not had a solid grounding or have not managed to find the “space between”. Other stressful life events (e.g., deaths of extended family members, life-threatening illnesses, loss of employment) were reported from more than half of participants, with some of these happening at the same time as childbirth. The presence of a third person in a relationship (affairs) was described as the tipping point, in some cases leading to the final separation. After reviewing the PA literature, no studies were found that were related to the developmental trajectories of families that experience PA.

4.3.4.3. Controlling behaviours & power imbalances

Abusive and controlling behaviours was a strong theme in this study, with some participants reporting such behaviours throughout the relationship. The abuse was mainly psychological but physical violence was also reported. APs were attempting to obtain financial gains and power through coercive acts, and this was evident sometimes prior to separation. Control after separation happened mainly through the use of children and the “system” (i.e., courts, cafcass, social services). Power imbalances were evident in most couple relationships. A domineering-compliant dynamic was reported, with TPs surrendering to their ex-partners’ wishes, after being threatened, blackmailed or pressurised. It is important to note that all APs showed a domineering pattern but not all TPs a compliant one. TPs’ responses to AP’s controlling behaviour varied from fighting

and, eventually, compromising, to surrendering without much resistance. TPs provided different reasons for staying in such controlling relationships, the main ones were to keep the family together and not to repeat previous life scripts of divorce and disengagement. Three TPs were afraid that they would not see their children again if they left the relationship and a couple of them stayed in the relationship to protect their children from the APs' harmful behaviours. However, in two cases, controlling behaviours were not reported at all prior to separation and these started a few months after the break-up. In both these cases, though, lack of trust and deceit was a strong theme in the relationship.

Similarities exist between the behaviours of APs and intimate partner violence (IPV) perpetrators, in terms of coercive control and using the children to dominate and control the other parent (Jaffe *et al.*, 2008; Lorandos *et al.*, 2013). Recent studies have found controlling coercive behaviours and psychological and financial abuse perpetrated by the AP (Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Harman *et al.*, 2018; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Haines *et al.*, 2020; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020; Baker, 2020). Power imbalances with APs holding the power was the outcome in the recent study of Harman *et al.* (2021). The reasons for TPs staying in abusive relationships prior to separation have not been extensively studied. However, researchers have reported the avoidance of further conflict and fear of losing the relationship with children (Harman *et al.*, 2018; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001).

Power issues in couples' relationships is closely linked to attachment. Studies in intimate relationships have found associations between insecure attachment styles and power imbalance (Rogers *et al.*, 2005; Shaver *et al.*, 2011) and between complimentary insecure attachment styles and abusive behaviour (Allison *et al.*, 2008; Dumas *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, past research indicated that power mediates the link between attachment and

aggressive behaviour in couples' relationships (Fournier *et al.*, 2011; Oka *et al.*, 2016). It may, therefore, be beneficial for future PA studies to examine power imbalances in couples' relationships in the context of adult attachment.

Before moving on to discussing the alienating strategies that APs and children used, it seems noteworthy to discuss participants accounts that were related to conflict and separation. Conflict and animosity during the separation was reported only by few participants, with others reporting "waiting for the end of the relationship to come". However, conflict intensified with time, particularly when alienating behaviours increased and with court involvement. This finding is consistent with Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001), who also reported varied degrees of conflict during the time of separation, which gradually increased. How conflict is defined, though, can vary from one study to another and from one participant to another, as conflict is a socially constructed concept and there is a lack of consensus about the term (Canary *et al.*, 1995). Conflict is tied to power, and perception of power affects, directly or indirectly, the dynamics of a conflict (Coleman, 2006). For these reasons, how TPs define conflict and the meaning they attribute to both conflict and power in their relationship with the AP, merits further exploration, as it can help better understand the ingredients of PA development.

4.3.5. Pre- and post-separation alienating "strategies"

The alienating strategies, described by the participants, were experienced in different ways, mainly as APs' attempts to control and exercise power over them, using the children. Positioning children as a proxy for allowing APs to keep power and control over TPs has been reported in other studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2020; Harman

et al., 2021). However, PABs in this study were also viewed as APs' conscious and/or unconscious ways to defend themselves against anxiety, rejection and abandonment.

In some cases, alienating attempts were evident prior to separation. These were not only attempts to reduce contact between the TPs and their children, as previously described, but also attempts to reduce TPs' and children's relationships with their families-of-origin. Studies so far have focused mainly on the use of alienating strategies after parental separation with few of them examining alienating signs whilst the parents were still together (e.g., Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a). Ingroup-outgroup family categorisations were obvious in participants' narrations and a theme that if anyone did not "obey" or take their side, they would be cast away. The APs involved various people in triangles to assume the position of either the victim or of the rescuer. In addition to entangling their child/ren, triangles were formed between the couple and a mother or mother-in-law, the couple and a therapist, the couple and an affair, etc. and, following separation, triangles were formed with various legal and social care professionals. Similar triangles were formed between the AP, the child and others (i.e., family members, legal/mental health professionals). The triangulation of children between extended family members and legal professionals has been reported by Lebow and Rekart (2007).

Conflicts were reported on some occasions between TPs and the APs' mother, or between APs and the TPs' mothers. The conflict seemed to be a matter of control. Extended families (mainly mothers) contributed to the couples' separation and PA through belittling and denigrating TPs' character. The contribution of APs' and/or TPs' extended families to PA has been reported in other studies (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Finzi-Dottan *et al.*, 2012; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a). Ties were cut with TPs' families; children did not want to

have contact or expressed that they were not allowed. Previous studies have also reported the alienation of the child from the TP's extended family (Baker, 2006; Tavares *et al.*, 2021; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a).

After the separation, blocking and controlling direct and indirect contact and making false allegations of abuse/neglect were the two main alienating strategies used. Previous studies with TPs and adults, alienated as children, have also described APs' behaviours that sabotaged and controlled the TP-child contact (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Baker, 2005c, 2006; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2020; Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; Harman *et al.*, 2021), and have reported the presence of false allegations (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; O'Sullivan, 2020). Allegations were usually made as a form of retaliation for TPs' actions (e.g., applying in court, asking for financial agreement, starting a new relationship, etc.) and served to gain time with children to negatively influence them against the TP and instil fear. Similar findings were reported in Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001) and Lee-Maturana *et al.* (2021a), who stated that APs' behaviours can be motivated by revenge, hate and anger. When the allegations were made by children, the AP's influence was apparent. Children's behaviour change was sometimes unexpected, and absence of guilt was reported. Absence of guilt has been reported in other studies too (e.g., Baker 2006).

Indoctrination, emotional manipulation, belittling and use of derogatory names in front of the children were described in nearly all cases. Previous studies have also demonstrated children's exposure to direct or indirect denigration of the TP (e.g., Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Steinberger, 2006a; Baker, 2006, Baker & Darnall, 2006; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Bentley & Matthewson, 2020; O'Sullivan, 2020; Harman *et al.*, 2021) and have reported

emotional manipulation of children by the APs (e.g., Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Baker & Chambers, 2011; Poustie *et al.*, 2018).

Older children, who had already been alienated, were used to help the AP alienate their sibling through the use of pressure and coercive control. Infusing to the child the fear of losing the relationship with the AP (withdrawal of love) and revealing family secrets were other strategies used by the APs. The recruitment of siblings in PA and the withdrawal of love and affection has been reported in previous studies (e.g., Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Baker 2006; Baker & Darnall, 2006, 2007 ; Bentley & Matthewson, 2020).

4.3.5.1. TPs' reactions to alienation

Not being aware of PA and not knowing how to recognise its signs seemed to perpetuate PA, at least in the beginning of the alienating process. TPs also talked about “penny-drop” moments, when they realised the unhealthy dynamics occurring in their family or when professionals helped them explain their ex-partners' behaviour. TPs in the recent study of Lee-Maturana et al. (2021a) also reported not knowing what PA was, and expressed regret for not knowing, as they might have acted differently.

Retrospectively, a few TPs in this study realised that their responses might have “oiled the wheels of alienation” through their contribution to the couple's conflict around the time of separation, and their difficulty to control their emotional reactions to the APs' behaviours. However, responses that could be interpreted as counter-controlling or counter-alienating (e.g., putting pressure onto the child to decide in favour of TP) were not always acknowledged as such by some participants. Being strongminded and/or disagreeable was reported by four participants, which might have played a role in their emotional and

behavioural responses. Studies with TPs as participants have not reported findings on TPs' reactions to the alienation taking place. However, Harman, Leder-Elder and Biringer (2019) that studied the prevalence of adults who feel they are targets of PABs, found that TPs engage in fewer PABs than APs but, in cases where parents put the child in loyalty binds, TPs tend to reciprocate PABs. Moreover, Johnston et al. (2005a), using data from archival databases of litigating families, reported that "although one parent was more likely to behave in an alienating manner than the other, to some extent reciprocal alienation occurred, exposing the child to the stress of escalated conflict" (p.206). However, Johnston and colleagues' study included not only alienated but also estranged families, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions.

Discrepancy in findings between this study and other studies with TPs as participants, may be related to methodological differences, differences in the ways the interviews were conducted, and the length of interviews. The interviews in this study lasted much longer than interviews in other studies and this may have contributed to participants feeling more at ease and "opening-up". Although the researcher could observe loyalty binds in a few cases, these were not acknowledged as such by participants, and there is a possibility that TPs demonstrated some denial to protect themselves from unwanted feelings. Nevertheless, it seems that PA would occur regardless of their responses, due to the AP's strong repressed emotions and subsequent behaviours. It would be worth examining further whether awareness of PA, knowledge on loyalty conflicts, and professional guidance around how to respond to APs' controlling/alienating behaviours, could influence the intensity of the alienating behaviours from the AP.

4.3.6. The alienated child

According to TPs, children demonstrated a need to remain loyal to APs, and not to be seen to betray them. Children's belief seemed to be that choosing the TP over the AP, would mean that they have broken the AP's trust. Children overtly and covertly received the message that they were not "allowed" to love both parents and assigned to them the labels of "good" and "bad". These descriptions can indicate the children's "captivity" in loyalty binds, with splitting being one means to cope with these emotionally difficult situations. Woodall and Woodall (2017), using psychoanalytic theories (e.g., Klein, 1946; Winnicott, 1989) have explained this process. Due to the intolerable experience of having to reject one parent to ameliorate the behaviours of the other parent, "the child splits off the powerless and vulnerable aspect of the self as a separate object representation. This inability to hold an integrated sense of self is then projected outwards and manifests itself as a secondary split" (p.78). This leads the child to perceiving one parent as entirely good and the other as entirely bad. Ferenczi's concept of "identification with the aggressor" is also relevant. The child feeling overwhelmed by an unavoidable threat, becomes transfixed by the aggressor's behaviour and wishes, and automatically, by mimicry rather than purposeful identification, subordinate themselves to the will of the aggressor (Ferenczi, 1949). Hoping to survive, the child senses and "becomes" precisely what the attacker expects of them (Frankel, 2002). Children in this study were presented as having "become" the same person as the AP, and mimicry was frequently reported.

Splitting (or "lack of ambivalence") as a distinguishing sign of PA has been emphasised by some authors and researchers (e.g., Kopetski, 1998a, 1998b; Lee & Olesen, 2001; Baker, 2006; Bernet *et al.*, 2017; Jaffe *et al.*, 2017). Bernet and colleagues (2017) found

that severely alienated children engaged in a high level of splitting and that splitting was not evident in children of other family groups (children in intact families, children of divorced parents in regular contact with both, neglected children of divorced parents who lived with their mothers and did not have contact with their fathers).

This study also found that, in two-thirds of the sample, the alienation started when the children were between 10 and 14 years of age, and that the requests for autonomy, linked to the adolescent years, fuelled the alienation. This is similar to findings of previous studies that suggested that the children most vulnerable to become alienated are of pre-adolescent and adolescent age (Waldron & Joanis, 1996; Johnston et al., 2005b).

With regards to alienated children's personality characteristics, being emotionally astute and intelligent, and understanding their parents' emotional needs, was reported by a few participants. This was linked to having compliant personality traits, not wanting to upset others, and taking up a responsibility to protect. Their non-alienated siblings were described as impartial, resilient and "easy-going" characters, who externalised their distress. These characteristics may play a role in children's capacity to deal with changes and transitional adjustments. Past research on personality characteristics of alienated and non-alienated children is very limited and no comparisons can be reliably made. However, Drozd in an interview with Fidler and Bala (2010, as cited in Fidler & Bala, 2010) mentioned resilience, less anxiety-prone personalities and differentiation of self as characteristics of non-alienated children, and internalisation as a temperamental predisposition of children that become alienated.

4.3.7. The role of the “system”

Participants perceived themselves as powerless to protect their children from the harm of the AP, partly due to contributions of the legal system, social services, Cafcass and schools. Issues of control and power imbalance between the parents seemed to be mediated and perpetuated through services, which were also constantly entangled in conflictual triangles. In addition to an adversarial and emotionally draining court process, TPs reported two more interlinked factors that prevented appropriate support from courts and Cafcass. These were non-awareness or “blindness”, which was linked to not having an appropriate legal framework, and non-timely involvement, which is crucial in cases of PA. These findings are consistent to those from other studies with TPs as participants, which have emphasised TPs’ feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction, due to services’ insufficient knowledge on PA (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Whitcombe, 2017; Poustie *et al.*, 2018; O’Sullivan, 2020, Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2021a). The exacerbation of PA, due to court proceedings, has also been suggested by other authors (e.g., Cartwright, 1993; Stoltz & Ney, 2002; Darnall, 2008).

Childress (2015) postulated that the various services and professionals involved in PA assume the role of the “bystander”, who legitimise and validate the false trauma re-enactment narrative of the AP. In addition, Harman, Kruk and Hines (2018) suggested that PA is societally denied and parallelised this denial with the socio-political denial of child abuse a century ago. Using psychoanalytic thinking in the context of services (e.g., Jaques, 1955; Menzies Lyth, 1988; Armstrong & Rustin, 2015), it can be hypothesised that due to the elevated levels of risk, anxiety and fear, linked to PA and protection of children from harm, services are “used” by their individual members to reinforce mechanisms of defence

against anxiety, in particular paranoid-schizoid functioning. These strong social defences can lead to “blindness” (denial), disorientation, resistance to change and perhaps “public panics” (displacement) through the form of fragmented or inadequate policies and frameworks. The services’ responses may mirror TPs’ “blindness” in the beginning of the process, which can also be related to unconsciously protecting themselves from the intolerable anxiety and fear of trying to deal with a situation that entails harmful behaviours towards their children and not knowing how to respond to protect them.

4.4. Critique of the current research

4.4.1. Evaluating quality

Constructivist grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2014) suggest four criteria for assessing quality in grounded theory: credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness. As explained previously (see 2.7.2), the quality of this study was assessed based on these criteria. Credibility refers to the transparency and rigour in data collection and analysis, as well as providing evidence of how the theory emerged. This study included interviews with nine participants, who were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling. Conceptual depth (Nelson, 2016) was used as a benchmark for data generation, as it was deemed more appropriate from a grounded theory perspective, and due to the study’s timeframes. The emergent theoretical categories were deemed by the researcher to have attained sufficient depth of understanding. The systematic coding process and constant comparison of data enabled a strong fit between the data and resulting model. The researcher also engaged in thorough memo-writing to keep an audit trail of the methodological procedure and to facilitate self and relational reflexivity.

Originality means that the GT study offers new insights regarding a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). This study's purpose was to examine the relational processes and individual factors involved in the development of PA, something which is under-researched. Despite the study's limitations, new findings emerged that have potential clinical and research implications. These are discussed later in this chapter.

Resonance refers to the study not only portraying participants' experience but also offering insight to other individuals for which it may be relevant. It was intended that member checking would be used to actively involve participants in discussing and confirming the findings (Birt *et al.*, 2016); however, this could not occur due to time restrictions. The researcher believes that the resonance and importance of this study will be better assessed following its dissemination with organisations and groups related to PA. The researcher will be in contact with them, provide summaries of the study and will hold discussions with interested individuals to understand their positioning in relation to the study. Similarly, usefulness of a study, the fourth criterion suggested to evaluate Constructivist GT, will be better assessed following its dissemination. Nevertheless, it is suggested that this grounded theory study, presenting a process of the development of PA, offers useful interpretations and new insights that could have practical applications and contribute to new lines of research.

4.4.2. Strengths

This study explored the mechanisms involved in the development of PA from the perspective of TPs. Research on this topic is in its infancy, and, therefore, the findings of this study offer significant contributions to formulating PA. Previous studies have

examined individual factors in isolation, have included parents, whose children's rejection was both justified and unjustified (e.g., Johnston, 2003; Johnston *et al.*, 2005a), or have explored TPs' experience of PA but without focusing on its developmental process. Moreover, this seems to be the first grounded theory study on the development of PA, and the second conducted in the UK that included TPs as participants.

Emphasis was given on the in-depth exploration of pre- and post-separation relationships and family dynamics, as well as on the intersection of individual, relational and systemic characteristics. Couples' relationships before separation and the changes that occurred in the family over time have not been previously researched in the context of PA. Pre-separation alienating signs were reported, which are important to consider for distinguishing families that may be more at risk of developing PA after separation or divorce. Family relational patterns and scripts were examined, an area where PA research is still lacking. This is linked to APs' and TPs' parenting practices and ways of relating with their children, something that is also under-researched. The presence of alienated and non-alienated children in the same family allowed comparisons between them and contributed to the emergence of preliminary findings related to children's susceptibility and protective characteristics.

Participants in this study were in different time points in the process of PA. Although all of them were separated, for some the alienating process had recently started and for others PA was established for many years. These differences contributed to offering multiple perspectives and helped map out the process of PA. For example, TPs, who had been experiencing PA for years and/or those, who had received extensive therapeutic input, could put themselves in the position of the observer and were willing to discuss their

perceived reactions and personality characteristics that could have fuelled the parental conflict and the APs' behaviours. They were also more likely to be less involved in the emotional turmoil and disorientation, which usually characterises the early years of PA. For others, the involvement of the court had been recent with high-conflict and animosity reported in the relationship between the parents. TPs' perspective whilst being in this situation has also been very valuable to understand the PA process.

Another strong point in this study was the richness of data collected. The length of the interviews along with the researcher's background (see 4.6) enabled the development of a good relationship between the researcher and participants, who were able to open-up and reflect upon their experiences. This, in turn, facilitated the emergence of complex and rich data, which were analysed in detail and were systematically explored. The follow-up questions addressed to a few participants contributed to the richness of data by examining further TPs' and APs' relational scripts. This study also included a pre-interview screening questionnaire, aiming to enhance the sample's representativeness. Participants were asked to answer PA-related questions that were based on previous literature (Warshak, 2001; Baker & Darnall, 2007), to ensure that they meet the study's inclusion criteria. This has been a limitation for most previous studies that included TPs as participants.

Finally, being positioned as an observer to the whole research process can be considered a strength. The researcher had no direct or indirect personal experience of PA, IPV, child protection or custody-related proceedings. This contributes to the reduction of researcher's biases, and data collection and analysis were approached in a more objective stance. Coming from a not-knowing position also helped in approaching the topic with intense

curiosity. The researcher's curiosity and strong interest on PA facilitated the TPs' externalisations of their, often, unacknowledged and societally denied experience.

4.4.3. Limitations

This study has certain limitations, which should be noted. Despite the use of the screening questionnaire, the sample's representativeness can still be problematic. Data was collected from parents, who were recruited through PA-related organisations and a psychological centre specialising in PA. The self-identification as TPs assumes that parents are honest about the absence of true abuse allegations, and one cannot guarantee the inclusion of estranged parents. The researcher agrees with the point made by Harman and colleagues (2021) that verifying PA through other means, such as custody evaluations or through Cafcass in the UK, would enhance the sample's representativeness and the study's trustworthiness.

Another limitation is that the data collected and the resultant model stem only from the perspective of TPs and does not encompass the views of the AP, the alienated and non-alienated children, or the perspectives of extended families. Family members can have distinct interpretations about issues of separation, conflict, quality and power in relationships, parenting, etc. Moreover, when families are pulled apart and their members are interviewed individually, researchers have a limited view of the relational processes at play. It would, therefore, be beneficial if future studies could include interviews with different family members of the same family to identify converging and discrepant points.

Participants in this study were limited in number, demographic characteristics and PA-related characteristics (i.e., perceived severity of PA, custody arrangements). The number

of participants is not necessarily problematic in terms of the study's resonance and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), since GT focuses on identifying and developing concepts based on a few, but intensive, data collection endeavours (Charmaz, 2014). All participants identified as White, with most of them being White British. The lack of ethnic and cultural diversity means that collecting varied perspectives might have been compromised. Only one woman participated in the study, which could mean that the findings do not reflect all targeted mothers' experiences of PA. Previous studies that included TPs as participants also recruited significantly more men than women (e.g., Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001; Whitcombe, 2017; O'Sullivan, 2020), with the exception of Matthewson's research group (i.e., Poustie *et al.*, 2018; Lee-Maturana *et al.*, 2020, 2021a), where fathers and mothers had equal representation, or mothers had even more (i.e., Poustie *et al.*, 2018). Poustie, Matthewson and Balmer (2018) relied only on written accounts of participants through an online survey and did not conduct interviews. This is an important observation, as it may imply that mothers find it more difficult to narrate their story, perhaps due to the impact of societal gender roles onto their identity. Women may experience PA in different ways than men, something that was also expressed by the woman in this study, who talked about the impact of societal parenting expectations on people's perceptions, and how this had affected her identity as a mother and as a person. It may therefore be that, as suggested by some researchers (e.g., Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Bow *et al.*, 2009), mothers and fathers can equally become alienated, but it is more likely that fathers feel more comfortable to share their experiences than mothers. Future research should look to include more women as TPs to help understand possible differences in parents' experiences and in the process of development of PA.

In addition, all but one participant perceived the alienation as severe. This can be linked to their custody status and the contact they had with their children. All participants reported that their alienated children did not live with them, and most of them had not seen their children for months or years. No parent had primary care of the children. This coincides with previous studies that the AP is more likely the one who has custody of children (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Harman *et al.*, 2018). However, due to the reported severity of PA, findings in this study may be mitigated and possibly less applicable to mild or moderate cases of PA. It would be valuable if future PA studies could incorporate parents or families with different severity levels.

Moreover, this study may have attracted TPs who were more interested than others to share their experiences and this may have led to social desirability and response biases. Recall biases cannot be ruled out either, since some findings were based on participants' retrospective narratives, for example when they recollected the beginning of relationship with their ex-partners and the challenges experienced throughout the relationship.

Finally, a wide perspective was taken to examine the multiple interconnected factors that emerged during the interviews. Although this wide scope was necessary given the lack of research in the development of PA, it has led the researcher to delve deeper into some categories than others. Subsequently, there were aspects of the study that demanded a lengthier examination but, due to lack of time and resources, they were addressed in a less thorough way. For example, less attention was given to TPs' perceptions of the alienated child and their reflections on their children's journeys through the alienating process. Also, whilst participants talked about the relationship with their children before separation, the researcher could have pursued that further, for example through exploration of the child's

attachment to the parent, the meaning of this relationship for TPs, and the impact of the relationship in their identity as parents. It is also worth reporting that a couple of participants described disengaged relationships with children from previous marriages and attributed this to either geographical distance or lack of understanding of human relationships. Although this was not claimed to be the case with their alienated children, it would merit further exploration to better understand how their relationship was different between their children identified as “disengaged” and those identified as “alienated”.

4.5. Study implications

4.5.1. Further research

The findings from this study manifest the need to examine thoroughly and holistically the developmental trajectories of families that experience PA. Although significant efforts have been made to understand PA post-separation, there is scarcity of research around the pre-separation period. The researcher believes that this is crucial to better understand the foundations of PA, to distinguish families more at risk, and to implement appropriate interventions. Future research should also investigate further the triadic relationship between APs, TPs and alienated/non-alienated children, aiming to gain a better picture of the family dynamics. The role of the “system” in perpetuating PA should also be explored through interviews with legal or social care professionals, an area where research in the UK is lacking.

Considering the findings of this study, some specific suggestions are made for future research. In addition to past trauma and abuse, this study found that a family history of disengaged relationships may predispose certain families to experience PA. Previous

studies have reported the repetition of PA patterns in families but have not extensively investigated relational patterns in parents' families-of-origin. Attachment-informed PA research could help identify the mechanisms through which relational patterns and trauma can be transmitted across generations. The TPs' and APs' ways of parenting and the relational dynamics with their children before and after separation also require further research. Although there is more consensus in the academic community about the characteristics of APs and the roles they play in their families, findings are inconsistent for TPs. This is the first study to report that TPs held a protective, peacekeeping or mediating role in both their families-of-origin and procreation. The assumption of these roles by the TPs before the development of PA might indicate a repetition of previous relational roles. Further research is needed to elucidate these roles and to explore the function and meaning of TPs' taking a protective role in relationships with significant others. It would also be beneficial to examine differences in TPs who report disengaged relationships with their families-of-origin with those who do not. This may help identify parents who may be more at risk of experiencing PA after separation.

Given the couples' power imbalance and the roles that both APs and TPs assumed in their relationship, it would be worth examining further the dominant-compliant dynamic through the lens of both IPV/power and attachment. It is suggested that Crittenden's dynamic-maturational model of attachment and adaptation (DMM, 2006) could be a useful framework for future PA studies to examine power imbalances in couple's relationship. The DMM may also help understand why some PA families resemble IPV cases, whilst others (at least in the pre-separation period) do not. Future research could focus on power in relationships before and after separation and examine how this shifts.

Identifying specific pre-separation “signs” or manifestations of PA is another area for future research. In addition to couple power imbalances, this study found conflictual relationships and control struggles between one of the parents and a grandmother. The contribution of extended families in creation of triangles and PA needs additional exploration. This study also found that whilst couples were still together, some APs struggled to “share” their children with the other parent and feared that their children would be taken away. This seemed to be linked to early distortions of reality and cutting-off relationships with TPs’ extended families. Investigating early in the process the APs’ perceptions of the TP-child relationship and the impact this may have on their parental identity may help understand APs’ “cognitive distortions” and the reasons behind their alienating behaviours. Similarly, childbirth was a crucial point of change in family relationships. Further research should aim to confirm whether this has been the case with other PA families and uncover the psychological processes involved during that period. Research designed through an attachment trauma lens could be proved useful.

Another fruitful area of research may be the comparison between characteristics and relational patterns of alienated and non-alienated children. This could help find out why some children are more prone to alienation than others, even in the same family, and whether the relationship between siblings may play some role. The degree of defences, such as projection and splitting, between alienated and non-alienated children could also be investigated and comparisons can be made among cases considered as mild, moderate and severe.

4.5.2. Clinical implications

The suggested theoretical framework can offer potentially significant contributions to mental health, social care and legal professionals working in the field of high-conflict separation/divorce and child custody. The model can be used to inform the current Cafcass framework and facilitate discussions about amendments that need to happen to improve the assessment and socio-legal management of PA. This study's dissemination is hoped to help not only professionals in the field but also TPs, whether they are in the beginning of their "awakening" process or whether they are fully aware and are involved in support and advocacy themselves. It may also help TPs understand the motivations behind their children's behaviours, the destructive power of the other parent's coercive control and the necessity to remain emotionally healthy to be able to help their children. Understanding the mechanisms through which PA develops is paramount in order to conduct appropriate assessments, identify families who may be more at risk and develop timely and appropriate interventions.

Complexity exists in understanding PA. Embracing it, rather than avoiding it, is crucial to help individuals and services move forward. PA is complex because of the many factors contributing to it. Although there are similarities between different PA cases, not one case is the same as the other. This is because relationships are not "black and white", they include complex relational dynamics, which are associated to attachment and power. The findings of this study emphasise the importance of a thorough multi-factorial assessment that will include family members (extended family, if needed) together and separately, and many different tools (e.g., clinical interviews, observations, detailed developmental and family history, projective testing, Adult/Child Attachment Interview, etc.). Moreover, the

professional conducting this type of assessment should have specialist knowledge in attachment, trauma and family dynamics.

According to the model presented, assessment can include, but not be limited to, the following points: a) Attachment patterns and family scripts, which can help ascertain the presence of disengaged and/or enmeshed relationships (e.g., lack of boundaries, inverted hierarchies) in parents' families-of-origin and procreation. The clinician should be alert to any histories of trauma/abuse, rejection, abandonment and loss but also to any histories suggesting that one parent may normally undertake a mediator, protector or peacekeeper role. This is also linked to an assessment of both parents' parenting practices, b) Assessment of personality profiles and the presence/absence of narcissistic traits, "distorted" picture of reality, and unhelpful defences, c) The presence of defences and distortions may also be evident through false abuse/neglect allegations and through other alienating behaviours. The assessment of alienating behaviours and signs before and after separation is paramount, as well as ascertaining whether alienating behaviours are unidirectional or bidirectional. The frequency, intensity and reciprocity of alienating behaviours should be clarified, as well as the presence of loyalty binds, d) Assessment for the presence/absence of abuse towards the child and the other parent. Power and control issues in the parental dyad has to be carefully examined from the time when the couple were still in a relationship. This is crucial as an intervention might be different if a dominant-compliant dynamic exists, which may require an approach, adopting elements of IPV interventions, e) Assessment of splitting in the child, which may indicate trauma displacement from the AP to the child. Splitting is key in differentiating PA from other reasons of rejection, f) Finally, it may be worth exploring the foundation of relationship

between the couples and their responses to significant life changes and stressors, particularly their emotional states and behaviours around the time of childbirth.

With regards to the involvement of legal and social services in PA, TPs accounts in this study demonstrated that they may, unintentionally, perpetuate PA, due to lack of knowledge, non-timely intervention, and absence of appropriate frameworks. Moreover, the power imbalance between the parents seems to be mediated through services. For these reasons, carefully designed training for involved professionals is crucial, as well as re-evaluation of the current Cafcass assessment framework in light of new research, relevant to the UK context. So far, in the UK, training on PA for legal and mental health practitioners has been minimal (Whitcombe, 2017). It is also suggested that a child protection framework might be more appropriate, considering that children experiencing PA are victims of repetitive emotional abuse, coercion and manipulation. A combination of psychoeducation, consultation and reflective group sessions for Cafcass and social care professionals, led on a regular basis by specialised psychologists or psychotherapists is also important. These sessions could help understand the underpinnings, manifestations and ramifications of PA, acknowledge professionals' triangulation into conflict, contain systemic and individual anxieties, and help with tolerating uncertainty and maintaining hope, whilst holding significant risk. Raising awareness of PA in schools and educational settings is also strongly recommended, so that school staff can understand the role they may inadvertently play.

Furthermore, services' intervention often comes too late, after psychological damage has occurred to the child, the TP and the relationship between them (Greenberg & Schneider, 2020). The current study demonstrated that manifestations of PA are often present before

the parental separation. The need for prevention, early identification and immediate intervention, with courts acting promptly and firmly is, therefore, significant. This has also been highlighted by others (e.g., Templer *et al.*, 2017; Marcus, 2020). The model suggested in this study can be used to inform therapeutic interventions, which, at least in the UK, are currently provided privately and not by statutory services (Whitcombe, 2017). The findings suggest that an integrative intervention containing elements of attachment-based, trauma-informed and structural/strategic family therapy may be more appropriate. Interventions should be tailored to each family's characteristics and dynamics, and not to be a "one-size fits all" approach. A consistent and co-ordinated legal and psychological management approach is necessary, with professional roles clearly defined (Sullivan & Kelly, 2001; Templer *et al.*, 2017).

Psychologists and psychotherapists have a vital role in supporting TPs feel better equipped to protect their child from the APs' harmful behaviours. Holding in mind the unequal power distribution and the AP's and child's projection of the split off qualities towards TPs, they need to empower them and lessen the power of APs. This may occur by gradually having the TP assume more responsibility over the child. Psychoeducation can help in identifying harmful projections and recognising patterns of behaviours. Additionally, offering guidance to TPs on how to respond to APs controlling behaviours can contribute to moderation of emotional responses and less conflict. Clinicians also have an important role in providing a psychological formulation to the court to justify the need for increased contact between the child and the TP and, if needed, to recommend more drastic measures, such as change of custody. This has been suggested as an effective way to reduce

psychological distress in the child and improve the relationship between the child and the parent (Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Gardner, 2001; Rand *et al.*, 2005; Templer *et al.*, 2017).

4.6. Researcher's reflexive account

It has been four years since this journey in the world of PA started. My interest in family relationships and my background in family therapy and developmental psychology were strong reasons to decide to delve into this topic. From the beginning, I was aware that I was going to be involved in a quite complex phenomenon, although my knowledge on PA was very limited and probably, if asked, I would not have been able to explain exactly what it is. Discussing it with others in different professional fields, I realised they had not even heard of the term. This possibly demonstrates how unaware the public is in relation to PA, although I can see a change over these years, possibly due to the influence of media and more organised attempts from PA groups. I believe that my limited knowledge on the topic and, at the same time, my training background helped in many different aspects. Not being aware of the mechanisms of PA contributed to being more curious about people's experiences and helped in the conduction of genuine interviews. My background training gave me an advantage as to being more attuned to family dynamics and feeling better able to conceptualise people's experiences, using systemic thinking.

My personal experiences and values also contributed to the way this research was conducted. Being a mother helped me relate and empathise with parents' experiences, as at least I know how it feels to love and care for your children. What I did not know (and I hope I will never do) is the pain involved in "losing" your child. During the interviews, a few parents expressed their devastation for losing their relationship with their child, whilst knowing they are alive, which resembled like a mourning without a closure. What seemed

even more intolerable was the knowledge that their child was emotionally harmed on a regular basis by the other parent, but they did not have the power to do much about it. The stories that I heard were overwhelming and had, at times, not only an emotional but also a somatic effect (e.g., upset stomach, feeling disorientated), particularly those heard when having face-to-face interviews with participants. This may be an effect of transference and can only provide a slight glimpse of what these parents feel on a daily basis.

Similar to what participants described, I also place high value in families staying together. I come from a culture that family is considered important, possibly due to the influence that religion still has on people's lives. I believe that hierarchy between grandparents, parents and children is essential so that members of the family system are clear of their roles and responsibilities. I see family as an organisational system, where parents have to work together as a team to promote the functioning of its members and to enhance their well-being. These values have predisposed me in a certain way towards this piece of work. During the process, particularly in the transcribing stage, I found myself feeling upset, even angry at times, due to children's lack of protection from their parents and from the courts. I got into dialogues with myself, trying to find ways to disbelieve some of the stories I heard, and then feeling guilty for doing so. These were attempts to defend myself from anxiety, from the exposure to the pain and suffering of targeted parents and from the reality that their children were harmed. This study on PA has been a revelation journey for me, feeling, like the participants, that I was "blinded" in the beginning and then managed to and see things through. This may be the way most professionals feel when they come across families experiencing PA. Being able to recognise their defences and understand their feelings is important to be able to provide support to these families that suffer.

In addition, it should be noted that it has been sometimes difficult to disentangle my role as a researcher and the one as a therapist. The doctorate in clinical psychology entails both clinical work and research and, as explained previously, I had some therapy training before. I believe that my therapeutic experience helped participants develop a good rapport with me and feel able to “open up” due to my empathetic stance. PA is an emotive topic and parents, who participated in the interviews, knew in advance that the conversations would bring up painful emotions. Being aware of this, I felt it was important to make participants feel at ease. The interviews were longer than research interviews normally last. This was due to a combination of factors, such as the emotional nature of our conversations and parents needing more time to recount their rich stories, as well as my own curiosity and meticulousness. Knowing that I was a trainee psychologist, a couple of participants asked me questions related to what they could have done differently or how they could find solutions. This happened towards the end of the interviews, and I felt it would be appropriate to pose some questions back to the participants to help them reflect on their experiences. Some others, after our interview, realised that it would be beneficial to receive support from a therapist or a psychologist.

Finally, to maintain the integrity of the study, I felt that the encouragement or assumption of a political stance in the PA debate should be avoided. Polarisation currently exists between feminist groups, who argue against the prevalence of PA, and fathers’ rights groups, who claim the pervasiveness of PA. Holding no loyalty to either group and taking a neutral stance, I believe helped in the study’s trustworthiness. Although there were times in the interviews where a few male participants expressed their view that mothers are favoured in the legal process and are given the custody due to gender-role stereotypes, I

chose not to encourage these conversations, as I felt it could possibly lead to accusations against women and would diverge from the aims of research. However, it has to be noted that there were times during the interviews with a few male participants that I felt uncomfortable, or I was left questioning about the intention behind their comments, when for example they made references to female psychologists or legal practitioners taking sides and possibly hinting that because of my gender, I might not fully believe them or understand their circumstances. At the same time, when interviewing the only woman, I felt that I could relate more with her as a mother. This connection retrospectively made me re-examine my relationship with certain males in the interviews, perceive their comments from different perspectives and better understand how my gender could influence the process of the interviews.

4.7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the process of development of PA from the perspective of TPs. The systematic review conducted demonstrated that there are very few studies that have approached PA from the TPs' perspective, and all but one had focused on understanding parents' experiences rather than examining specifically the psychological mechanisms through which PA may develop. Constructive GT was utilised, and the resultant theoretical model was grounded to participants' experiences. Assuming a developmental perspective of family life, the model suggested brought together interrelated intrapersonal, relational, intergenerational, and systemic factors that contribute to the development and perpetuation of PA. Amongst the many findings of this study, those that were stronger were: the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns; the APs' struggles to manage overwhelming emotions; inverted hierarchies and role reversal from

APs; APs' abusive/controlling behaviours towards TPs and children; alienating behaviours, such as blocking parental contact and making allegations of abuse; and services inadvertently mediating the power imbalance between APs and TPs. Despite this study's limitations, the findings lead to a number of contributions to clinicians, social workers and legal professionals working with families that experience PA or may be at risk of developing PA, following separation/divorce. This study highlighted the need for further research, incorporating the views of more family members, in order to better understand the processes underpinning the development of PA.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies & quality assessment of studies included in the systematic review

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Appendix 1: CASP checklist & quality assessment of studies

Table 1

Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies

CASP checklist	Responses			
	Yes	No	Can't tell	Comments
Section A: Are the results valid?				
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?				
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?				
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?				
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?				
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?				
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?				
Section B: What are the results?				
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?				
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?				
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?				
Section C: Will the results help locally?				
10. How valuable is the research?	Comments:			

Table 2*Quality assessment of studies included in the systematic review using CASP*

CASP checklist	Finzi-Dottan et al. (2012)	Harman et al. (2021)	Lee-Maturana et al. (2020)	Lee-Maturana et al. (2021a)	O'Sullivan (2020)	Poustie et al. (2018)	Tavares et al. (2021)	Vassiliou & Cartwright (2001)	Whitcombe (2017)
1. Clear statement of aims	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Qualitative methodology appropriateness	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3. Research design appropriateness	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, but methodological process not explicitly discussed	Yes, but no mention of how researchers decided which method to use	Yes	Yes, but limited justification	Yes
4. Recruitment strategy appropriateness	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, but unclear selection criteria	Yes
5. Data collection addressing the research issue	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Can't tell
6. Relationship between researcher & participants adequately considered	No	Yes	No	Can't tell (just acknowledge that researcher bias may have influenced the results)	No	No	No	No	No

Table 2 (continued)

7. Ethical issues considered	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
8. Data analysis sufficiently rigorous	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	No	No
9. Clear statement of findings	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10. How valuable is the research	Findings broaden the knowledge on PA. Researchers discuss new areas of research & practical implications.	First study to qualitatively evaluate power dynamics in families experiencing PA from the perspective of TPs. However, no discussion of clinical & research implications.	Among very few studies that explore the consequences of PA for TPs & their coping mechanisms. Makes recommendations for psychological/legal interventions & research implications.	Adds to the limited existing literature on PA from the perspectives of TPs. Quality criteria used by researchers and member checking conducted. Clinical/research implications discussed.	Clinical implications discussed but very limited mention of research implications. Study covers main points but would benefit from more explicit reporting and better justification of rationale, data collection & analysis.	Clinical and research implications discussed. However, the analysis relies only on written accounts of participants/non-verbal and/or visual material did not exist. No opportunities for clarifying responses or eliciting further data, which limits credibility of study.	Provides insights onto the impact of PA on TPs' and their coping strategies. Limitations & implications discussed. It would benefit from researchers critically examining their bias & influence.	Important methodological limitations (no report of method of analysis used). However, an influential study, as the first to explore TP's lived experiences of PAS.	Limitations of study's value due to methodological issues. Discussion on study's contribution took place.

Participant information sheet

Study title: The targeted parents' perspective on the development of parental alienation

Invitation to the study

You are being invited to take part in a research study on parental alienation. This research is conducted by Angeliki Kaloudi, a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Essex. Before agreeing to participate, please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is parental alienation?

Parental alienation is when a child unfairly criticises and rejects a parent that he/she previously had a relationship with. For the purposes of this study, the rejection is one that is considered unjustified by the parent and lasts for more than six months. This rejection is also partly maintained by the close relationship of the child with the other parent. Parental alienation usually occurs in the context of high-conflict divorce and custody disputes. It is different from estrangement, where the child's decision to put his/her parent at a distance, is a justified and appropriate response (e.g., because they were exposed at risk, violence, or neglect).

What is the purpose of the study?

Little is known about the development of parental alienation and an adequate theoretical foundation is lacking in this area. This study aims to address the gap and explore the process of development of parental alienation.

Who can participate in the study?

Mothers and fathers, who have not had any contact or who have had minimal contact (e.g., only once a month) with their children for a period of at least six months can participate.

Alienation will either be still ongoing or had been ongoing until the children reached 18 years of age. I am looking for parents where: a) their children continuously reject/criticise them, b) they feel this rejection/criticism is unjustified and c) they feel the rejection is/was partly the result of the other parent's influence and behaviours, e.g., through denial of visitation rights, child's brainwashing, etc. It is expected that for some parents it may be difficult to self-identify as having experienced parental alienation, as this may not be a concept they are familiar with.

What does participation in this research study involve?

You will be initially asked to complete a brief questionnaire, which includes questions on alienation and demographic information, and sign a consent form. After this, you will be invited to an interview to discuss your experience. We can agree together the place of the interview. Your participation will take approximately an hour. The interview conversations will be audio recorded. Following this, I will transcribe the audio recording.

How will the researcher protect my confidentiality?

Your responses and the information you provide will be kept completely confidential and anonymous. I will take responsibility for storing the data in a safe place (electronic data will be password protected). My research supervisors will also have access to the data, if required. The data will only be used for the purposes of this study and will be stored until the study ends. Data will, then, be deleted.

What are the benefits of participation?

Your participation in the interview can contribute to the psychological understanding of parental alienation. Your experiences and insight could help psychologists and therapists design potentially useful interventions.

The role of the researcher in the study

As parental alienation is a litigious context, you may have reservations about talking openly and honestly regarding this topic. I ensure potential participants that I have no role in the legal process. My only intent is to gain an understanding about the process of alienation. I

will not take part in any future court proceedings and what you say will not be used in court unless there are risks involved (please see section below).

Are there any risks involved in this study?

If you decide to participate in the interview, you may experience some distress, as you recount your experiences. I will give you the option to stop the interview and/or re-schedule it for another time. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and any information you have provided will be destroyed (unless you state otherwise). If you feel that you require further support, I will provide a list of counselling and psychological services. In addition, if you disclose something that involves imminent harm to you or others, I will have to take necessary steps to ensure your or the other person's safety. In these circumstances, I may have to break confidentiality and take steps to refer you to a qualified professional. Please ask any questions you may have about this issue before agreeing to participate in the study.

What will happen to the results of this research study?

The results of this study will be published, and your words may be used as quotes, but your name and other identifiable information will not be included.

Ethical approval

This research study has been reviewed on behalf of the University of Essex Ethics Committee and had been given favourable opinion.

Concerns and complaints

Please address any concerns or complaints to me (see contact details below) in the first instance. You can also contact my research supervisor, Dr Frances Blumenfeld (see below). If you are still concerned or you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (see below).

Contact details for further information

Doctoral researcher

Angeliki Kaloudi, Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, School of Health & Social Care, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ. Email: ak16022@essex.ac.uk

Supervisor, Programme Director and Clinical Lead

Dr Frances Blumenfeld, Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, School of Health & Social Care, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ. Email: fblume@essex.ac.uk.
Tel: 01206 873125

University of Essex Research Governance and Planning Manager

Sarah Manning-Press, Research & Enterprise Office, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, CO4 3SQ, Colchester. Email: sarahm@essex.ac.uk. Tel: 01206 873561.

Appendix 3: Participant consent form

CONSENT FORM

Research title: The targeted parents' perspective on the development of parental alienation

Name of doctoral researcher: Angeliki Kaloudi (supervised by Dr Frances Blumenfeld & Dr Susan McPherson)

Please initial box

1. I have read all the information provided in the participants' information sheet and I am aware of what the study entails. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions, which were answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without penalty.

3. I agree that the researcher will use audio recorder during the interview.

4. I understand that identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher and her supervisors and that confidentiality will be maintained, unless there is a requirement for disclosure, such as disclosure of illegal activity or a safeguarding issue that puts the participant or a child at risk.

5. I understand that data collected in this research study might be shared as appropriate and for publication of findings, in which case data will remain completely anonymous.

6. I give permission for quotes from my interview to be used in the publication of the study anonymously.

7. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant's name

Date:

Participant's signature:

Researcher's name:

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Appendix 4: Participant screening questionnaire

Initial questionnaire

Research title: The targeted parents' perspective on the development of parental alienation.

Please complete the following information and return this questionnaire to Angeliki Kaloudi, doctoral student – email: ak16022@essex.ac.uk. Your responses will remain confidential.

Date: _____

Your age: _____

Your gender: _____

Your ethnic background: _____ City/area of residence:

1. How would you describe your current employment status?

2. How would you describe your current relationship status (please circle)?

Single Co-habiting Married Other (please specify)-

3. How would you describe your current relationship with your ex-partner/spouse?

4. Number of biological children (please specify if from different partners/spouses):

5. Any other children (please specify):

6. a. Number of biological children from whom you are alienated:

b. Gender and age of alienated (biological) children:

7. a. Number of any other children (e.g., stepchildren/adopted) from whom you are alienated:

b. Gender and age of alienated (other) children:

The following questions are related to the child/children you are alienated from:

8. Were you married to the child's/children's mother/father (please circle)? Yes No

9. Length of marriage/relationship (in years or months):

10. How many years/months has it been since the initiation of separation/divorce?

11. a. Do any of the alienated children currently live with you (please circle)? Yes

No

b. If yes, how many? _____

12. What parenting arrangements do you currently have (please circle)?

- Primary caring parent with whom the children live with

- Parent with parenting time arrangements/visitation

- Parent with supervised visitation

- Shared residency

- No caring responsibility (parenting time, visitation or shared residency)

- Other

13. What were your parenting arrangements when you separated?

14. Has this changed and when?

Appendix 5: Initial interview topic guide

Interview topic guide

Study title: The targeted parents' perspective on the development of parental alienation

Relationships before & after separation/divorce

- Change in relationships over time: with ex-partner/spouse & child/children
- The lead-up to separation/divorce
- New relationships after divorce & impact of those on other relationships

Development and causes of alienation

- Description of the process of alienation: start, duration, change over time, etc.
- Alienating behaviours by the child towards the parent.
- Influence of the alienating parent on the child's behaviour
- Their perceived role in the alienation
- The role of extended families
- The impact of court proceedings (and allegations, if any) on relationships

Looking back and looking forward

- Actions taken to stop/remediate the alienation.
- Plans for the future
- Hopes for reconciliation
- If the alienation has ceased, the circumstances that made this possible
- Impact of alienation on parent's life and well-being
- Feelings about their interview participation

Appendix 6: Amended interview topic guide

Interview topic guide

Study title: The targeted parents' perspective on the development of parental alienation

Introduction

Thank participant

Introduce study and its aims

Reminder of confidentiality and anonymity

Recording

Right to withdraw from study

Time constraints for interview

Checking for questions

Interview guide

Initial question: *As I could see from the brief questionnaire that you completed, you have X children that you don't manage to see, and that alienation takes place. Can you tell me more about your experience of alienation?*

Relationships before & after separation/divorce

- Change in relationships over time: with ex-partner/spouse & child/children
- The lead-up to separation/divorce
- New relationships after divorce & impact of those on other relationships

Possible prompting questions:

- *How did your relationship with your children change over time?*
- *How did your relationship with your ex-partner change over time?*
- *What do you think led to your separation?*
- *How would you describe your relationship with your ex-partner prior to separation?*
- *After the separation, did you form any other romantic relationships and, if yes, how did this new relationship/s affect your relationship with your child/ren and your ex-partner?*

Development and causes of alienation

- Description of the process of alienation: start, duration, change over time, etc.

- Alienating behaviours by the child towards the parent.
- Influence of the alienating parent on the child's behaviour
- Their perceived role in the alienation
- The role of extended families
- The impact of court proceedings (and allegations, if any) on relationships

Possible prompting questions:

- *When and how did you realise that alienation was taking place?*
- *How was the alienation manifested?*
- *What influence did/does your ex-partner have on your children's behaviours?*
- *Is there anything from your side that made you think that somehow you contributed to the alienation taking place?*
- *What has the role of the extended families been?*
- *What was the impact of court proceedings on the relationship with your children and your ex-partner?*
- *What was the impact of false allegations on the relationship with your children and your ex-partner?*

Ending/debriefing

- *Is there something else you think I should know to understand your experience of PA?*
- *Is there anything you would like to ask me?*
- *Further contact arrangements (if needed) and sharing study's findings.*

Appendix 7: Confidentiality agreement for transcription

Confidentiality Agreement for Transcription

Research Study Title: “Targeted parents’ perspective on the development of Parental Alienation: A Grounded Theory study”.

I, [REDACTED] as a transcriber of this study, understand that I will be listening to audio recordings of interviews, containing private and confidential information. I understand that the information included in the audio recordings must not be shared with any third parties, except the researcher, Angeliki Kaloudi, who provided access to this data. Violating this agreement or any of the terms set below will be considered breach of contract and can lead to legal consequences. I am confirming that I will strictly adhere to the agreement in full.


I, [REDACTED] agree to maintain full confidentiality of all research data received from the researcher.

Specifically, I agree to the following:

- I will hold in strictest confidence all information pertaining to the identity of any individual that may be revealed during the interview transcriptions.
- I will securely store the contents of the recordings and the files associated with it in password protected documents, inaccessible from anyone else apart myself.
- I will not make copies of any recordings, unless specifically requested to do so by the researcher.
- I will not provide the research data to any third parties.
- I will only break confidentiality, if it is evident from the recordings that there are safeguarding concerns that have not been addressed by legal services, the Police or social services. Due to the nature of the topic, interviews may include conversations around adults or children being at risk. In case I am concerned, I should first discuss the concern with the researcher, prior to taking any action. If no action has been taken, it is the researcher’s responsibility to take actions and speak to the relevant authorities. If the researcher has taken no action, I should discuss my concerns with the researcher’s supervisors at University of Essex, Dr Frances Blumenfeld and Dr Susan McPherson

(Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, School of Health & Social Care, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ. Tel: 01206 873125. Email addresses: fblume@essex.ac.uk, smcpher@essex.ac.uk).

- All data provided for purposes of this transcription, including any back-up records, will be returned to the researcher. When I have received confirmation from the researcher that the transcription work has been satisfactorily completed, all research data that I hold will be permanently destroyed.

Transcriber's name (printed) 

Transcriber's signature:  Date 15/10/20

Appendix 8: Example of line-by-line coding

Interviewer (black), participant (blue)

51 His family were odd. Very controlled, the mother ruled the roost, very controlling, very very
 52 controlling, she didn't want, it was all on her terms as well, so, perhaps one of the things again
 53 from research, there clearly has to be, more likely a family dynamic in the past, so its
 54 intergenerational, she had actually cut off ties with two of her brothers and I never really found
 55 out why so...there has already been some behaviour instilled in the family, you know, in broad
 56 terms if anybody crosses, you cut them out. So, when our marriage failed and there were signs
 57 that it was never going to survive, he was controlling, it was all on his terms, when...he's never
 58 had a relationship previously, not a proper relationship, so his experience of relationships was
 59 none, everything was pretty much based on his needs, so...Things were OK for a couple of
 60 years but he was not very giving, he was not very sensitive towards me. My mum can be a
 61 challenging individual, my ex-husband and my mother definitely.

62 Did they clash?

63 Beyond...very very very vitriolic and I desperately tried to find a working means, you know, I
 64 said to both, "you don't have to like each other but for my sake and ultimately for our children's
 65 sake you need to find a working relationship". Em, and he basically gave me an ultimatum
 66 that it was either him or my mother at some stage and it was just awful, it was just awful.

67 What was the basis of their clash?

68 Control. Control.

69 Control...

70 Sure. He wanted me, he wanted... He basically wanted us to live in this little cocoon
 71 environment originally the two of us, and when the boys came along the four of us, excluding
 72 anybody else.

73 Excluding his family as well?

- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Recognising ex's mum as controlling & not compromising
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Describing disengagement in ex's family-of-origin-intergenerational link
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Not abiding by the rules leading to rejection & disengagement
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Having signs of marriage dissolution early on
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Describing ex as controlling
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Lacking experience in romantic relationships
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Lacking sensitivity, having unmet needs
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Conflicting relationship between ex & her mum. Participant trying to mediate/keep the peace
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Giving an ultimatum, threatening & emotionally abusive behaviour
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Ex & her mum competing over gaining control/power
- KA **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Excluding, isolating, perceiving that he protects them

74 Well, no, no. His family were included but excluding all my family, all my friends, he
75 ostracized my family, he ostracized all my friends. And I am a very sociable person so I ended
76 up becoming the Jekyll and Hyde character and when the boys came along I thought it was
77 fortunate to work part time and I wanted work life balance, you know, have time with the kids
78 and also continue with my career, you know, with some caveats that I realised later, that I
79 could not progress as far as I could do, but I was happy with that, it was the best of both worlds.

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Categorising people, ingroup-outgroup
categorisations

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Describing a change in character, becoming double-
faced to meet his needs

80 Sorry to clarify, you said that he decided that it was him or your mother, so then you cut off
81 the relationship with your mother?

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Trying to achieve work-life balance

82 Well I had to manage that, so I would see my mom with the kids and also my sister when he
83 was working, and the other complication was because he ran his own business and he ran it
84 from home, on the days I wasn't working he would hang around, he wouldn't go, he wouldn't
85 let me be with the boys, you know, and then I had to arrange it so that I see my mum. She
86 came to our home when he wasn't there and I used to get really worried, you know, what time
87 is he going to get home, is she still going to be there, and I had to shoot her out because the
88 conflict was just awful. And I am sure the boys felt it too even though they were so young. It
89 was just awful! (emphasis given).

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Controlling contact with children, isolating her

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Keeping relationship in secret to avoid conflict

90 So, the families didn't meet together? Or your family didn't meet with him or his family?

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Feeling isolated but also in the middle, like being in
two groups

91 Well, I mean at the beginning, it got to that stage that it just completely... you know it stopped,
92 it stopped. So, I would be with the boys and my sister and her kids and my mum and it was
93 completely isolating. I was expected to take the boys over to his parents and play happy
94 families.

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Pretending to have a good relationship

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Lacking social skills

95 And in terms of his relationship with his family, you mentioned estrangement, and I have seen
96 that in other families, it's quite interesting, I am wondering about his relationship with his
97 siblings, if he had any siblings.

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Regretting for not noticing characteristics early in the
relationship

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Having family being beyond expectations

98 Yes, he had (number of siblings) but he was just the most socially inapt person you could have
99 ever possibly met. Well, look back now and I think how I missed such an obvious thing. He
100 had no friends, he didn't drive when we met. This man had never really expected to marry and
101 have children and when the children came it was almost like they were gods, you know, and I

KA Kaloudi, Angeliki
Deifying children

102 was just like the functional birthing person to give him these children and they were put on
103 pedestal, I mean yeah yeah, em he did (university subject) and run a business, but he thought
104 he knew everything, his whole perspective, his knowledge-base was completely distorted.
105 When I was working and I came home from a long day, he got his own business and, yes, on
106 paper it was great, he picked the kids up from nursery and when I got home I wanted to spend
107 time with kids, no, he wouldn't let me do it on my own and we either did it together or not
108 and...it was a constant battle,...and I just knew the divorce would be difficult, I knew the
109 fallout from the divorce would be difficult and when the marriage did come to an end it was
110 just the most awful scene and he took the kids away, I had to go chasing to get them back. He
111 had already created a diary about the things he did for the children, the things I didn't do for
112 the children because I was working.

- KA** **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Assigning role of giving birth to children, undermining other roles she had
- KA** **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Distorting knowledge, "distorted" perspective
- KA** **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Implying a façade
- KA** **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Isolating, controlling, not letting her on her own with children
- KA** **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Separating in dramatic way, children been taken away
- KA** **Kaloudi, Angeliki**
Planning for separation & custody-dispute

Appendix 9: Example of focused coding

The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface. On the left is a navigation pane with sections for 'Quick Access', 'IMPORT', 'Data', 'ORGANIZE', 'Coding', and 'Sentiment'. The 'Coding' section is expanded to show 'Codes', with 'Focused coding 2' selected. The main workspace shows a tree view of codes under 'Focused coding 2'. A table below the tree provides summary statistics for each code.

Name	Files	Refer	Created on	Create	Modified o	Modifi
BEGINNING OF RELATIONSHIP	0	0	30/09/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
HONEYMOON PERIOD	4	6	06/06/202	AK	21/02/202	AK
NOT HAVING A SOLID BASE-GROUND FOR THEIR RELATIONSHIP	6	16	06/06/202	AK	07/06/202	AK
NOT KNOWING THEM WELL ENOUGH OR DISREGARDING SIGNS	6	18	06/06/202	AK	24/05/202	AK
COUPLES DYNAMICS before separation	0	0	30/09/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
COLLUDING, CONDONING, GIVING IN, BACKING OFF, AVOIDING, SURRENDERING & COM	4	25	06/06/202	AK	07/06/202	AK
CONTROLLING, MANIPULATING, EMOTIONAL OR PHYSICAL ABUSE	8	32	06/06/202	AK	24/05/202	AK
DELAYING SEPARATION-STAYING LONGER IN RELATIONSHIP	0	0	06/06/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
attempts to save relationship	6	12	06/06/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
birth of children delaying final separation	2	3	06/06/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
breaking ups before the final separation- some of them occuring from the very beginning	6	12	06/06/202	AK	22/05/202	AK
co-dependency & increased tolerance levels	1	2	06/06/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
previous experience of divorce either own or parents playing a role in not wanting to divor	2	4	06/06/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
staying in the relationship for fear that he won't see his kids again	3	3	06/06/202	AK	24/05/202	AK
Valuing family being together-family loyalties	7	17	06/06/202	AK	27/02/202	AK
DIFFERENCES WITH EACH OTHER	3	10	06/06/202	AK	07/06/202	AK
ENDING RELATIONSHIP	0	0	06/06/202	AK	23/05/202	AK
agreeing to separate- agreements initially re living arrangements	1	5	06/06/202	AK	23/05/202	AK

At the bottom of the workspace, it shows 'AK 276 Items'. The Windows taskbar at the very bottom shows the search bar, system tray with temperature (7°C), time (12:41), and date (27/02/2022).

NVIVO
Parental alien...).nvp

Quick Access

IMPORT

Data

- Files
- File Classifications
- Externals

ORGANIZE

Coding

- Codes
 - Additional questions in...
 - Focused coding 1
 - Focused coding 2
 - Initial codes interview 2
 - Initial codes interview...
 - Initial codes interview 5
 - Initial codes interview 6
 - Initial codes interview...
 - Initial codes interview 9
 - Initial codes interviews...
 - Thematic framework 1
 - Thematic framework 2
- Sentiment

File Home Import Create Explore Share Modules

Clipboard Item Organize Query Visualize Code Autocode Range Code Uncode Case Classification File Classification Workspace

Focused coding 2

Search Project

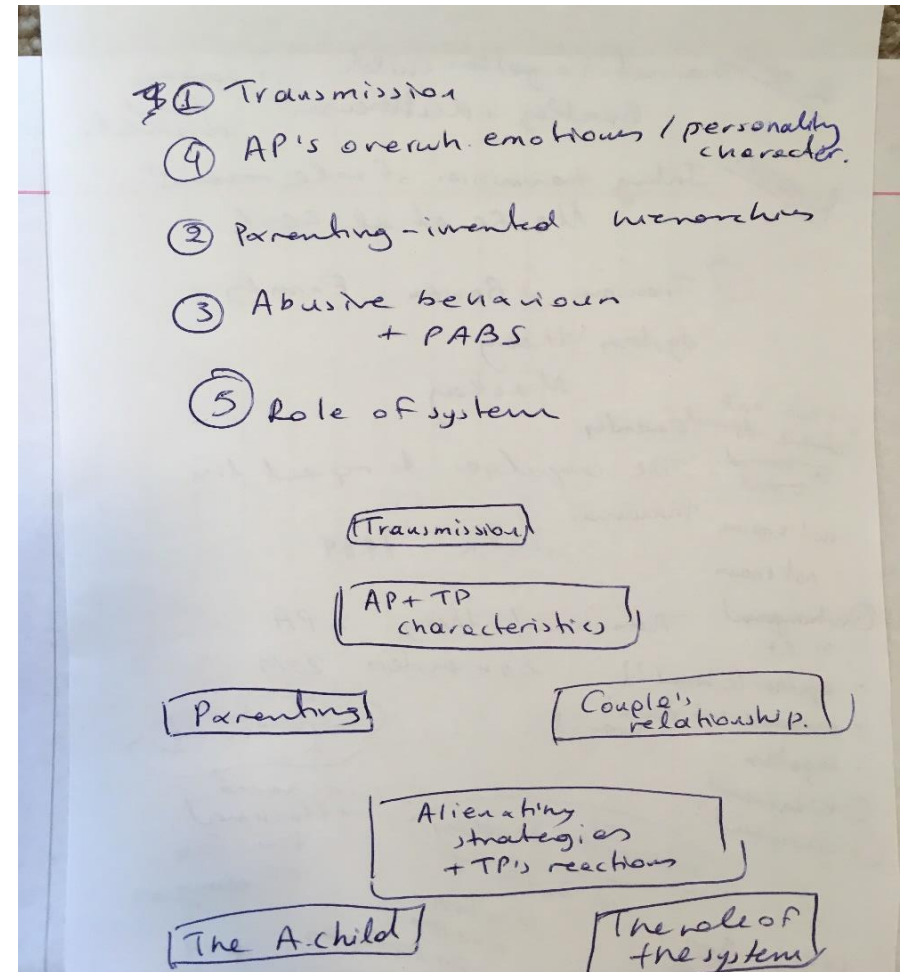
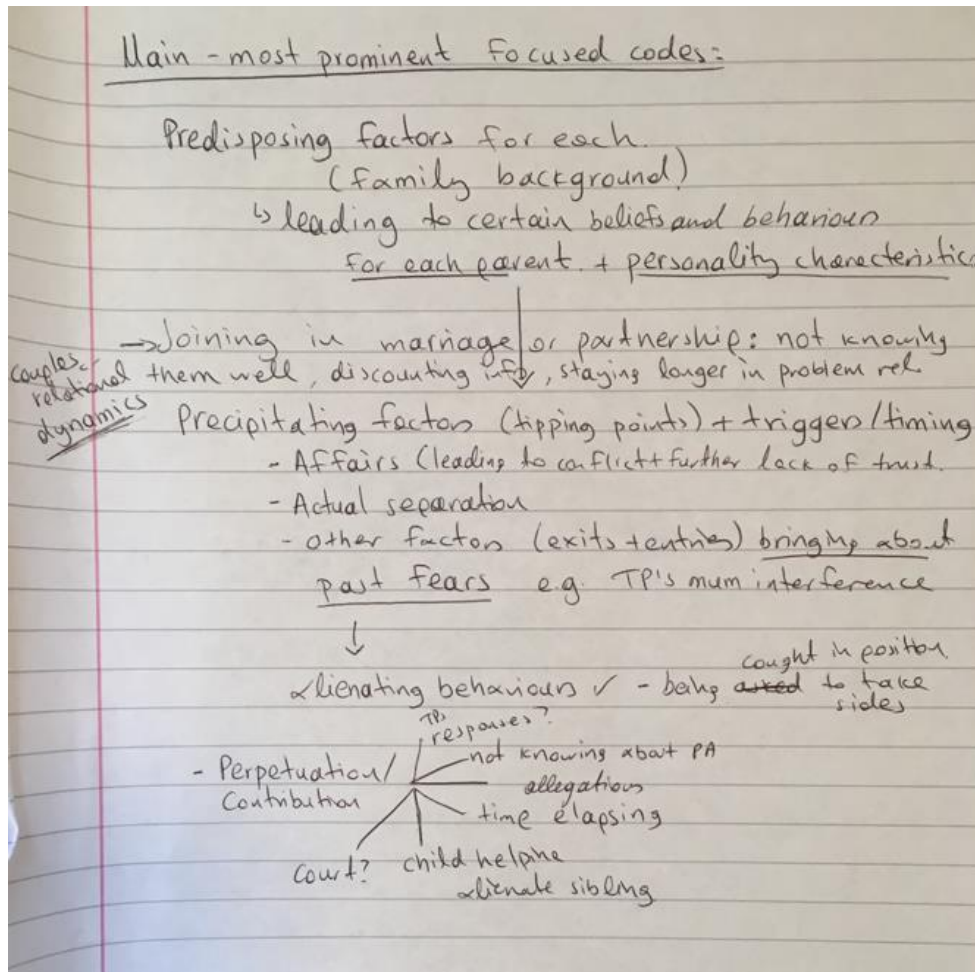
Name	Files	Refer	Created on	Create	Modified o	Modifi
DIFFICULTY IN MANAGING OVERWHELMING EMOTIONS	1	1	06/06/202	AK	28/12/202	AK
ex cutting-off the psychologist when things became too hard or denying there is a problem	4	6	06/06/202	AK	27/02/202	AK
ex struggling, not having appropriate coping strategies	1	2	06/06/202	AK	03/06/202	AK
ex-husband being overwhelmed by the possibility of family-long term relationship	1	1	06/06/202	AK	24/11/202	AK
ex-wife struggling with kids being dependent on her	1	1	06/06/202	AK	23/10/202	AK
managing anger becoming worse after disclosure of affair	1	1	08/06/202	AK	27/10/202	AK
projecting feelings	5	9	06/06/202	AK	27/02/202	AK
Using children to convey emotional charged information-communicating indirectly or unilatera	2	4	06/06/202	AK	14/12/202	AK
distorted perspective- picture of reality	4	7	06/06/2021 19:49		07/06/202	AK
FAMILY OF ORIGIN RELATED CODES BOTH SIDES	0	0	06/06/202	AK	07/06/202	AK
APs ATTACHMENT ISSUE-INTERGENERATIONAL REJECTION-CUTTING OFF FAMILIAL TIES-ESTR	7	28	06/06/202	AK	07/06/202	AK
AP's VIOLENT & ABUSIVE UPBRINGING or parents' separation-disruption in family life	4	8	06/06/202	AK	08/06/202	AK
dependency or enmeshment of TP or AP with family of origin	3	7	07/06/202	AK	27/02/202	AK
reporting MH problem, anger issues or narcissistic traits in AP's family of origin	3	7	06/06/202	AK	03/06/202	AK
TP's disruptive family relationships - disengagement- TPs or extended family cutting-off ties	3	8	06/06/202	AK	27/02/202	AK
FEAR OF LOSING CHILDREN	5	23	07/06/202	AK	14/06/202	AK
FEAR THAT CHILDREN WILL BE TAKEN AWAY	3	8	06/06/202	AK	30/09/202	AK
NOT WANTING TO SHARE THE CHILDREN OR LEAVE THEM ALONE WITH TP	4	12	06/06/202	AK	07/06/202	AK
STRUGGLING TO ACCEPT THE LOVE BTW CHILD & TP	5	8	06/06/202	AK	23/02/202	AK

AK 276 Items

Type here to search

12:46
27/02/2022

Appendix 10: Example of theoretical coding



Appendix 11: Example of memos

Post-interview memo - 4th Dec 2018

First interview. I was nervous in the beginning, but overall did well, despite problems with sound. I feel that we focused quite a lot on alienating behaviours and court processes. We didn't talk at all about his background (note that for future interviews). Also, perhaps I could have explored more about his behaviours/his role. At times, I could have followed with additional questions some of the points he made, to ask clarifications, but I stuck to my agenda (security?), which perhaps changed the focus of the conversation. More in-depth discussions occurred at the end (as it usually happens). Perhaps my initial focus on alienating behaviours, which is something less emotional, also shows some defence from my side. He was also talking about common characteristics of alienation throughout the interview but more like someone else, like a professional, and not like an affected dad. However, there were moments that he was emotional, particularly when he was talking about not seeing his children. I felt some slight uneasiness possibly coming from the way he was talking, but I am unsure why this is – my gender? my training as a psychologist? (he hinted something about female therapists focusing on female perspective/taking sides). There was something about positionality or control that I can't quite put my finger on it, it's just an intuition.

I feel that in his case, he managed to seek support quite early, before letting things get worse. He seemed to take an active stance in relation to daughter's difficulties, but also to contact alienation specialists when his youngest daughter started showing signs. Proactive approach. How he defines moderate and why he finds it moderate could have been another point of discussion. I wonder did the attempts he made around seeking support in a timely fashion played some role? Is it that his ex-partner did not show very severe alienating behaviours? Is it a matter of how he handled things, e.g. his personality characteristics (e.g. he didn't seem to me a person who could get overwhelmed by emotions that easily, he seemed quite a balanced and reasonable man) and how these characteristics interplayed in his responses with ex-partner (e.g. if he had shown a response overwhelmed by emotion, he could have triggered his wife more- could have encouraged/reinforced her fears of abandonment?). Is it that court involvement was minimal in his case? Is it possible

that further court involvement could have made it easier for his ex-partner to make further allegations, which could have been believed, and then she would manage to alienate the kids even more?

I'm also not sure whether I should have shared with him at the end that I am a mother. I guess after having spent all this time talking to me about his experience, I just wanted to share something about me. Telling him that I have a child seemed to elicit a positive reaction. However, I should be mindful and think in advance what I feel comfortable sharing. I think that he hinted that our interview was kind of therapeutic ("it helps to talk about it").

Memo after transcribing 3rd interview – 20th March 2019

It's interesting that this man was shocked about his wife's views after all these years that they had been together. I came across something similar in interview 2. There may be a theme around not knowing them well enough or not "seeing" things early on? I also realised from his statements that he tends to disregard things when the emotional load is too much. In a couple of occasions in the interview, he took a peacemaker role (e.g., in regards with his ex's relationship with her mother). Did he have this role in his family-of-origin? Perhaps this needs to be explored with follow-up questions. The description of the incident where mum attacked the child...even now that I am listening to the recording, I feel sweaty and dizzy. I just can't believe that a mum can behave like this to her own child. I remembered that I left the interview feeling quite heavy and confused but couldn't remember the exact things that were said (possibly I tried to block them out of memory). This might show how difficult this interview had been for him (and for me) – transference?

Memo whilst doing focused coding - 2nd Oct 2020

I noticed two codes that may be worth having in mind to check in future interviews whether they are connected:

- ex taking advantage of adolescence-autonomy
- oscillating between being a kid and being a teenager (under characteristics of alienated child). Mum made sexual abuse allegations and contact was stopped.

Hypothesis: could it be that when children enter adolescence, this can be used by the alienating parent as a way to alienate/stop contact by bringing autonomy as a reason? Does adolescence make it easier for them to make sexual allegations? If this is the case, why is this happening? Could it be that because the daughter was confused, trying to understand her body and dealing with lots of emotional and physical challenges due to puberty, this made her more susceptible?

I also thought that my categories characteristics of the targeted parent and characteristics of alienated child are a bit static and don't capture the relational element. So, I created separate categories: ex-partner-child relationship, couples' relationship, targeted parent-child relationship. It may also be worth to do a timeline for each case.

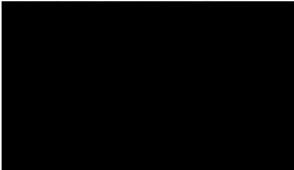
Appendix 12: Ethical approval, University of Essex



University of Essex

17 July 2018

MISS ANGELIKI KALOUDI

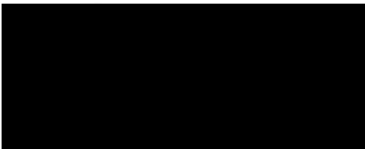


Dear Angeliki,

Re: Ethical Approval Application (Ref 17047)

Further to your application for ethical approval, please find enclosed a copy of your application which has now been approved by the School Ethics Representative on behalf of the Faculty Ethics Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Ethics Administrator
School of Health and Social Care

cc. Research Governance and Planning Manager, REO
Supervisor



Application for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants

This application form must be completed for any research involving human participants conducted in or by the University. 'Human participants' are defined as including living human beings, human beings who have recently died (cadavers, human remains and body parts), embryos and fetuses, human tissue and bodily fluids, and human data and records (such as, but not restricted to medical, genetic, financial, personnel, criminal or administrative records and test results including scholastic achievements). Research must not commence until written approval has been received (from departmental Director of Research/Ethics Officer, Faculty Ethics Sub-Committee (ESC) or the University's Ethics Committee). This should be borne in mind when setting a start date for the project. Ethical approval cannot be granted retrospectively and failure to obtain ethical approval prior to data collection will mean that these data cannot be used.

Applications must be made on this form, and submitted electronically, to your departmental Director of Research/Ethics Officer. A signed copy of the form should also be submitted. Applications will be assessed by the Director of Research/Ethics Officer in the first instance, and may then passed to the ESC, and then to the University's Ethics Committee. A copy of your research proposal and any necessary supporting documentation (e.g. consent form, recruiting materials, etc.) should also be attached to this form.

A full copy of the signed application will be retained by the department/school for 6 years following completion of the project. The signed application form cover sheet (two pages) will be sent to the Research Governance and Planning Manager in the REO as Secretary of the University's Ethics Committee.

1. Title of project:

"The targeted parents' perspective on the development of parental alienation"

2. The title of your project will be published in the minutes of the University Ethics Committee. If you object, then a reference number will be used in place of the title.
 Do you object to the title of your project being published? Yes / No

3. This Project is: Staff Research Project Student Project

4. Principal Investigator(s) (students should also include the name of their supervisor):

Name:	Department:
Angeliki Kaloudi (student)	Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, School of Health & Social Care
Dr Frances Blumenfeld (Supervisor, Programme Director & Clinical Lead)	Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, School of Health & Social Care
Dr Susan McPherson (2 nd supervisor, Senior Lecturer)	Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, School of Health & Social Care

5. **Proposed start date:** July 2018

6. **Probable duration:** Until end of September 2020

7. Will this project be externally funded? Yes / No



8. If yes, what is the source of funding?

[Empty box for funding source]

9. If external approval for this research has been given, then only this cover sheet needs to be submitted

External ethics approval obtained (attach evidence of approval) Yes / No

Declaration of Principal Investigator:

The information contained in this application, including any accompanying information, is, to the best of my knowledge, complete and correct. I/we have read the University's *Guidelines for Ethical Approval of Research Involving Human Participants* and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures set out in this application in accordance with the guidelines, the University's *Statement on Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice* and any other conditions laid down by the University's Ethics Committee. I/we have attempted to identify all risks related to the research that may arise in conducting this research and acknowledge my/our obligations and the rights of the participants.

Signature(s):

Name(s) in block capitals:ANGELIKI KALOUDI.....

Date:29/06/2018.....

Supervisor's recommendation (Student Projects only):

I have read and approved the quality of both the research proposal and this application.

Supervisor's signature:

Outcome:

The departmental Director of Research (DoR) / Ethics Officer (EO) has reviewed this project and considers the methodological/technical aspects of the proposal to be appropriate to the tasks proposed. The DoR / EO considers that the investigator(s) has/have the necessary qualifications, experience and facilities to conduct the research set out in this application, and to deal with any emergencies and contingencies that may arise.

This application falls under Annex B and is approved on behalf of the ESC

This application is referred to the ESC because it does not fall under Annex B

This application is referred to the ESC because it requires independent scrutiny

Signature(s):

Name(s) in block capitals:

Department:

Date:

The application has been approved by the ESC

The application has not been approved by the ESC

The application is referred to the University Ethics Committee



University of Essex

Signature(s): [REDACTED]

Name(s) in block capitals: [REDACTED]

Faculty: **Psychology**

Date: **16/07/2018**



Details of the Project

1. **Brief outline of project** (This should include the purpose or objectives of the research, brief justification, and a summary of methods but should not include theoretical details. It needs to be understandable to a lay person, i.e. in everyday language that is free from jargon, and the reviewer must be able to understand what participants will be asked to do.)

The concept of parental alienation (PA) is characterised by a child's denigration and rejection of a previously loved parent in the context of high-conflict divorce and child-custody dispute. The rejection is persistent, unjustified, and partly instigated by the strong alignment of the child with the other parent (alienating parent) (Warshak, 2002). One of PA's defining characteristics is the alienating parent's attempts to eliminate the relationship between the child and the other parent (targeted parent) by engaging the child in a series of tactics and indoctrinations (Bond, 2008; Meier, 2009).

The phenomenon of PA remains a significant problem for clinicians and judiciaries due to definitional controversies, as well as due to the limited available empirical research. The insufficiency in existing research needs to be addressed. This study aims to contribute to the conceptualisation of PA by focusing on parents' experiences around the process of development of PA. The aim is to build a theory, which will be grounded to the data and will reflect the immediate experiences of targeted parents.

The research design will be qualitative, using Constructive Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). Fourteen to eighteen mothers and fathers, who have experienced alienation for more than six months will be recruited, mainly through charities known for providing support to targeted parents, and family lawyers. Interviewing will be used for data collection. Member checking (also called informant feedback or respondent validation) will be utilised to enhance the study's trustworthiness. This means that participants will be asked to comment on the findings, after collecting and analysing all data.

Enhancing our understanding of parental experiences, particularly the parents' perspective on the process of PA development, can assist in its conceptualisation. Such an endeavour will help in distinguishing the factors contributing to PA, in identifying families that may be more at risk of developing PA, as well as in designing effective intervention strategies (Gardner, 2002; Turkat, 2002). Carefully designed therapeutic and legal programmes could improve the targeted parents' psychological well-being and restore parent-child relationships.



Participant Details

2. Will the research involve human participants? (indicate as appropriate)

Yes



No



3. Who are they and how will they be recruited? (If any recruiting materials are to be used, e.g. advertisement or letter of invitation, please provide copies).

Participants will be mothers and fathers who have experienced alienation for more than six months. Alienation will either be still ongoing or had been ongoing until the child/children reached 18 years of age. Participants should not be convicted of child abuse or neglect, where the alienation may have been an appropriate response. At least three elements of PA have to be present, naming: a) rejection/denigration of a parent that is persistent, b) the child/children's rejection is unjustified and c) it is partly the result of the AP's influence and behaviours, e.g. through denial of visitation rights (Baker & Darnall, 2007; Warshak, 2001).

It is expected that for some parents it may be difficult to self-identify as having experienced alienation, as PA may not be a concept they are familiar with. In addition, as PA is quite a litigious context, some participants may have reservations about talking openly and honestly regarding the process of PA. An information sheet has been developed for the recruitment of participants that considers, among others, these two important issues. In this sheet, the researcher explains clearly the concept of PA and ensures potential participants that she has no role in the legal process (please see supporting document attached).

To enhance the sample's representativeness and make sure that the criteria explained above apply to all participants, a short questionnaire has been developed to screen people who will volunteer to take part. The questionnaire asks participants to answer specific questions, based on the above criteria, and incorporates questions related to demographics (please see supporting document attached).

Participants will be approached through different charities, known for providing support to TPs. The following charities will be approached: Mothers Apart from their Children, Families Need Fathers, Fathers for Justice, Dads Unlimited, and Action Against Abduction. The recently established meet-up group Parental Alienation UK will also be contacted. Family lawyers will be another way to recruit participants. Lawyers specialised in cases of PA will be contacted and asked to identify clients, who may wish to participate. The possibility of including snowball sampling (existing study participants recruiting future participants) will be considered.

Will participants be paid or reimbursed?

A token of appreciation, limited to the cost of £10, will be given to each participant in the form of chocolates or biscuits. These costs will be covered by the Facilitating Research Fund of the School of Health and Social Care.



4. Could participants be considered:

- (a) to be vulnerable (e.g. children, mentally-ill)? Yes / No
- (b) to feel obliged to take part in the research? Yes / No

If the answer to either of these is yes, please explain how the participants could be considered vulnerable and why vulnerable participants are necessary for the research.

Informed Consent

5. Will the participant's consent be obtained for involvement in the research orally or in writing?¹ (If in writing, please attach an example of written consent for approval):

Yes No

If in writing, please tick to confirm that you have attached an example of written consent

Consent should be obtained before data is collected. How will consent be obtained and recorded? Who will be giving consent? Please indicate at what stage in the data collection process consent will be obtained. If consent is not possible, explain why.

Prior to conducting the interviews and collecting any data, written informed consent will be sought for research participation and use of audio recordings (please see supporting document attached). During the interview participants may convey information that, initially, had not intended to, and did not give consent for. Therefore, because of the emotional nature of conversations, informed consent will not be a single event but an ongoing matter, also obtained orally during the interviews. Participants' right to withdraw themselves or their data at any time will also be made explicit. To ensure safeguarding of participants, a list of services offering counselling and psychological support will be shared prior to participants' engagement in the interviews.

Please attach a participant information sheet where appropriate (attached, please see individual supporting document).

Confidentiality / Anonymity

6. If the research generates personal data, describe the arrangements for maintaining anonymity and confidentiality or the reasons for not doing so.

¹ If the participant is not capable of giving informed consent on their own behalf or is below the age of consent, then consent must be obtained from a carer, parent or guardian. However, in the case of incompetent adults, the law in the United Kingdom does not recognize proxy consent by a relative. In addition, the University Ethics Committee is not able to provide ethical approval for such research. It needs to be approved by a Health Research Authority National Research Ethics Service Research Ethics Committee.



Participants' right to confidentiality, anonymity and privacy will be ensured. The researcher will take responsibility for storing the data in a safe place. Participants will also be informed as to how the data will be used. Dissemination of results will not interfere with confidentiality, since participants' identifiable information will not be included.

Data Access, Storage and Security

- 7. Describe the arrangements for storing and maintaining the security of any personal data collected as part of the project. Please provide details of those who will have access to the data.

The data provided by participants will be anonymised as soon as they are collected. Transcription of data will be made in password protected documents. Any other written data collected, e.g. the initial screening questionnaire, as well as people's consent forms, will be scanned and securely stored to researcher's hard drive (password protected). The researcher will have access to the data, as well as the researcher's supervisors, if required. Transcription of interviews will take place by the researcher herself. Data will be stored until the end of this study, which is expected to be in September 2020. After that time, verbal interviews will be deleted from the recording device. Any electronic documents containing interview transcriptions will also be deleted.

Data Sharing

- 8. Do you intend to share or archive data generated from this project?

Yes No (If no, please skip to question 10)

If Yes,

Please describe briefly and continue to question 9. (Relevant considerations include funder, publisher, or other requirements for shared data. If you have completed a data management plan, the section on sharing/archiving may be copied here.):

Data collected in this research study will be shared as appropriate and for publication of findings, in which case data will remain completely anonymous. Participants' quotes from the interviews may also be used anonymously.

- 9. Please indicate the means by which you intend to share/archive your data:

Openly available from a data repository (e.g. UK Data Archive, University of Essex Research Data Repository, other repository)	<input type="checkbox"/>
--	--------------------------



Available via a data repository but with controlled access (<i>Examples of access controls include registration with the repository, requesting permission from the depositor, and data access committees.</i>)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (<i>Please provide details</i>) Raw data will not be shared but the study findings will. This will happen in the following ways: charities involved in participants' recruitment will be sent a report, outlining the study's findings. Dissemination of findings may also occur through the Parental Alienation Study Group, an international non-profit organisation comprised by psychology experts, researchers and advocates, whose goal is to educate clinicians and the public about parental alienation. Articles for publication may be submitted to the Journal of Family therapy, Family Court Review and/or the Journal of Divorce and Remarriage. Any opportunities for dissemination of findings through conferences will be considered.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

10. If you answered 'no' to question 8 above, please provide specific reasons why the data will not be made available (*e.g. participants have not consented, sensitivity of the data, intellectual property restrictions, etc.*)

It is a requirement of the Data Protection Act 1998 to ensure individuals are aware of how information about them will be managed. Please tick the box to confirm that participants will be informed of the data access, storage and security arrangements described above. If relevant, it is appropriate for this to be done via the participant information sheet

Further guidance about the collection of personal data for research purposes and compliance with the Data Protection Act can be accessed at the following weblink. Please tick the box to confirm that you have read this guidance (http://www.essex.ac.uk/records_management/policies/data_protection_and_research.aspx)

Risk and Risk Management²

11. Are there any potential risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants or subjects associated with the proposed research?

Yes No

² Advice on risk assessment is available from the University's Health and Safety Advisers (email safety@essex.ac.uk; tel 2944) and on the University's website at www.essex.ac.uk/health-safety/risk/default.aspx.



If Yes,

Please provide full details of the potential risks and explain what risk management procedures will be put in place to minimise the risks:
<p>Because of the potentially emotional nature of conversations during the interviews, informed consent will not be a single event but an ongoing matter, obtained orally during the interviews (as well as in writing prior to any data collection). Participants' right to withdraw themselves or their data at any time will also be made explicit. To ensure safeguarding of participants, a list of services offering counselling and psychological support will be shared prior to participants' engagement in the interviews. If, at any point during the interview, the researcher feels that either the interviewee or a member of their family is at risk, the researcher will follow the safeguarding protocol of the Essex Partnership University NHS Trust (please see separate documents attached). If participants make disclosures that their children are at risk of abuse and/or neglect, the researcher will first establish whether social services, courts and/or Cafcass are involved. The researcher will act upon safeguarding the participants' children only in cases that protection from abuse/neglect is not already taking place. In such rare circumstances, social services and/or Cafcass will be contacted.</p>

12. Are there any potential risks to researchers as a consequence of undertaking this proposal that are greater than those encountered in normal day-to-day life?

Yes No

If Yes,

Please provide full details and explain what risk management procedures will be put in place to minimise the risks:

13. Will the research involve individuals below the age of 18 or individuals of 18 years and over with a limited capacity to give informed consent?

Yes No

If Yes, a Disclosure and Barring Service disclosure (DBS check) may be required.³

³ Advice on the Disclosure and Barring Service and requirement for checks is available: (1) for staff from Employment Compliance Manager in Human Resources (email staffing@essex.ac.uk) and on the University's website at <http://www.essex.ac.uk/hr/policies/docs/CRBdocumentpolicy.pdf>; (2) for students from the University's Academic Section.



University of Essex

14. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of the Faculty Ethics Sub-Committee and/or University Ethics Committee.