

# Listening to child victims: Understanding experiences disclosed by adults who were exposed to parental alienation in childhood. A qualitative analysis

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**Background**

Parental alienation is increasingly recognised as a **critical issue** by family services and legal professional, particularly in contexts involving child safeguarding. This phenomenon involves a child's **unjustifiable rejection of one parent**, often driven by the **manipulative behaviours of the other parent**. These behaviours can include acts of denigration and the promotion of distorted perceptions, leading the child to align strongly with one parent while vilifying the other. Although parental alienation is not classified as a formal diagnosis in the DSM-5, it is acknowledged as a behavioural pattern with **significant impacts on children's mental health**. This recognition underscores the importance of continued research to understand its consequences and develop effective interventions. As scholarly attention grows, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of parental alienation is expected to enhance its identification and treatment within professional practises.



**Objective**

- Develop a deeper understanding of the impacts of parental alienation on children's psychological well-being and development.
- Explore how children subjected to parental alienation internalize behaviours through observational learning, navigate challenges with self-efficacy, employ self-regulation to cope with emotional conflicts, and how motivations and outcome expectancies influence their psychological state.

**Methodology**

Qualitative studies were identified via electronic databases, following a **purposive approach**, narrowing search to keep within focus of research aim. Timeframes for searching were limited to **January 2000 to November 2023**, language: **English**, Primary research, and articles which directly associated with parental alienation in childhood. **Thematic analysis** was used to perform synthesis of data from verbatim findings and participant transcripts. Both **inductive and deductive** approaches were employed for data extraction and coding, through the **theoretical framework of Albert Bandura's Social cognitive learning theory**.

**Social Cognitive Learning Theory**

A comprehensive framework for understanding human learning and behaviour, encapsulating thoughts, emotions, and actions

**Observational Learning**

**Motivation and outcome expectancies**

**Reciprocal Determinism**

**Self-regulation**

**Self-efficacy and agency**

**Key findings**

**Internal psychological impacts of alienation experiences**

- Emotional turmoil
- Impacted sense of self and identity
- Long-term enduring psychological effects

**Adaptive learning and behavioural responses to alienation**

- Behavioural conditioning through parental behaviours
- Learning from perceptions of parental roles and characteristics
- Navigating communication challenges

**Coping strategies and influences**

- Developing coping mechanisms
- Impacts from an absence of social support and influence

**Outcomes of alienation**

- Impacted future relationships
- Growing resilience and insight
- Strategies for healing and reconciliation

**Conclusion**

The findings within this study illustrate how individuals faced with parental alienation in their childhood experience significant psychological and developmental impacts. These individuals often mirror the dysfunctional dynamics of the alienating parent, adversely affecting their trust, communication, and self-esteem. As they internalize and imitate the dysfunctional dynamics of the alienating parent, their capacity for self-regulation is compromised, often resulting in impaired emotional control. The pervasive impacts of parental alienation extends in later life, effecting ability to form and maintain healthy relationships, continually influencing their psychological well-being throughout their lives.

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