

FATHERS' EXPERIENCE AND PERCEPTIONS OF PARENT ALIENATION IN HIGH-CONFLICT DIVORCE

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This research focuses on providing social workers with a deeper insight into fathers' experience and perceptions of parent alienation in instances of high-conflict divorce. An exploratory and interpretative research design was used in this qualitative study. Data were collected by means of in-depth interviews with each participant individually as well as by field notes made by the researcher. It was clear from the research that fathers experience parent alienation as traumatic or negative at several levels of functioning. Parent alienation is a reality and the necessity for further research on this phenomenon was clearly evident.

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INTRODUCTION

Parent alienation in South Africa is an important phenomenon that family care workers and legal professionals need to take cognisance of and understand. Parent alienation occurs when one parent undermines or prejudices the contact and relationship between the child and the other parent without well-founded reasons. The phenomenon of parent alienation occurs mainly in high-conflict divorce cases and is often accompanied by care and contact disputes (Bekker, Van Zyl, Waterford, & Labuschagne 2004; Zastrow, 2010). High-conflict divorce cases, according to Moore and Ordway (2016), are those in which the parents are involved in custody litigation and become so engaged in argumentativeness that alternative dispute-resolution techniques are mostly unsuccessful. It is clear from this study that fathers experience parent alienation on several levels of functioning as traumatic or negative. The necessity for further research on this phenomenon became clearly evident in this study.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to the 2012/2013 Annual Report of the Department of Justice, the divorce rate had risen by 28% in South Africa. During 2012 39 573 divorce cases were reported and in 2013 50 517 (South Africa, 2012/2013). Oosthuizen (2011) maintains that the main reasons for the rise in divorce cases in South Africa are empowerment of women, role confusion of women, financial dependence as well as a decrease in the stigmatisation of divorce. In the researcher's practice high-conflict divorce cases are mainly characterised by mutual verbal and/or non-verbal aggression, litigation, contact and caring disputes, as well as an inability of the parties involved to engage in positive communication and deal with resolving conflict.

According to Rand (1997:5), "High conflict divorce is characterized by intense and/or protracted post-separation conflict and hostility between the parents which may be expressed overtly through on-going litigation, verbal and physical aggression, and tactics of sabotage and deception." Hence, it is clear that high levels of conflict between the parties is practically a given when a degree of conflict had already existed prior to the divorce. The problem, furthermore, is that so much aggression is present that the parties can no longer communicate with one another meaningfully and think that they can rather reach agreement through litigation.

In practice, high-conflict divorces also lead to parents using children in the process as pawns. Rand (1997), Eddy (2010) and Evans and Bone (2011) confirm this statement and are of the opinion that parent alienation normally occurs in high-conflict divorces and that the child is almost always caught up in the middle of the conflict. This high divorce rate in South Africa leads to a larger number of care and contact disputes, which in turn lead to a higher occurrence of parent alienation in South Africa. When high-conflict divorces,

coupled with conflict over care and contact arrangements, carry on for too long in the legal system, they become a breeding ground for parent alienation (Stahl, 2011).

Parent alienation occurs when one parent undermines or damages the relationship between the child and the other parent (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). Steinberger (2006) sees parent alienation as a form of social and psychological brainwashing by one parent who pits the child against the other parent.

Bernet (2010:xvii) defines parent alienation as follows: “Parental alienation is a mental condition in which a child, usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict divorce, allies himself or herself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without legitimate justification.”

From these definitions it is clear that parent alienation as a phenomenon comprises three components – one parent who alienates the child from the other parent (known in research as the alienating parent), the parent who is being alienated from his child (referred to in the current research as the target parent), and lastly the child who is alienated from the target parent by the contact between parent and child; even though this has been taking place for many years in practice, the concept of parent alienation is not yet used in South African courts or dealt with as an urgent problem.

The following remark was made by the South African Law Committee (South Africa, 2002:8): “It is not unusual to find that the custodial parent is using the child as a weapon in the matrimonial warfare and is sabotaging the access visits of the non-custodial parent.” The South African Legal Committee (South Africa, 2002:11) further remarked: “In fact, many a time a child’s sudden wish to break off contact with a parent could indicate a major problem necessitating therapeutic rather than legal intervention.” Although the term “parent alienation” is not used, similarities can be inferred from these comments. It appears that parent alienation is seen from a judicial viewpoint as a social problem in South Africa.

The researcher agrees with Bekker *et al.* (2004) that the South African court system and professionals need more knowledge about parent alienation, and that juristic persons are either unaware of, or not convinced of, the existence of the phenomenon.

For purposes of the research the term “parent alienation” is used with reference to the process through which an alienating parent disrupts and/or undermines the contact and relationship between the child and the target parent during or after high-conflict divorce, without profound reasons. The researcher’s experience in practice bears testimony of the fact that parent alienation can harm the emotional bond between father and child irrevocably. This can also happen the other way around, but this research study focused on parent alienation as traumatically experienced and perceived by the “alienated” father.

Sauber (2006) and Stahl (2011) describe the influence of parent alienation on the alienated father during divorce.

- The father is robbed of his visiting rights and he recognises the role of the other parent in the alienation process and feels powerless to do anything about it. Hence feelings of powerlessness, dismay and rejection manifest in these fathers.
- They experience anxiety and fear that the good father-child relationship can be destroyed.
- They experience anger towards the parent who brings about the alienation, and often hears the words in those of the child(ren). The alienated father then becomes concerned about the emotional damage caused in the child.
- They experience fear, since victimisation occurs in the process of parent alienation. These fathers also fear that the courts will believe the child's contaminated rendition and the alienating parent's lies. Their experience of this fear is that they will no longer be able to successfully fulfil their role as a father. Should the father not receive any assistance or his voice not be heard by the legal system, he can eventually become depressed and develop a low self-image.

The dangers of this situation holds are the following:

- The longer the father is exposed to negative behaviour, unfounded anger and criticism, the stronger the chance of him wanting to withdraw physically and emotionally from the child(ren) and the situation. Unfortunately, such actions strengthen feelings of rejection in the child and incalculable damage is caused in both parties;
- In the process of alienation the emotional father-child bond is harmed. Emotional bonding is the sustained emotional closeness that attaches children and their parents to one another.

This bonding process already starts with the birth of the child and forms the basis for emotional security and safety in the child and influences the child's confidence to explore the world, to take risks and to adapt to difficult circumstances. Father alienation in divorce influences this secure emotional bonding negatively. This can in turn have far-reaching consequences for the child and the parent psychologically and physically, as well as impacting on future relationships and functioning (Feeny & Monin, 2008).

The quality of father-child bonding is of the utmost importance, especially where a healthy father-child bond had already existed. It is absolutely necessary that a healthy emotional bond must continue to exist between parent and child after the divorce. When parent alienation has occurred, the child not only loses a father figure, but there is also long-term emotional damage. Feelings of rejection, loneliness and anger may be present in them because of the bond being broken. The father not only loses his spouse, but also the privilege of being a father to his child or children. This situation is experienced by father and child as extremely traumatic.

Goldberg and Goldberg (2013) see the experience of the target parent as being practically just as traumatic as the death of a child. The difference, however, lies in parent alienation being a continuous process and often emotional closure is never

reached. Gardner (2006) and Stahl (2011) confirm that parent alienation is a form of emotional maltreatment and that parent alienation can lead to the weakening or the total destruction of a once loving relationship between the alienated father and the child.

Once parent alienation has taken place, parent alienation syndrome steps in. The focus of parent alienation syndrome is on the child's behaviour after parent alienation. Parent alienation syndrome manifests in the aversion and criticism of a child aimed at a once good, loving parent. This negative attitude towards the parent is unfounded and is the result of a combination of brainwashing as well as the conscious and unconscious aspects of the alienating parent's behaviour, which influences the child negatively against the alienated parent. Factors in the child, for instance, temperament and reaction to the divorce, are also factors that can occur in parent alienation syndrome (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012, Evans & Bone, 2011). Hence, it is clear that when one has to act in the best interest of the child, one also needs to investigate whether parent alienation is not perhaps already occurring, which will require attention in care and contact matters.

Family counsellors and judicial persons should be thoroughly trained in the phenomenon parent alienation so that they can be better informed when working with families experiencing divorce (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Sauber & Worenklein, 2013). In her practice the researcher's experience is that it is mainly the mother who disrupts the father's contact and relationship with the child. But research has found that mothers as well as fathers can act as alienating agents (Moné, Macphee, Anderson, & Banning 2011; Weitzman, 2013).

Little research is available on the target parent of parent alienation. Much more research has been done on the experience and perceptions of divorced mothers compared to that of divorced men and fathers (Baker, Farley & Bailey, 2006; Erera & Baum, 2009; Smyth, 2004). This limited body of research as well as the researcher's experience in practice were the motivation for this research on fathers' experiences and perceptions of parent alienation in instances of high-conflict divorce.

The study therefore addressed the following question: What are fathers' experience and perceptions of parent alienation in high-conflict divorce in the South African context?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to investigate the father's experience and perception of parent alienation. A qualitative research approach was utilised. Qualitative research is defined by Creswell (2013) as research that begins with the assumption and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry in the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and undertake data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns and themes.

An exploratory and interpretive research design was used. Botma, Greeff, Muloudzi and Wright (2010) describe the research design as the backbone of the investigation. It gives structure to the research methods and the planning of the investigation with the aim of

reaching the expected outcomes. Thorne (2008) sees an interpretive research design as focused on developing knowledge, bridging the gap between objective neutrality and objective theorisation, and developing a measure of understanding of the importance of the applied discipline within the context of its distinctive social mandate. Babbie (2001) describes it as an approach which attempts to understand people.

Participants answered one open-ended question during an individual in-depth interview. The interviews were held until data saturation was reached. Botma *et al.* (2010) point out the advantage of in-depth interviews, namely that data obtained are rich in depth and quantity. Interviewing is the dominant data-collection method in qualitative research and the researcher has to attempt to incorporate the participants' personal experiences as well as their opinions (Greeff, 2011).

Fathers were selected by means of purposive sampling. The selection took place from attorney firms and other social workers in private practice. One attorney and one social worker in private practice acted as mediators. According to Louw, Van Ede and Louw (1998) and Botma *et al.* (2010), qualitative in-depth studies often only need a small number of participants, specially selected for their ability to describe a specific experience clearly and unabridged. The participants had to be involved in a high-conflict divorce in which the couple could not communicate with each other. The participants had to comply with the following four criteria for parent alienation as proposed by Baker, Burkhard & Kesley (as cited by Sauber *et al.*, 2013):

- A positive parent-child relationship had to have existed prior to the current contact dispute. The mediators have all the details in their files and know if there was a positive parent-child relationship or not. They only contacted those who have a positive parent-child relationship;
- Maltreatment of the child by the target parent was not to have occurred;
- The alienating parent had to have applied one or more of the following parent-alienating strategies:
 - Speaking negatively of the target parent;
 - Limiting communication between the child and the target parent;
 - Withdrawal of love from the child when he/she had indicated that they had received positive love and affection from the target parent;
 - Limiting or withholding the target parent's contact with the child;
 - Creating the impression that the target parent is dangerous;
 - Permitting the child to choose whether or not he/she wished to visit the target parent;
 - Misleading the child with false information that the target parent no longer loves the child;
 - Involving the child in discussions on the legal matter as well as the personal feelings of the alienating parent;

- Forcing the child to mislead the target parent;
 - Requesting the child to spy on the target parent during contact;
 - Requesting the child to keep secrets safe from the target parent;
 - Referring to the target parent by name instead of saying father or mother;
 - Convincing the child to call the step-parent father or mother;
 - Withholding important information such as school and medical reports from the target parent;
 - Changing the child's surname without permission from or notification of the target parent;
 - Making the child dependent on the alienating parent and/or undermining the target parent's authority.
- The alienated child had to demonstrate more than four of the eight behavioural manifestations of parent alienation. Baker and Fine (2014) list the eight behavioural manifestations as follows:
 - The child launches a campaign of humiliation and alienation against the target parent;
 - The child proffers poor and/or ridiculous reasons for the rejection;
 - The child demonstrates a lack of missing the target parent;
 - The child has a strong conviction that the decision to humiliate and reject the target parent is their own decision;
 - The child supports the alienating parent;
 - The child demonstrates a lack of feeling guilty about the humiliation and rejection of the target parent;
 - The child uses borrowed vocabulary and scenarios applied by the alienating parent;
 - The child runs down the friends and extended family of the target parent.

Data were collected by means of an in-depth interview with each participant individually until data saturation. Data saturation was reached after in-depth interviews with six fathers. Field notes were also made by the researcher. Field notes are written notes on observation by the researcher on what he/she hears, sees, feels, experiences and thinks during the interview (Botma *et al.*, 2010). The interviews were conducted in the participants' environment. Every interview was tape recorded (with the written permission of the participant). The researcher observed the non-verbal communication of the participants and noted it in field notes. The qualitative data obtained from the in-depth interviews were transcribed and processed manually into themes and sub-themes. The data processing was done according to Tesch's eight steps as set out by Botma *et al.* (2010). Botma *et al.* (2010) explain that data saturation is reached when the researcher is

knowledgeable about the information and no new information is brought to light. The participants were not known at all to the researcher. The question posed during the in-depth interview was the following: What is your experience and perception of parent alienation?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of the study and discussions of the findings will be presented in accordance with the aim mentioned above. This section discusses the eight themes emerging from the interviews and will be compared with the literature.

Themes

The following themes emerged in the study and are discussed below.

TABLE 1
THEMES

Theme 1	Perception of intense hurt
Theme 2	Unparalleled anger
Theme 3	Loss of self-worth
Theme 4	Distrust of women
Theme 5	Parental responsibilities and rights
Theme 6	Consistent concern about their children's physical and social wellbeing
Theme 7	Distrust of the court system
Theme 8	Contact supervision between a parent and the child

Theme 1: Perception of intense hurt

The most common and emotional conceptualisation of all six participants was a feeling of intense hurt as a result of the loss of contact, as well as an intense longing for their children.

The participants said the following in this respect:

"It is worse than death. When someone dies, it fades away as time goes by."

"Parental alienation, it never gets better, in fact, it gets worse and worse!"

"There are days when you simply are dead inside!"

"You don't even want to live anymore. I've got no feelings anymore. I don't care about anything, absolutely nothing!"

"It is said that you are a no-good father, a mess. You have chucked away the children as though they are dogs. It hurts – very badly."

From these comments it becomes very clear that the participants perceive the hurt to be very intense. The hurt they perceive is more than an emotion of heartache. They also experience physical pain. Baker *et al.* (2014) and Goldberg and Goldberg (2013) confirm this hurt which the parent can experience because of the loss of their child or children during the process of divorce.

The loss of a child, be it through death or exclusion, reaches further than any parent's ability to cope (Darnall, 2010). Lebow and Rekart, (2006) thus recommend that parents experiencing this intense form of heartache and hurt must receive therapy or else this heartache or hurt could turn into violence. According to Baker and Fine. (2014), the perception of such a parent that there is only one incident emotionally worse than parent alienation is the death of one's child. Therefore, these parents experience no emotional closure. Each day brings them new pain, more false accusations, court procedures and yet another milestone of the child they are prevented from sharing with him/her.

Reay (2011) summarises the father's experience aptly: "The losses, combined with the effect of undergoing the dynamics of parental alienation syndrome, mark the beginning of one of the most painful times in an alienated parent's life." Hence, from this it becomes clear that parents are emotionally touched so deeply by parent alienation that they often use very few other words or comparisons than "worse than death" to verbalise their intense hurt.

Theme 2: Unparalleled anger

All the participants confirm that they perceive unparalleled anger. According to the participants, they mainly perceive this anger towards the alienating parent. The participants verbalised their anger as follows:

"In a certain stage I hoped a bus would run over her; I wish something will happen that she dies so that the children come to me."

"This thing is being taken too far with fathers; this is why fathers take the law into their own hands. I understand the men that indeed do it 110% – take the law into their own hands, like these men that assault, shoot their wives."

"I am furious with the court because they do not want to believe me. Want to go and hit my wife's head into pieces."

"I am angry with God. How can God allow this?"

"I even wanted to go and beat up the attorney and everybody else in line."

In cases of parent alienation, anger is inevitable (Reay, 2011). Van Mansfield (2012) confirms that the experience of anger during parent alienation is mainly rooted in the fact that the parent feels that it is wrong of any person to withhold one's child from one. Fathers are angry about the false accusations and lies spread by the mother or anyone else. Baker and Fine, (2014) and Goldberg and Goldberg (2013) mention that the harassed parent experiences anger towards the alienating parent because that parent controls the child's physical and emotional life, causes the child to experience unnecessary emotional pain and is also accountable for the loss of time that could be spent between the targeted parent and the child.

Goldberg and Goldberg (2013) are of opinion that the target parent also experiences anger towards the legal system, professional persons and other individuals. The target parent feels that people align with the alienating parent and that they are manipulated by the alienating parent. Pedro-Carroll (2010) is of the opinion that "anger may also be the

other force of sadness, fear or other painful emotions, and often erupts when the individual is afraid of losing someone or something they may value deeply.”

Quite perturbing is the intensity of the perception of the participants who expressed a need for the death of the alienating parent. A source of concern is the intensity of the perception of the participants’ words that represented a feeling of powerless and their wish to murder. This wish of the fathers that the alienating parent would die is caused by their feeling that they are estranged from their children is in practice a reality. A tragic example in South Africa is the death of a mother, a step-parent, a father as well as a social worker. A deceased man expressed his feeling of powerlessness and cropped up anger in his suicide note saying that he had felt that his wife had refused him access to his daughter and that the entire system that had to decide on his access had failed him (Anon, 2013).

From this it therefore becomes clear that the perception of a parent that feels targeted cannot be underestimated. The anger goes much further than only directed towards the other parent. It is also projected onto the other systems such as the court, legal professionals, social workers and psychologists.

Theme 3: Loss of self-worth

All the participants experienced loss of self-worth. The participants started doubting their ability to be good fathers and experienced an overall feeling of self-doubt and inferiority. The participants said:

“Is something wrong with me? Am I a no-good father?”

“It is as if one feels one is inferior. One feels one can do nothing, is worthless; one also feels one means nothing to anyone, one is brought down so badly.”

“I feel like a loser, a total loser.”

“I was an involved father. I cannot speak to him on his birthday, do not see him at Christmas, not on my birthday, nothing.”

“I became a hermit for six months, lived in my house, I never went out and I made no friends. One tries to protect oneself in this way.”

“One is so shy, one avoids people. What do I say to them? What reason can I give them for not being allowed to see my children? I cannot create relationships of any nature whatsoever, I have already been celibate for three years, I cannot.”

Van Mansfield (2012) maintains that the cause of the low sense of self-worth in the target parent is a combination of the internalisation of false accusations coupled with the target parent’s self-doubt as well as the constant running down of him by the alienating parent. This leads to it becoming difficult for the target parent to differentiate between his true self and the self-constructed by the alienating parent. Baker and Fine (2014) and Goldberg and Goldberg (2013) confirm that the process of parent alienation leads to the target parent internalising the negative messages from his children and the alienating parent, and later starting to believe that he is inferior and a no-good father. According to

Vangelisti (2006:575), “separating couples experience emotional feelings including shame, failure, humiliation and isolation”, because they perceive the separation from the other parent negatively, seeing that the target parent experiences the entire alienation process impacting negatively on the children.

The literature (Chung, Farmer, Grant, Newton, Payne, Perry & Stone, 2002; Lee, Sabarra, Mason & Law, 2011, Lucas, 2005; Waller, 2007; Wyder, Ward & De Leo, 2009; Zizook & Shear, 2009) comes to the conclusion that the results of a high-conflict divorce unleashes separation anxiety, which leads to social isolation. The authors also are of opinion that the feelings of loss and incompetence as a parent often leads to emotional withdrawal or emotional exclusion in the target parent.

Theme 4: Distrust of women

Five of the six participants confirmed that they experience distrust not only of their wives who estranged them from their children, but also of women in the helping professions and women in general.

“After what has happened, I look at women and I have no trust, none whatsoever!”

“I have a distinct dislike towards women, and how they manipulate and actually estranged me from my child.”

“... my relationships with women, I have no trust, not at all. Everyone right through the entire system whom I had dealt with (that was a woman) meant zero to me.”

“Then one shuts out everyone to keep out that hurt. One loses one’s trust in people.”

Disappointment in women arises from the fact that their spouses whom they loved and trusted earlier are now precisely the persons accusing them of things such as sexual abuse of a child, family violence, and physical and emotional maltreatment (Darnall, 2010). According to Mitcham-Smith and Henry (2007), high-conflict divorces replace once dedicated marriages with prolonged relationship conflicts characterised by anger and rejection. Since it is a long-term struggle, continuous emotional damage is done by both parties as well as in the children. Emotional closure can therefore not take place and no win-win solution is found.

The powerlessness they experience as fathers as a result of the accusations mean that they no longer want to trust any women. Goldberg and Goldberg (2013) refer to this generalisation of feeling as transferral. Targeted parents that have had negative perceptions of other systems, such as the legal system, or the spouse, can consciously or unconsciously transfer these negative feelings onto other individuals in their environment. Levy (2009) defines transferral as “a tendency in which representational aspects of importance and formative relationships (such as parents and siblings) can be both consciously experienced and/or unconsciously ascribed to other relationships.”

Hence it is clear that the target parent can transfer onto others his perceptions and experience of disappointment in and distrust towards his spouse and/or helping system in general.

Theme 5: Parental rights and responsibilities

From the interviews with the participants it emerged that all of them experienced that they no longer had any parental responsibilities and rights. They felt that their right to be involved in their children's lives was being taken from them and that they were missing out on many milestones and memories of father-child togetherness. It was also the participants' perception that their children are suffering as a result of the parental alienation, because their fathers could no longer share in their children's lives.

“Who gives a mother the right to take away a father's responsibilities from him? Who gives the mother the right to take a child's love away from his father? Who gives the mother the right to mess up your child's life due to what she feels inside her, what she thinks is good and what she thinks is right?”

“Your fatherhood is replaced by someone else without you having a choice in it. It takes away your responsibilities towards and authority over your children.”

“I cannot and may not attend school functions, or watch them participating in athletics, because there is an interdict against me as a result of lies!”

From the participants' narratives it was clear that the loss of parental responsibilities and rights is an important cause for concern for the target parent. Baker and Fine (2014) maintain that it is the target parent's perception that his absence as a parent in his child's life can influence the child negatively. The target parent realises that he cannot educate his child as he wishes to, since the target parent's authority has been taken away from him. In practice it is common that the target parents perceive this loss of involvement in their children's lives as exceptionally traumatic.

During the interviews the participants occasionally became emotional and some even cried, especially when they spoke of missing out on climactic moments in their children's lives, such as the first tooth appearing, rugby matches and ballet performances. The experience of loss of parental responsibilities and rights is experienced by the father as a constant loss. Loss and incompetence regarding their role and status as fathers is experienced traumatically and leads to their withdrawal (Dudley, 1991; Jordan, 1996; Mercadante, Taylor & Pooley, 2014).

Theme 6: Constant concern about their children's physical and social wellbeing

All six of the participants verbalised the experience of constant concern about their children. They expressed their constant concern about the influence of parent alienation on their children, their children's health and general safety and wellbeing. The participants also expressed their concern about what their children think of them as fathers.

“What do my children think, where is their father, why does my father not phone me? They feel their father has eloped.”

“What does that child see? What becomes of that child’s images? What does he learn from this whole story ... that a man is a bad thing? How is he going to treat his wife one day when he undergoes such things?”

“One wonders what the children are doing, what your children think of you, do they miss you, do they enquire about you? How many times did she ignore them and said they were not going to talk with their father, because he has disserted them. Psychologically they are indoctrinated against the other parent.”

“She is with my wife who is an abusive person. It pulls you to pieces, because you know exactly what is happening. I don’t know what sort of mental damage she has done to the child.”

“The child has actually been estranged from me, the less I see the child, they have actually broken the bond between my child and myself. I don’t know if she will know me anymore.”

“You wonder whether she is still doing that, you know, putting her seatbelt on. Is my child getting the nutrients?”

Baker and Fine (2014) compare this constant concern of the target parent with a drawn-out torture – torture in the knowledge that your child is out there somewhere, growing older, becoming cleverer, developing and growing, reaching milestones, and you are absent. It is like a wound that remains open constantly. This emotional torture worsens when the target parent knows that his children are being harmed physically and/or emotionally by the alienating parent while he can do nothing to stop it. The target parent experiences constant concern about the negative impact of parental alienation on the forming of the children’s characters and their emotional health.

The researcher is of the opinion that this constant torture is directly related to the participants’ perceptions of intense heartache and their comments that parent alienation is worse than death. It is a traumatic experience that confronts the target parent on a daily basis. This can, according to Mercandante *et al.* (2014) lead to a constant emotional struggle and everlasting mourning.

Theme 7: Distrust of the court system

The experience of general mistrust of the court system, legal persons, psychologists and social workers was verbalised by all six of the participants. The participants’ negative experiences specifically were with regard to professionalism, financial issues, ignorance and an attitude of prejudice.

“I feel the court does not support us fathers. If one cannot afford an attorney or an advocate, one is not going to get one’s children.”

“Can right and righteousness prevail if one does not have money? I don’t think so.”

“The court has not removed the parental alienation.”

“I have no trust in attorneys. There is no feeling; it is a business. If there is no money, the back is turned on you.”

“In the best interest of the child is in all the correspondence! How is it in their best interest if children may not see their father? A father who tries to be part of his children’s lives, and then it is taken from him!”

“The court is biased; the mother has more rights. Psychologically the children are indoctrinated against the other parent. How does the court see it to be right that something like this is done to the other parent?”

“The legal system is not about children anymore, it’s about money.”

“What the system has actually done, they have cut my arms off. It makes me feel useless.”

“They actually failed my own child. I gave them photographs of the beating, blue eyes, marks across the back. They still would not listen to me. Obviously they have a problem with male gender. They don’t want to see anything wrong with the mother.”

In practice the parents have separate attorneys. Each attorney acts in the best interest of his client, but is not always informed about parent alienation strategies, and is of opinion that his/her focus primarily is to act for the client and to strengthen the client’s case. From previous research (Evans & Bone 2011; Lowenstein, 2010; Viljoen & Van Rensburg, 2014) it appears that the legal system maintains parent alienation through their constant litigation in the interest of their client, namely the alienating parent.

Steinberger (2006) is of opinion that the long process of the court procedure as a result of litigation, mediation, negotiation and psychological evaluations maintains the process of parent alienation. It also keeps the alienated father away from his child for longer and creates the perception in the alienated father that helping systems support the parent that alienates and that it approves of her behaviour.

The extended litigation process provides the alienating parent with sufficient time to indoctrinate the child against the alienated parent. The end aim of attorneys is to win their case and they do not always act in the best interest of the child and of the alienated parent.

Van Mansfield (2012:5) states: “Parental alienation is child abuse. Some even argued it is legalized child abuse because the courts refuse to come near it and mental health professionals only meet it with moderate acceptance.” Baker and Fine (2014) maintain that the legal system and health-care professions are not always sufficiently trained and prepared to address parental alienation effectively and successfully. Baker and Fine (2014) identify the following reasons for this shortcoming:

- Very few attorneys, advocates and therapists are sufficiently trained to differentiate between a child who rejects a parent for profound reasons and a parent who is rejected as a result of parent alienation strategies;

- As a result of insufficient knowledge of parental alienation professional persons content themselves with their preconceived thinking pattern of “it takes two to tango” and that both parents are responsible for the current situation;
- The notion of brainwashing or indoctrination by the alienating parent is often dismissed by the legal profession, social workers and psychologists as being psychological nonsense (“mumbo jumbo”) and professional persons thus prefer to accept a simple reason such as that the target parent displayed behaviour that justifies the child’s aversion.

Baker and Fine (2014) point out that the target parent (father) experiences the helping system to be prejudiced in favour of the protection of women and children, and are manipulated and exploited by the alienating parent. Currently there is a strict prejudice among attorneys, social workers and psychologists that the alienating parent is talking the truth and the target parent is telling lies in order to shirk his responsibilities and to minimise shortcomings. Steinberger (2006) confirms that mental health practitioners agree that fast, effective actions are expected from the courts to prevent further parental alienation and to limit long-term damage for the parties involved.

Researcher is of opinion that legal and professional costs are very high and that the target parent often is ruined financially to such an extent that he or she no longer possesses the finances to fight on the legal forum for the child. It often happens in practice that attorneys withdraw from the court case only a few days prior to it, because the target parent cannot pay the fees. This situation results in the parental alienation process being set forth and the target parent being estranged from the children even further

Theme 8: Contact supervision between a parent and the child

Contact under supervision means continued contact between a child and her or his parent who does not have supervision and control over the child, but in the presence of an objective, neutral third party in cases where physical or sexual maltreatment, neglect, parental dysfunction or family violence is alleged (Crook & Oehme, 2007; Pulido, Forrester & Lacina, 2011; Stern & Oehme, 2002). According to Pulido *et al.* (2011), it is very difficult for the court to differentiate between the contact rights of the parent who does not have parental supervision (usually the father) with his child, and the risk it holds for the child because of allegations of maltreatment, psychological disorder, addictive drug abuse or family violence, usually made by the parent who has supervision (usually the mother). These references often are based on false accusations of sexual, physical or emotional maltreatment by the alienating parent towards the target parent.

Some participants said the following about contact supervision between the father and his child:

“You feel like a scoundrel, you are being watched. You feel like a bandit who has been given parole. It feels as if you have done something bad to your children – abused them.”

“You do not know what to say to your child – you do not know what is right and wrong. You cannot act naturally when kept under surveillance.”

“I feel like a bandit with a policeman constantly watching me, every word I say is weighed. It is the most unnatural situation under God’s sun. Should I say something, it gets all blown out of proportion.”

From this study it appears that the participants experienced the supervisors negatively and they felt victimised. The prejudiced attitude and subjectivity of the supervisors made them feel uncomfortable. A non-judgemental attitude is needed for them to feel at ease. This negative experience of the participants concerning supervised visitations as a consequence of parental alienation has as yet received little attention. The researcher is of the opinion that this new theme has as yet not been investigated. Increasingly more target parents of parent alienation are referred for supervised visitation during contact disputes in high-contact divorces.

Recommendations for contact supervision are made by the court without comprehensive, objective investigations by a professional expert. Stern and Oehme (2007) as well as Pulido *et al.* (2011) stress the following important components of visits under supervision:

- The safety of all parties during care and contact is of cardinal importance;
- The professional person who deals with the supervision must be neutral. Should the supervising person not be objective and neutral, the legitimacy of the care and contact visit is questioned;
- The experts who deal with supervision need to receive the correct training and be adequately qualified in the special field of contact under supervision (Stern & Oehme, 2007).

The concept of neutrality during supervision visits appears in the literature to be an important component of supervision visits. Stern and Oehme (2007) define neutrality as follows: “Neutrality requires a common foundation and dignity for all who participate in supervised visitation.” The literature also strongly emphasises the necessity for the experts dealing with the supervision to be trained accordingly. The researcher agrees that they should not only be well-informed about the pathology of parental alienation, but also about the process of contact under supervision. Pulido *et al.* (2011) state that it is necessary for supervising experts to be trained in family violence, physical and sexual maltreatment of children, psychological ailments, addictive drug abuse, and the influence of these things on the child, and the ability to maintain neutrality during supervision visits for more effective service during contact under supervision. Pulido *et al.* (2011) claim that the expert should do supervision more often. To bring about effective contact under supervision, knowledge of the process and objectivity are of cardinal importance. Stern and Oehme (2002) confirm this: “Supervised visitation was originally established to provide a crucial service, parent-child access, and was never intended to be used as backdoor parenting evaluation.”

CONCLUSION

From this research on fathers' experiences and perceptions of parent alienation in high-conflict divorces, the target parent in parent alienation cases mostly experiences intense pain, which includes not only heartache, but also an emotional hurt which they compare with death. The intensity of anger which these parents experienced was very troubling, since it can lead to irrational thoughts and actions. Most participants in this research study experienced a lowered sense of self-worth as well as social isolation, and they project the distrust of the alienating parent onto women in general. It appears that the target parent also has very little trust in the legal system, legal persons, psychologists and social workers. The emotional impact of supervision visits on them seems to be traumatic as they feel victimised because of the unnaturalness of these visits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the research findings.

- The focus of the research was to investigate fathers' experience and perception of parent estrangement in high-conflict divorce. A limited amount of literature is available on the father's experience and perception of parent estrangement. Consequently there is a void in the theory and a need for further research on certain themes related to the father's experience and perception of parent estrangement.
- Social workers and psychologists need to be trained by means of workshops and be informed about fathers' experiences and perceptions of parent estrangement. In so doing the fathers can receive assistance in coping with their emotions, as well as developing skills by means of which they can deal with parent estrangement in a positive manner.
- Training for legal persons, social workers and psychologists, specifically regarding the identification of the parent estrangement strategy adopted by the estranged parent; the parent estrangement syndrome behaviour of children towards the estranged parent; as well as the effect parent estrangement has on the estranged parent. This will contribute to parent estrangement being identified, addressed and prevented.
- Further research on visits under supervision is essential.
- It is necessary to ascertain whether the target parent is really a candidate for contact under supervision.
- The researcher is of opinion that in cases of parent estrangement, where the target parent had a good relationship with the child and did not make him/herself guilty of violence, neglect or drug abuse, poor parenting skills or has a mental disorder, the target is not a candidate for visits under supervision, but rather for bonding therapy.
- In some cases bonding therapy between the targeted father and estranged child is recommended instead of contact visits.

- The professionals who control the contact need to be trained in the structure and application of supervised visits. They have to be capable of maintaining an objective, neutral, non-judgemental attitude towards all the parties involved.
- Affordable legal services for the targeted parent of parent estrangement must be available to all parents.
- Parent estrangement must be acknowledge and addressed as a serious phenomenon in South Africa, especially by the helping professions and be addressed accordingly.

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